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A Building Block to Better Performance:

Using Council-Manager Goal-Setting to Support Performance Evaluation

**By former City Managers
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A Building Block to Better Performance: Using Council-Manager Goal-Setting to Support Performance Evaluation

*“If you don’t know where you’re going,
you might wind up someplace else.” -- Yogi Berra*

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As managers, we’re used to setting goals. We help our city councils set annual and long-range goals. We ask our department managers to set goals for the budget. We measure the success of our local governments by whether we meet organization-wide goals.

But like cobblers’ children who go shoeless, many of us do our jobs in the absence of specific goals for our own work. The lack of annual goals for the manager does a disservice to not only to the manager, but to the local government as a whole. Goal-setting at the manager’s level will reinforce organization-wide goals, while neglecting the exercise for an individual manager hinders the government’s ability to perform at maximum effectiveness.

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Set Goals Early On, Working with the Council

Ideally, a new city manager should establish a set of 12-month goals for council approval within his or her first three or four months of service. For a city manager who's been in the job a while but is operating without specific goals, plan to include goal-setting as part of your next performance evaluation.

The manager can propose a list or solicit ideas for goals from council members to come up with an initial draft. It is important that council discuss the goals and, after an iteration or two, approve them so that there's agreement on what success would look like for the first year.

Keep Goals Attainable, Limited and Specific to the Job of Manager

The manager's goals will likely be somewhat different than the goals that appear in the budget, department work plans or various strategic/long-range plans. After all, there are many moving pieces in a city and having too many major goals or priorities generally means that few are truly accomplished well. We suggest the manager synthesize what he or she believes are the most salient city goals from the various policy documents and, based on an assessment of the council's preferences, create 10-12 overarching goals to guide priorities for the coming year.

The council should discuss and ultimately approve the list, and there may be some editing and horse-trading, which is healthy. But once agreed upon, these are the manager's marching orders. These goals, once set, will be critical in the performance evaluation.

When the evaluation occurs:

- *High levels of goal attainment* should be recognized by the council as resulting from the city manager successfully leading the staff, volunteers and community partners for civic improvement.
- *Low levels of goal attainment* may signal trouble with communication, overly ambitious goal setting or performance.

Refer to the Goals Regularly Throughout the Year

The goals approved by the council should serve as a roadmap for the city manager's priorities throughout the year.

- As the manager writes reports & updates for the council and meets with council members individually, he or she should provide information on progress or challenges in meeting the goals.
- Community addresses, public communications and staff presentations should reference the goals set by the council and information about their completion.
- At evaluation time, the council should be familiar with the status of council goal achievement due to this steady city manager-initiated communication throughout the year.

Make Adjustments as Needed Without Simply Adding Goals

In real life, things change (sometimes rapidly) throughout the 12-month evaluation cycle. The council may approve new efforts and initiatives as the year progresses. The city manager should add these to the current goals, but be confident enough to ask the council for guidance if new directives exceed staff or resource capacity. This may require a reordering or prioritizing of the original goals, which is fairly normal.

The manager who simply agrees to add more goals throughout the year risks falling short of council expectations if there isn't capacity to accomplish them all. Conversely, refusing new council goals during the year because they were not part of the original council goal listing is not recommended. As is so often the case in this profession, communication is key.

Use the Goals as the Basis for Performance Review

In preparation for the annual evaluation, the city manager should prepare a document that sets forth the agreed-upon goals and the progress made toward accomplishing them. The report should also include other priorities that popped up during the year and unexpected challenges along the way. If a council goal was stymied or dropped due to special circumstances, it should be noted as to why. Also, additional accomplishments that the city manager wants the council to note but were not necessarily tied to council goals should also be listed, but probably not in as much detail.

This report and the managers' reflections on the year, including candid assessment of his or her own performance and opportunities for improvement, are important documents for the performance evaluation and the council-manager

discussion that should occur. It provides the structure for a more complete and factual appraisal than simply asking the council members to fill out evaluation forms based on a number of desirable traits and performance categories.

Some managers are uncomfortable in embracing organization-wide goals, as they don't wish to be seen taking credit for the efforts of many others in goal attainment. But remember that the manager is held responsible for organizational performance. A good manager is liberal in giving praise and thanks to others for the many when things go well, and steps up and accepts responsibility when the city comes up short. Such is the stuff of leadership.

Embrace Goal-Settings as a Means to Effective Engagement

Goals will help make the manager's performance evaluation a constructive and meaningful process. Elected officials sometimes avoid evaluations because they can lead to difficult conversations among themselves and with their city managers. Some city managers don't want an annual evaluation, believing that they are essentially evaluated every day because the city council can fire them at any time for any reason.

But if a manager's primary goal is merely keeping his or her job, it is difficult—if not impossible—to actually accomplish the central purpose of city management. The council-manager form of government is not just about elected officials and their key appointees having warm and amicable relations (although it sure helps!). City management is about translating the collective will of the community as expressed by its representatives into effective, efficient and equitable programs, initiatives and projects. It's about getting important things done, and doing them well.

Managers can miss important things and be distracted by unimportant things if they don't take the time to establish meaningful goals for themselves that the council has endorsed and helped create.

Goal-Setting Exercise Is Worth the Effort

City managers and their city councils need to get goal-setting right. Elected officials have a right and a duty to fairly and constructively evaluate the manager's performance, and that evaluation ought to be as objective as possible. It is in the manager's interest that the evaluation includes a review of demonstrated progress toward council-approved goals during the evaluation period. The alternative can be

a subjective and often arbitrary discussion that centers on how the manager did last week or last month, or based on recent emotions and political views.

Clearly, a manager wants and deserves a better review than that. It is crucial for successfully steering the city and for a healthy and productive working relationship. Spend the time and improve each year.

Examples of City Manager Performance Goals

A manager's goals should be verifiable, measureable, broad and challenging without being unattainable or too easily achievable, either. You don't want to set the bar above the world record, nor place it so low the manager may trip going over it. City manager goals should be the top priorities for the council as relates to community priorities (e.g., completing a general plan update), critical internal organizational priorities (e.g., succession planning or labor negotiations), or relationship goals (e.g., with the community or council).

Some examples of typical city manager goals are listed below. Most often, the city manager would not have all of these as goals, since the ones listed for the city manager's attention should be the most critical ones that are meaningful to the council as well as to the city manager.

- Delivering and administering a balanced budget while improving reserves and maintaining a favorable bond rating.
- Completing, on time and on budget, major infrastructure capital projects.
- Negotiating new labor agreements and filling key positions with highly competent people.
- Meeting or exceeding certain approval levels for city services, if the city gathers data on resident attitudes.
- Implementing major new systems or employing new techniques for civic engagement and public involvement in government.
- Achieving public-safety milestones such as “reducing part-one crime by five percent” or “reducing response time for Advanced Life Support EMS calls to an average of six minutes.”
- Achieving major milestones in planning, such as adoption of key plans and updates, and in economic development would be fair game for council goals.

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- Hitting community-wide marks for such things as water conservation, alternative transportation mode use, waste diversion from the landfill or emissions reductions could figure in the council's goals for a city manager.
 - Achieving professional development milestones such as becoming an ICMA-certified city manager.
 - Maintaining positive working relations with the neighborhood organizations, chamber of commerce or school district.
 - Creating new forms of reporting on achievement of the annual city council priorities.
 - Streamlining the development review process.

Conclusion

Establish a set of meaningful goals that are mutually agreed-upon by the manager and council is the best way of ensuring that everyone is on the same page with expectations. If the manager and council all have different expectations for what the manager will be doing and how he or she will be focusing their efforts, it can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction on everyone's parts. Open, collaborative discussions about goals, followed by discussions about progress during the year, can foster an effective working relationship that is satisfying to everyone.

About the Authors

Rod Gould had a 35-year career in public management. He served as city manager of Santa Monica, Poway, San Rafael, and Monrovia as well as assistant city manager of Walnut Creek. Prior to city management, he served as senior management consultant for the firm of Deloitte, Haskins and Sells and assistant director of operations for the Boston Housing Authority. Rod has held leadership positions with CCMF, ICMA and the League of California Cities. Rod is currently a management consultant to local governments.

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