

THE UNOFFICIAL ROLE OF THE ADMINISTRATOR

Many communities, looking for the benefits of professional management without the requirement of going through a formal election to change the form of government, have chosen to create a position similar to that of a city manager, but under the authority of the mayor. The resulting hybrid form of government is often described as being “the best of both worlds” that includes elected leadership with professional management of day-to-day local operations.

Having worked in such a position for nearly my entire professional career in local government, I can answer the question “Is it truly the best of both worlds?” without the slightest sense of irony or hesitation: “yes and no.”

The titles of city administrator and county administrator are commonly used, although chief administrative officer, supervisor, chief of staff, and, occasionally, deputy mayor are also applied. Numerous articles clearly articulate the textbook distinctions between the council-manager and mayor-council forms of government, but in practice in this hybrid form, personal and systemic characteristics intertwine in such a way that a simple factual comparison of the forms of government misses the subtleties of the unofficial role often played by the administrator.

Under the mayor-council form of government, as defined by statute for most cities I’m familiar with in the state of Washington, all city staff members work for the mayor. Even staff members in positions that are described as responding solely to council needs are legally appointed by and serve at the pleasure of the mayor.

ADMINISTRATOR’S ROLE

A pivotal but yet unofficial role of the administrator is to serve as a link between the mayor and the council. Clearly, a new administrator entering this arena should understand this and work quickly to establish credibility with the councilmembers. Usually,

though not always, the establishment of the city administrator position is agreed upon by the mayor and council. That’s a head start.

First and foremost, however, the mayor must have trust and confidence in the administrator. The Revised Code of Washington (RCW) that deals with cities operating under the “Optional Municipal Code” states:

RCW 35A.12.100

Duties and authority of the mayor: The mayor shall be the chief executive and administrative officer of the city, in charge of all departments and employees, with authority to designate assistants and department heads. *The mayor may appoint and remove a chief administrative officer or assistant administrative officer, if so provided by ordinance or charter. [Emphasis added.]*

Any authority the administrator possesses comes from the mayor. And as the statute states, the administrator is appointed by and serves at the pleasure of the mayor. Yet, at the same time, the administrator’s relationship with the council is a key to effectiveness.

The administrator works for the mayor but must work with the council. As the chief operating officer of the municipal corporation, the administrator must enjoy a high degree of confidence from the council. When the relationship between the mayor and council is strained, the administrator is legally aligned with the mayor.

If a relationship has been built with the council, however, the administrator may be able to function like a mediator. This can be extremely effective, but it is also unofficial and involves a degree of risk. The administrator must be sensitive to just how closely either the mayor or the council can be drawn together. At the end of the day, the administrator still reports to the mayor.

Every mayor differs in personality, work style, communication style, and time commitments. The administrator must adapt to the unique characteristics of the mayor in order to work effectively for that individual and apply acquired professional skills to the task of managing the city’s operations.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

In some cases, the mayor might have outside employment or other interests that preclude being readily available for consultation. In such instances, the administrator sometimes can exercise considerable discretion and authority. To paraphrase a mayor I once worked closely with: “You take care of city hall, and I’ll take care of my factory. Keep me informed; no surprises.”

We worked as a team on those terms for nearly eight years. His “office” was a wire in-basket and a folding chair at the corner of my desk. In contrast, the next elected mayor had recently sold his business and was able to devote considerable time to the office.

He moved into an available office and spent many hours meeting with staff and citizens at city hall. The administrator can’t take such a relationship for granted. As these contrasting examples illustrate, after the next election an entirely new working arrangement might be required; thus, perception and adaptability are crucial.

Legally, the mayor is the chief executive but ostensibly the office is a part-time one in many local governments. The mayor’s presence may not be required all day, every day, particularly if the mayor has chosen to delegate authority to the administrator for many of the daily details of community management.

In other instances, regardless of the official status of the office, the mayor may be available for as many hours as the individual wishes to commit and can offer advice or give direction at any time. This can be advantageous when the mayor and the administrator work in sync and complement each other’s skills and style in an agreed division of labor.

Confusion and conflict can occur, too. Sometimes, a mayor will make a management decision against the advice or in the absence of the administrator, with effects ranging from inconsequential to calamitous. The best relationship is one in which each trusts the other to support the other.

Ideally, the mayor needs to know the administrator will honestly, professionally, and effectively represent the mayor’s position and decisions; in return, if the administrator says something—whether

to a citizen, councilmember, or staff member—the administrator needs assurance that the mayor will support that.

GOOD AND BAD

When this system works, it can be highly effective. When it doesn't, look out, because the mayor and the administrator can end up working at cross purposes. No mayor can be expected to accept that for long, if at all; and if their working relationship can't be resolved, the mayor will usually end it.

The relationship with the council is legally predicated on the separation-of-powers concept wherein the council functions as the legislative branch and the mayor as the executive. In Washington State law, this is clearly spelled out in the council-manager statutes. Councilmembers are expressly prohibited from interfering in the manager's day-to-day administration of the city.

No such express prohibition exists in the mayor-council statutes. The mayor may assume a collegial role with the council or may prefer to establish more of a bright line between policy and administration. Sometimes, the same mayor may operate in both spheres depending on the issue or perhaps in response to a change in the makeup of the council. The administrator is obliged to discern the subtleties of these shifts and respond appropriately.

Legally, as a mayoral appointee, the administrator is not answerable to the council. In practice, effective management by the administrator is impossible without a working relationship with the council. While the council cannot legally give the administrator directions, the administrator must be able to walk a fine line between the clear executive authority of the mayor and the policy direction of the council. (Note that there is a difference between an administrator and a chief of staff, a position that exists in some larger cities. A chief of staff is often closely aligned politically with the mayor and leaves office at the end of the mayor's term; a typical administrator works apolitically through election cycles and may serve a series of mayors.)

Consequently, the administrator's relationship with the council, though unofficial, is invaluable. An administra-

tor can't afford to deliberately alienate the council even though the administrator does not officially report to councilmembers. Having the confidence of the council proved invaluable to me at least twice during my career.

In one instance, a mayor died during his term; in another city, a mayor had to resign for a health-related reason. In both cases, the council's confidence in me permitted me to continue to manage the city and assist the council in the process of filling the vacancy in the mayor's office. Effectively, I was shifted into the role of city manager during the interim then back again after the new mayor took office.

When the mayor and council are at odds, it sometimes takes tremendous time and effort on the part of the administrator to help the two parties find middle ground and make progress. Sometimes it can't be done. In that situation, assuming the administrator continues to enjoy the support of the mayor, the administrator may find it extremely difficult to have recommendations acted upon favorably by the council.

Even if the administrator has been able to maintain a positive relationship with the council, councilmembers may take contrary positions because of antipathy toward the mayor. Conversely, success with the council on the part of the administrator may be perceived by the mayor as somehow a breach of the mayor-administrator relationship. Either way the administrator's effectiveness can be severely compromised.

On a positive note: in more than 30 years of my local government service, mostly in cities with the mayor-council form of government, the vast majority of the time the relationships were positive, productive, and collegial. Regardless of the legal distinctions in the form of government as defined by statute, the elected official's dedication to the good of the community brought the two positions together. When strains in relationships occurred, more often than not I was able to help find areas of agreement to build upon.

My father became a city manager in the latter half of his career, serving in Alaska, California, Oregon, and Montana. As a city manager, the line

of authority was clear for him: he was responsible to the city council. We had many opportunities to compare notes on our experiences, and more than once he said, "Son, I don't know how you do it!"

So, after 30 years of experience serving in positions as an administrator in mayor-council communities, was it the best of both worlds? My answer remains: yes and no!

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