

BY MICHAEL CONDUFF, ICMA-CM

ONE BAD APPLE

How to keep the rest of your council from spoiling

The small-group discussion at a state meeting this past winter on the subject of council relations was filled with seasoned managers, and I was looking forward to facilitating and learning from this group of colleagues.

The first participant lived up to my expectations by stating right up-front: Taken as a whole, I actually have a great council. In fact, as a group, I generally give them high marks on the council effectiveness metric that ICMA offers. With that said, however, I do have the councilmember from Hades. The chorus of “me toos” quickly led us to change the table topic to “challenging councilmember relations.”

I took a quick poll, asking how many of those in the group, on balance, would rank his or her council as a whole as effective or even highly effective in their governance role? All but one or two of the participants raised their hands.

Challenging Behaviors

Then I asked how many of those who had raised their hands had at least one member with whom it was difficult or extremely difficult to work. Most hands went up again, and a few “impossible to work with” were muttered.

I asked for some examples of these members’ challenging behaviors, and here is what I heard:

- Treats every staff presentation as an inquisition.
- Routinely discloses confidential information to the media.
- Spends all of his or her time on minutia and misses the big picture completely.
- Never comes prepared for a meeting and regularly asks questions that were answered in the packet of materials that was distributed prior to the meeting.

- Never willing to bring closure and always wants more information before a vote.
- Refuses to abide by the meeting rules of order.
- Always tries to make the staff (and the manager) look bad.

Intervention Strategies

A colleague asked how he could keep one member from infecting all of the rest because they watch his antics and come down to his level of behavior more often than they bring him up to theirs.

In the course of the hour we agreed that the ideal governance situation is that the manager doesn’t have to be involved in council discipline at all. The mayor or the most senior or most influential member would take the repeat offender aside and help him or her see the good governance light.

In most cases, though, the brunt of the challenging behavior is directed at administration and so logically some of the intervention must, too. Here are strategies the group suggested:

- Meet with the member individually to try to determine motive.
- Use some of the personality profiling tools to help educate the member and others.
- Accommodate the member where possible and when it is not unethical or unduly burdensome to do so.
- Assure the member that you work for the council as a whole and intend to follow its direction expeditiously.
- Be as responsive and transparent as possible.
- Don’t take it personally — even when it is.
- Keep the member fully in the loop and don’t avoid communication or meetings.

An Ounce of Prevention

The group also agreed that in retrospect they wished they had done more to help the council establish good governance procedures before the disruptive member had come on board, but putting good governance procedures in place when councils are supportive sounds silly. “They already govern well, why push process on them” is a common phrase I hear.

My reply uses the same logic as negotiating an employment agreement when everyone is friendly. In cooperative times, it is challenging and doable, and in difficult times, it is often impossibly difficult to do. Develop a council process manual when the group is cohesive and behaviors make sense.

Where possible, it is always preferable to have a ready pool of potential council candidates. Citizen academies or leadership programs help educate and identify prospective members. Matriculation to major boards or commissions by council appointment deepens their exposure to the governance system. Consequently, when a council opening occurs, someone with the desire and acuity to serve is ready to step up.

An ethics caution: While these steps necessitate a consistent progression that is often only sustainable with input and nurturing from the manager’s office, it is incumbent that even the appearance of engaging in the actual political process be avoided.

At the conclusion of the session, we all looked at each other and agreed that sometimes it just feels good to vent and at the same time, everyone went away feeling like they had some cogent strategies to keep the council as a whole in an effective range. We hope these steps are useful to other managers, too. **PM**



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