

Dealing with Bumps in the Road

At some point in the journey, the board/executive relationship may encounter difficulties. In fact, a consistently comfortable relationship could in itself be an indicator that one or both parties may be avoiding both testing ideas and possible conflict to the detriment of the agency and public they serve.

Strategies to Try¹

1. **Avoid Complacency.** Strong relationships require ongoing investment of time. The environment, challenging situations, changes in players, unanticipated demands and day-to-day politics all place stress on board/executive relationships. Take time to step back and assess relationships on an ongoing basis. Be prepared to adjust approaches if necessary.
2. **Communicate.** Often, communication is the first place where relationships begin to suffer. Something happens; human nature can be to avoid confrontation and uncomfortable discussions. When communication barriers emerge, schedule time for a private face-to-face and earnest discussion with the individual in question. Acknowledge any elephants-in-the-room, share perspectives of what happened, and explore how to improve the relationship.
3. **Address Issues Directly.** Avoidance tends to make problems fester; rarely does avoidance cause problems to go away.
4. **View the Relationship as a Partnership.** Work together to address community needs without focusing on distinctions between policy and administration. Each party to the relationship should feel that their contributions are valued and respected.
5. **Avoid Being a Barrier to Staff Contact with Electeds.** Electeds may prefer to deal with staff directly; staff should keep the chief executive in the loop when significant issues come up in their conversations with members of the governing body.
6. **Focus Credit and Attention on Elected Officials².** The center of positive attention at governing body meetings or at community meetings should be elected officials, not staff.
7. **Try to See the Situation from Others' Perspectives.** Ask open-ended, non-judgmental and even-toned questions. Take a step back to assess what happened and is happening in the relationship. Ask clarifying questions to understand the perspective of the other person; share your own perspective in neutral terms. Examine the problem and not the individuals. Treat the situation as a learning opportunity to avoid future missteps.

8. **Delve Deeper.** Listen for the meaning behind the words. Try to identify the underlying issues, which may have both a logical and an emotional dimension. What are the values, beliefs and anxieties that might be at stake? Sometimes the issue is not more data and facts; it is about connecting on a more personal level. Sometimes people just want to be acknowledged and understood.
9. **Accept Responsibility.** You have surely contributed to the difficulties in a relationship, intentionally or unintentionally. Accept responsibility, apologize if necessary, discuss how to avoid a repeat and move on.
10. **DWYSYWD (“Do What You Say You Will Do”).** People may judge your commitment to a board/executive relationship by what you do, not what you say. If a relationship has been damaged, the first thing people will look for is evidence of commitment to rebuild the relationship. Do what you said you will do. It will be noticed. Start with simple steps (for example, gather information, arrange a meeting, resolve a problem, or create a follow-up plan). These can be immediate and observable demonstrations of your sincerity in wanting to address concerns.
11. **Find a Confidant.** Serving as an elected official or a chief executive can be a solitary world. Identify an objective sounding board to bounce ideas off of and test assumptions and theories. The best confidants are typically outside your organization. They say what you need to hear, not necessarily what you want to hear and can help you navigate through difficult issues.
12. **Take Care of Yourself.** Maintaining a balance in the demands of public service and personal life is challenging. Make time to get away, to decompress, to work off frustrations, to reflect, and create space between public service and your private life. Working through difficulties requires a certain mental and emotional stamina. In addition, people can overreact when they are tired and under stress. Even if it is only an hour at the gym or a long weekend, make time for yourself.

Red Flags for Relationship Attention²

- **Instinct.** If your sense is something isn't as good as it might be, you may well be right. Don't hope it goes away.
- **Information Flows Diminish.** Sometimes one party will feel the other isn't keeping them properly informed or they aren't getting the information they need to do their respective jobs well. Other times, the issue may be that people communicate less and less frequently or information isn't being shared equally.
- **Interpersonal Relations.** Another warning sign is when the chief executive or board member stops being included in conversations that he or she would ordinarily be included in. Watch for any signs of changes in the relationship changes (less forthright/more evasive)
- **Performance Reviews.** Avoiding an annual review (the board doesn't want to give one or the chief executive doesn't want to receive one) can be a sign of trouble.
- **Badmouthing.** This usually signifies significant frustration levels.
- **Focal Point is the Staff.** Another potential sign of trouble is when the chief executive or other staff become the focus of media or election attention.
- **Dissatisfaction with Staff.** Governing board members are dissatisfied with key staff and the chief executive is perceived as not addressing the problem and/or being able to get things done.
- **Trust Diminishes.** The governing board regularly second guesses the executive's recommendations.

About the Institute for Local Government

This tip sheet is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities, the California State Association of Counties and the California Special Districts Association.

© 2015 Institute for Local Government. All rights reserved.

References

¹ Heifetz, Ronald A. and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 2002, Harvard Business School Press, Boston.

²International City/County Management Association and National League of Cities, *Working Together: A Guide for Elected and Appointed Officials*, 1999 at pages 63-71.