

The Complementary Responsibilities of City Councils and City Management Staff

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Effective governance and management requires that elected officials and staff work together cooperatively. To do so, officials must understand their distinct roles and responsibilities. There is a need to reassess and strengthen council-manager relations. Cities are experiencing strain from within as the characteristics of officials change and from without as they take more burdens with fewer resources. A realistic and supportive division of responsibilities between the council and manager can promote constructive interaction among officials and better governmental performance.

A division of responsibilities along the lines of "policy" and "administration" has been the common guide to determining who does what in city government. With the growing complexity of local government and the increasing contribution of professional staff, however, the simple division of responsibility between policy and administration can break down. It is useful to think about the governmental process in terms of four dimensions: mission, policy, administration and management.

DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITY

The division of responsibility found in cities both reconfirms and departs from the traditional model of separate spheres. Although there are differences among cities, there is typically both separation and sharing of responsibility between council and staff at the same time.

Major responsibility for formulating mission is exercised by elected officials. Although staff make substantial contributions in the form of recommendations, identification of problems and planning, and assessment of the feasibility of alternative "futures," the major decisions concerning purpose, scope, and

direction are made by the council. The city's goals with respect to growth or the decision to add (or eliminate) a major service are determined by the council. These decisions over the years create the framework within which specific policy choices are made.

Responsibility for management, on the other hand, is largely the responsibility of the manager and staff. This is not to say that the council is not interested in questions concerning organizational design and performance, e.g., productivity improvement. Still, councils usually refrain from interference in operational details such as who gets jobs, raises, or contracts. The manager takes the lead in providing quality staff and effective management systems.

Responsibility for middle-range policy is shared. Although the council is ultimately responsible for all policy decisions, many of these are made or shaped by staff. Furthermore, the council is dependent on the manager for a host of recommendations, the most important of which is the city budget which contains the policies of the city in dollar terms. Councils cannot "make" all policy; they would be overwhelmed by this task. Managers also contribute to policy making. As long as the manager makes choices within the framework determined by the mission of the organization, democratic control is maintained.

There is also considerable sharing with respect to the implementation of policies. Staff are largely responsible for administration, but councils are and should be interested in how policies are translated into programs and how services are delivered. Thus, the council has a responsibility for administrative oversight and program evaluation. In addition, council members frequently get involved in handling complaints from citizens and asking specific implementing

decisions. Councils need to be careful not to get bogged down with such specific "administrative" details.

Thus, two dimensions are handled separately and two are shared. The ultimate responsibility for mission rests with the council and for management with staff. Both the council and manager contribute to policy and administration. Recognizing the complex division of tasks is a start toward identifying problems with council-manager relationships and prescribing solutions.

COMPLEMENTARY RESPONSIBILITIES OF OFFICIALS

There are a host of difficulties that can interfere with the positive relationship between councils and managers. The council-manager form of government, however, is different from cities with a separation of powers in which conflict between the mayor and council is endemic. It is possible for each set of officials to cooperate because they tend to have common goals and they share rewards for accomplishments. Council members and administrators can meet their distinct needs and responsibilities without impeding the work of the other.

Research in council-manager governments indicates that councils need to change some aspects of their performance in order to strengthen the working relationship with the manager. There needs to be more attention to formulation of mission, consideration of questions of purpose, and planning the community's development. In policy, the council should give more attention to setting clear goals and standards, on the one hand, and provide more careful assessment of staff recommendations, on the other. Administrative activities should stress

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COMPLEMENTARY RESPONSIBILITIES OF COUNCILS & STAFF

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oversight on a regular, systematic basis rather than probing into specific complaints unless the situation warrants council investigation. The council's role in management involves appraisal of the performance of the manager in particular and the organization in general along with encouragement and support for organizational improvement by the manager.

The manager has responsibility in all governmental functions: subordinate with respect to mission, substantial and shared with respect to policy and administration, and predominate but not exclusive in management. The manager should actively assist the council, uphold important social values, and take initiatives that are appropriate to each dimension. The manager must provide responsible leadership that is supportive of the council and, at the same time, responsive to the needs of the entire community.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE MAYOR

Councils do not necessarily function well without leadership. Mayors contribute to effective performance by providing leadership within the council, promoting communication between the council and the manager, and team building to increase cohesion. They help to provide a sense of direction by identifying problems, clarifying goals and priorities, advocating solutions, and building coalitions. In addition, mayors should seek to guide the council toward recognition of its roles and responsibilities, assist the council to organize itself effectively, and maintain positive council-manager relations.

The mayor helps to meld the contributions of the council and manager, rather than trying to dominate either one. It is important that the mayor respect the manager's executive authority. If the mayor encroaches on the manager's executive functions, he/she impairs the manager's ability to

accomplish all of his/her responsibilities. The mayor has ample opportunity for providing nonexecutive leadership through his/her coordination and policy guidance activities.

In general, the mayor's responsibilities are (1) to ensure that council and staff are performing as well as possible, and (2) to guide the city toward accomplishing its mission. Thus, rather than being an executive leader who seeks power, this mayor is a facilitative leader who seeks to empower others.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, officials can ask themselves the following questions to assess the quality of governance and management in their city:

- Do we know our purpose? Do we know in what direction we want the city to go, and where we actually are going?
- Are we doing the right things to accomplish our goals?
- How well are we doing? How effective are our programs and services?
- Are we as efficient and economical as possible given our goals?

In addition, there is another broad question concerning the governmental process: are we getting the best contribution from each official, elected and appointed? This question leads to efforts to improve the effectiveness of municipal teamwork.

Councils and managers do not always agree and tensions may develop between them. Misalignment will occur when one or the other is not filling a responsibility or exceeding the constraints which each responsibility implies.

Councils and managers can perform better and improve the effectiveness of city government by raising their mutual expectations concerning the contributions they make. Each set of officials brings distinct perspective and talents to the work of government. The council provides political leadership and the manager professional leadership to all dimensions of the governmental process. By pursuing their complementary responsibilities, they can sustain positive interaction and contain friction. In the process, they meet each other's needs and make it easier for the counterpart to fulfill their own responsibilities.