

WORKING FOR A COMMITTEE: TIPS FOR CLARIFYING CITY COUNCIL EXPECTATIONS

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(SHORT VERSION)

It's called a city council, but it could be a commission, the executive committee, the commission, the board of trustees, board of governors, board of directors, or just... the "board." While we're discussing local government, it could be any public, private or nonprofit group in which a policymaking group represents constituents and oversees and enterprise.

The council had the wisdom to hire you as their agent implementing their collective direction, and whether you're called the city manager, the executive director, the CEO, superintendent, general manager you work for a committee and need to meet their individual and collective expectations. Congratulations on making it to the top. Welcome to ambiguity!

Working for just one boss can be difficult, but satisfying the expectations of a seven or nine member city council made up of very independent-minded and highly motivated individuals can be a nightmare. So, how do successful managers know and meet the expectations of the council? First, they ask them.

Now, don't be surprised if you get blank stares the first time you ask the question, "What do you expect of me?" This approach may be new to your council, so here are ten tips to help you extract and use this information for everyone's benefit.

1 – Conduct basic research. From this data create a list of what you believe your council expects of the position you hold. Note... I said "your position"...not you. Only after learning the council's feelings about the position should you start applying that information to you, as an individual. Meet with each council member and ask him or her

to add items to your list. Have them rate the importance of each item, and assign comparative value to establish priorities.

2 – Use the data to determine trends. Do all council members value “X”? Is “Y” frequently at the bottom of their list? Is there a split over a specific characteristic? Does the odd-man-out just want to be contrary, or is there a substantive difference in that person’s approach?

3 – Your research may uncover disagreements within the council. Decide whether you want to handle the subsequent discussion yourself, or whether you need to call someone like me. (That’s what I do for a living.) If you do it yourself start with, “I found some of you feel strongly about “A”, but others believe “A” is the wrong direction. What might be causing this apparent divergence?” Seek clarification.

4 – Determine which two or three characteristics of your job are consistently ranked the highest and develop annual objectives for each. Be specific. Make them measurable, and include them in your annual performance plan. The council should see these objectives as supporting their expectations of you.

5 – As you discuss your performance with the council, challenge them to identify other expectations that might be in their collective minds. Whether the expectations are stated or unstated, the council will hold you accountable, so document their expectations. Ask for examples. “How will I know if I succeed in meeting that expectation?”

6 – Expectations, like communication, are two-way. While your council has expectations of you, you also have expectations of your council. Share your expectations of them...with them. Be respectful but don’t be shy. Encourage discussion and negotiation.

7 – Use your annual performance appraisal process as a scorecard to document how well the expectations negotiated are being met... both by you and by the council.

8 – Periodically ask, “So, how are we doing?” Go through each expectation, one at a time, and rate performance. If something can’t be achieved, negotiate an appropriate change to the objective, but keep the original as baseline information throughout the period.

9 – As new council members are added and current members leave, keep communication up-to-date and flowing. Help your new members define their expectations. Establish a solid foundation for communications right from the start.

10 – During the annual performance evaluation include expectations as a discrete topic. Use this time to negotiate new or revised expectations. Again, do them in writing. Document the process and don’t forget... you have expectations of the board, too.

If you’re the city manager you work for a committee. While it’s difficult to meet all their expectations all of the time, by developing a limited number of clear, high-value, and strongly shared expectations your job becomes just a bit easier.

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Bio:

Lance Decker is a business planner whose practice focuses on local governments, community dispute resolution and conflict management. In this capacity Lance helps managers, policy-makers and their constituents find practical pathways into the future. A new product the company is developing, the Manager Performance Assessment System, is ready for release in July 2010 and will address the issues highlighted in this article.

A frequent lecturer and conference speaker, Lance has several publications to his credit and teaches college courses in strategic planning, public involvement and conflict management.