Challenges and Strategies:
Maximizing Success for City and County Managers in California

The Report of the City and County Manager Survival Skills Project

July 2015

By Kevin Duggan, Frank Benest, Jan Perkins, and Kevin O'Rourke

This report summarizes an effort during 2014 and 2015 to identify major challenges facing city and county managers in California, as well as to begin the identification and development of strategies and resources to help address the challenges. While we, as authors, believe this is a necessary and important first step, our report will need to be followed by a number of actions by ICMA, Cal-ICMA, and other organizations that support the profession if the full potential from this effort is to be realized.

Background

Cal-ICMA, the California affiliate of ICMA, was approached by Bob Murray of Bob Murray and Associates, Roseville, California, regarding the potential for Cal-ICMA to undertake an assessment of factors impacting a manager's job success in California. As one of the principal executive search professionals in the state, Murray

had witnessed too many examples of a manager facing a significant job challenge, sometimes resulting in involuntary termination of employment.

As a result of his observations, he offered Cal-ICMA a grant of $10,000 to undertake a review of the major challenges faced by local government managers and to identify strategies and best practices to address these concerns.

In response to this outreach, the Cal-ICMA Executive Board authorized the preparation of a proposal to undertake this effort, which Murray subsequently accepted. These were the project's goals:

- Identify the key issues and challenges impacting city and county manager job satisfaction, success, and tenure.
- Identify successful strategies and best practices to address the identified issues and challenges.
- Determine how to make existing resources more readily available to managers while identifying resource gaps and recommending how to fill those gaps.

A project team was formed that included Cal-ICMA staff and volunteers. The first task undertaken was the formation of a 25-member advisory committee composed of city and county managers from throughout California. The advisory committee convened through conference calls and e-mails to serve as a sounding board for the project team on a number of critical aspects of the project.

The project consisted of two major components: a survey of all California managers and a series of eight focus groups throughout the state.

A Two-Part Methodology

1. Survey. With input from the advisory committee and using SurveyMonkey, an online survey was developed to obtain manager input. While relatively brief in order to encourage a strong response rate, the survey solicited information regarding major job challenges and techniques used to address the challenges. A variety of demographic information was also collected.

The survey was distributed with the assistance of ICMA, Cal-ICMA, the City Manager's Department of the League of California Cities (LCC), and the Chief Administrative Officer's Association of California (CAOAC).

It garnered an approximate 50 percent response rate, with slightly more than 250 responses based on a potential response pool of approximately 500 city and county managers in the state. The survey questions covered these topics:

- To what extent did 14 types of issues and factors pose challenges for managers?
- How frequently did eight identified factors present challenges to managers in regard to their relationship with their governing boards?
- Did technical or relationship issues cause the greatest challenges?
- How frequently were five identified techniques used to strengthen the relationship between the manager and the governing board?
- What issue and factor creates the greatest challenge to managers in regard to their relationship with the governing board (narrative response)?

The survey also collected information regarding:

- Gender.
- Age.
- Length of tenure in current position.
- Total length of tenure as a local government manager.
- Jurisdiction population.
- Number of employees in the organization.
- Race and ethnicity.

Survey results were then reviewed with the advisory committee and trends and key factors identified.

The next phase of the project was to convene a series of eight focus groups throughout the state. A total of 75 managers participated in them. The purpose of these focus groups was to review survey results, identify trends, and discuss how to leverage both existing resources and potential new resources to help managers deal with the primary challenges.

Findings and recommendations outlined in this report are derived from both the survey and the focus groups.

Major Findings

Here is a summary of the survey findings:

Most Significant Professional Challenges Faced by City and County Managers:

- Consequences of state actions and outside factors.
- Budget and financial issues.
- Relationships with individual council and board members.
- Conflicts regarding planning and development issues.
- Relationships with unions and employee groups.

Most Frequent Challenges Faced by City and County Managers in Regard to Their Relationships with Their Governing Boards:

- Councilmember and councilmember conflict.
- Financial issues.
- Personality and interpersonal relationships.
- Defining and respecting roles.
- Policy issues.

Types of Issues That Pose the Greatest Challenges to City and County Managers:

- Relationship issues: 69%.
- Technical issues: 31%.

Techniques Used to Strengthen Relationships With the Governing Board:

- Goal setting: 87%.
- Study sessions: 74%.
- Outside facilitator: 44%.
- Team building: 44%.
- Code of conduct: 36%.

Major Issues Summarized From the Narrative Question (Greatest Challenges to the Manager and Governing Board Relationship):

- Lack of respect for the council-manager form of government; role differentiation; micromanagement.
- Difficult financial conditions and budget reductions.
- Organizational impact of controversial issues.
- Conflict between councilmembers and "outlier" councilmember(s).
- Need for elected boards to set priorities and understand workload impacts and limited resources.
- Demands of individual council and board members (versus receiving direction from the council majority); bullying conduct by elected officials.

2. Focus Groups. The next phase of the project involved convening eight focus groups around the state composed of 75 city and county managers. The goal of focus groups was to review and comment upon the survey findings and to gather additional information regarding primary areas of concern and potential resources to help managers deal with these challenges.

Focus Group Summary Comments: Observations and Challenges

Primary Areas of Concern:

- Councils and councilmembers who don't understand and value the council-manager form of government.
- Uncertainty regarding how to respond to false or inflammatory social media posts and to what degree to be involved in the social media arena.
- Councilmembers who attempt to interfere administratively and micro-manage.
- Impacts of councilmember and councilmember conflict on manager and staff.
- Lack of respect for the professional judgement of the manager and staff.
- New councilmembers not being prepared to govern effectively.
- Dealing with bullies—councilmembers and public.

- Strategies for effectively dealing with challenging issues (e.g., financial stress; land use).

Other Areas of Concern:
- Impact on relationships from the need to address such difficult technical issues as budget balancing, land use, labor relations, and more.
- Return of the "spoils system" in some communities.
- Impact on the manager from difficult financial conditions.
- Impact on the manager's job from state actions.
- Conflicts related to land-use issues.
- Impact of managing controversial issues and minimizing the damage to the manager and council relationship.
- Personal demands on the manager and the manager's family.
- Irresponsible media coverage and anti-government bias.
- Lack of decorum and civility.
- Impact of organized labor on local decision making.
- Managers isolated by the nature of the job.
- Refusal of some individual councilmembers to support the majority decisions of the council.
- Treatment of women managers.
- Perennially split councils and antagonistic behavior.
- Unethical conduct by councilmembers.
- High-profile issues that split the council.
- High-priority need for the manager to have strong interpersonal skills.
- Increased "party politics" and partisanship.
- Avoidance of difficult—but important—policy issues.

Focus Groups: Ideas and Recommendations to Address Challenges
- Enhance state league training for elected officials, emphasizing best practices and using respected elected officials to communicate the information.
- Encourage LCC to communicate some of the content from annual elected official training programs at regional division meetings.
- Develop a 1:1 peer-coaching program for managers using senior advisers to facilitate matches. Additionally, encourage ICMA to consider adding the activity of receiving coaching to the list of activities eligible for credentialing credit.

- Experiment with regional peer support groups (examples are Minneapolis and Chicago).
- Promote facilitated performance evaluations for managers to improve these processes and to facilitate conversations regarding good government practices for governing board members.
- Use ICMA's "*Life, Well Run*" videos and materials to educate elected officials and community members about good governance and how the council-manager form of government works.
- Encourage better use of senior advisers to reach out to local government managers to promote dialogue and peer support. Senior advisers, for example, could host "small circle" informal lunches.
- Start area manager group meetings—possibly before the business agenda—with manager-only "Joys and Challenges" conversations, thus promoting peer support and informal coaching. Train senior advisers to help promote and support such practices.
- Encourage the use of community leadership academies to promote good governance and develop a pipeline for new commissioners and elected officials; create a model curriculum.
- Enhance the use of senior advisers to support managers-in-transition (MITs)
  - Provide resume review and interviewing skills support.
  - Help MITs create a short "sound bite" about why they are in transition and how to manage their social media profiles.
  - Provide access to information on severance issues, non-disparagement clauses, financial planning, PERS issues, and more.
- Develop model protocols for councilmember interactions with fellow councilmembers, local government staff, and the community.
- Create standard curriculum and materials for council and board retreats regarding form of government and roles and responsibilities, including how to appropriately represent the community.
- Improve training of managers and staff on how to better tell their "local government stories."
- Create lists of retreat and performance evaluation facilitators as well as legal resources.
- Develop materials for executive recruiters to provide to councils and boards on how to evaluate manager candidates, attract and retain them, communicate and interact with them, and leverage their skills.

- Train managers on how best to deal with "outlier" council and board members or those with difficult personalities and how to address controversial issues that split the council and board.
- Develop and promote such standard tools as model employment agreements for managers, including provisions for annual evaluations and facilitated evaluations, "cooling off" periods, and notice and severance).
- Develop a toolkit of resources to orient first-time managers. Use senior advisers to distribute and discuss these tools with them.
- Develop a self-assessment tool—similar to the tool used in the ICMA Credentialing Program—to help managers reflect on what they know, what they don't know, and what new learning and tools are needed at various points in their careers.
- Develop resources to enhance the communication skills of managers to better address inaccurate or abusive communications within the community, including through social media.
- Train managers in better addressing issues related to rapidly changing communities, including demographic changes, changed political alliances and dynamics, and changed expectations and standards of behavior.

Short-Term Recommended Actions:

- Widely disseminate this report and its findings through multiple venues including:
    - Professional journal article(s).
    - Conference presentation(s).
    - Webinar(s).
    - ICMA, Cal-ICMA, and other local government management professional associations.
- Review the findings and short-term recommendations and obtain input from other organizations, including the League of California Cities (LCC) and its City Managers Department; the California City Management Foundation (CCMF); the County Administrative Officers Association of California (CAOAC); and the Institute for Local Government (ILG).
- Develop, in conjunction with fellow professional associations, strategies to implement priority recommendations.
- Discuss with league leadership the alternatives for reaching out to elected officials regarding the findings and follow-up actions.

- Develop a priority list for new and enhanced resources needed to support California managers.
- Create a depository on the Cal-ICMA website of new and existing resources to assist managers with the challenges identified in this report.
- Consider a variety of media to communicate this information, including written documents, webinars, copies of presentations, and videos
- Include information on best practices regarding the priority issues at professional meetings and conferences.
- Create a dialogue at the area manager group level regarding ways to enhance peer support.
- Work with the LCC and CAOAC to develop a strategy to distribute ICMA's *Recruitment Guidelines for Selecting a Local Government Administrator* to councils and boards of supervisors.

Potential Long Term Actions and Initiatives:

- Develop a "Toolkit for First-Time Local Government Managers."
- Develop an article on the facilitated performance evaluation process, and develop a list of experienced facilitators.
- Develop a resource for executive recruiters to share with elected officials to promote conversations on how to promote good governance and effective working relationships among elected officials and with the local government manager.
- Work with ILG to develop sample materials for council and board retreats. These materials would focus on form of government issues, good governance practices, communication and interaction protocols, and how to best leverage the talents and skills of the manager and staff members.
- Create a self-assessment tool focused on effective council-manager relations and encourage modifications to ICMA's existing tool.
- Explore "small circle" executive conference calls similar to the Women Leading Government executive support calls and consider a pilot project.
- Develop tools to help train managers and staff in effectively "telling their stories" in regard to the work of their organizations and positive community impact.
- Draft an article and create resources regarding how to effectively work in the context of rapidly changing demographics within a community.

Conclusion

After acceptance of the project report by the Cal-ICMA Board, the project team will develop an implementation action plan including both short- and long-term recommendations.

It is hoped that this process—identifying key challenges facing city and county managers as well as potential strategies and resources to help managers deal with these challenges—will lead to not only a better understanding of the issues, but also to additional and more accessible resources that will help managers better cope with management and workplace challenges.

Cal-ICMA wishes to thank Bob Murray of Bob Murray and Associates for his financial support of this project. We would also like to thank all the city and county managers who assisted with the project by participating on the project advisory committee, completing the online survey, and participating in one of the focus groups.

Kevin Duggan*, ICMA West Coast Regional Director, Mountain View, California*
Frank Benest, *ICMA Liaison for Next Generation Initiatives, Palo Alto, California*
Jan Perkins, *ICMA California State Liaison, Laguna Beach, California*
Kevin O'Rourke, *Cal-ICMA Board Member, Fairfield, California*