

Managing in Difficult Political Environments

-or-

*How To Keep Things Running When
You Want to Run Away*

This is a story about Local government management

Through the eyes and experience of a former
city manager – back when he was young and
naive



*Craig Rapp,
City Manager*

My Background

22 yrs in local government

13 yrs consulting/training

Appeared in National Enquirer and
Entertainment Tonight- not by choice

The Context

- Two Cities
- Two Mayors
- Two Styles
- Two Managers
- Two Difficult Political Environments
- Same Outcome



“The secret to managing is to keep the guys who hate you away from those who are undecided”

-Casey Stengel

Seminar Objectives

- Learn from **real life examples**
- Understand the **unique role** of the Manager
- Discuss **personal implications**
- Examine the role of **organizational politics**
- Develop a “Personal Primer” to address **organizational politics**



“The chief obstacle to the progress of the human race is the human race.”

-Don Marquis

Manager in the Middle

- What **can** the Manager do?
- What **should** the Manager do?
- Is it always clear?
- What happens when **you'**re the focus of political unrest?
- How can/should **organizational politics** be handled?

What We'll Cover

- Difficult Political Environments
- The Seeds of Discontent
- Warning Signs
- The Spotlight, Bad press and You!
- The Manager's Job
- Organizational Politics

Difficult Political Environments

“In times like these, it helps to recall that there have always been times like these.”

- Paul Harvey

Difficult Political Environments

- Not tough politics
- Not personality conflicts
- Not a “divided Council/Board”
- Not just a problem between Manager & Mayor or Member

We're Talkin' Dysfunction
with
A Capital "D"

“Genius may have its limitations,
but stupidity is not thus
handicapped.”

- Elbert Hubbard

Exercise

Define dysfunctional environments:

List differences between tough politics and a truly dysfunctional situation

Tough Politics

- Characterized by **Rules** – explicit or implicit – but understood by all
- Relies on political process – wins by “**having the votes**”
- Can be emotional – but is **not personal** – respect remains intact
- **Playing to win** – pushing exclusive agenda, freezing out the other side...

Tough Politics

- Maximizes **political advantage** – programs, personal profile, reelection
- Depending upon form of government – can involve **high level staff**
- Predictability, **consistency**, reliability
- Things **get done**

Dysfunctional

“... abnormal or impaired functioning, especially of a bodily system or social group.”

Dysfunctional

- Lack of **Respect**
- Lack of **Trust**
- No **Rules**
- **Unpredictable**, Unstable
- Lack of Progress / **No Progress**

Dysfunctional

- Not Getting **Critical Tasks** Accomplished
- **Not Making Decisions** Efficiently-or at All
- **Not Setting** or Following **Goals/Priorities**
- Council/Board **don't trust** each other & **disrespectful** to each other

Dysfunctional

- Council/Board not respectful to and **distrustful of staff**
- **Manager attacked** / not trusted by Council faction
- Manager attacked by **community faction**
- Community factions creating **continual roadblocks**/ discontent, attacking Council/ staff

Summary

Tough

- Respect/Trust
- Political Process
- Rules
- Reliable
- Accomplishments
- Play to Win

Dysfunctional

- Disrespect/Distrust
- Disruption/Attacks
- Chaos
- Unpredictable
- No Decisions
- Play to Harm

“Blind Spot”

“ Not being aware of our **‘blind spot’** when driving can result in a nasty accident. Not being aware of a **‘political blind spot’** in our community can result in a nasty accident for the City Manager.”

The Seeds of Discontent

“Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning.”

-Bill Gates

The Seeds of Discontent

- A changing community
 - Fast growth
 - Deterioration - housing/commercial/infrastructure
 - Rising crime
 - Changing demographics
 - Budget cuts/Fiscal stress
- Cataclysmic community event
 - Scandal
 - Industry closing/leaving

The Seeds of Discontent

- Major political unrest (throw the bums out)
- Existing projects/programs become “unpopular”
- Citizens – “Not being heard”
- Powerful group-unhappy



“Egotism is the anesthetic that dulls the pain of stupidity”

- Frank Leahy

Warning Signs

“Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment.”

-Barry LePatner

Warning Signs

- Formal **information requests** pile up
- “Citizens for Accountability” groups, “**secret meeting**” claims
- Council/Board focusing on **Parliamentary Procedure**
- **Internal groups align** with citizen group/Council faction
- **Letters to the Editor / social media** wars
- Metro or **statewide media** coverage

Would You Recognize the Warning Signs?

“If you choose not to ‘play the game’ of organizational politics, or recognize the signs of dysfunction, the game goes on without you – in other words, ‘play’ or ‘be played’ by others in the community.”

Here's What Can Happen...

“If absolute power corrupts absolutely,
does absolute powerlessness
make you pure?”

-Harry Shearer

The Manager's Job

- Leader
- Support to Council/Board
- Producer of Results
- Change agent
- Motivator
- Role Model
- Political Filter/Synthesizer

Group Discussion

- Strategies for **keeping staff motivated**
- Strategies for achieving goals/**getting work done**
- Strategies for addressing **unhappy internal groups** trying to take advantage of political unrest

Strategies For Motivating Staff

- Celebrate Accomplishments
- Provide Reassurance
- Model Behavior
- Commit to Integrity

Strategies For Getting Work Done

- Continue to Press for **Goal Setting**
- Establish **Small Steps**
- Find **Non-Threatening Champions**
- Fly **Below the Radar**
- **Throw** the Discontented **a Bone**

Strategies For Addressing Unhappy Internal Groups

- Determine **Tough/Dysfunctional**
- Use **Political Process**
- Consolidate **Power/Influence** within organization
- Build a **strong management team**
- Plan/Organize

The Media

“For most folks, no news is good news; for the press, good news is not news.”

- Gloria Borger

The Spotlight, Bad Press and You!

- When it shines on you
- The Vortex
- Friendly local journalists?
- Ambitious metropolitan daily journalists
- National news – you should be so unlucky

The Press – A two edged sword

- One side to cut off your head
- The other to cut up the nattering nabobs of negativism

The Press – What They Want

- Celebrity
- Issue
- Action
- Reaction

Dealing with the Media

- Tell the Truth
- Avoid “No Comment”
- Respond to calls, even if you’d rather not
- Be circumspect about “off the record”
- Get to know the reporters
- Try to supply “good news” regularly

“Americans detest all lies except
lies spoken in public or printed
lies.”

- Edgar Watson Howe

“All the world's a stage and most
of us are desperately
unrehearsed.”

- Sean O'Casey

The Manager's Job

To create “win/win” outcomes for your community without compromising your personal or professional ethics.

WATCH OUT!

If your community has:

- Unclear goals/refusal to set goals
- Vague performance measures
- Ill-defined decision processes
- Lack of leadership from elected officials
- No clear lines of authority
- Major change
- Strong individual or group competition

It's time to check the organizational
politics

Failure to do so:

-system dysfunction

-focusing on the wrong problems
and lead to

The 5 “B” s”

Typical Responses (the five “B” s”)

» Bargain

» Battle

» Buck-up

» Bunker

» Bail

Bargain

- Trying to “negotiate” or satisfy the dissatisfied
- Attempting to use compromise/trade-offs

Battle

- Deciding to confront the people/problems “head-on”
- Matching tactics with tactics
- Getting down to their level

Buck-up

- When at first you don't succeed, keep a stiff upper lip and do your job
- Hope it will blow over and you will survive

Bunker

- After failing in the other approaches, you retreat to the safety of your conference room/office
- With or without your staff supporting you

Bail

- At the end of your rope, the best option becomes departure
- Often at the Council's request

“If at first you don't succeed, failure
may be your style.”

-Quentin Crisp

The Personal Cost

- Manager can/does **absorb impact** from tension at both Board and staff levels
- Family **tensions; relationships** can suffer – spouse/partner, children/local school issues

The Personal Cost

- Manager can become **focal point/ scapegoat** for citizen and/or Board displeasure
- Negative focus on Manager often **played out in the press** – newspaper, cable



“Life is full of misery, loneliness,
and suffering - and it's all over much
too soon.”

-Woody Allen

Exercise

Ideas, programs, strategies that Managers can use to **remain mentally and emotionally healthy** in the midst of intense personal attacks and professional pressure to perform.

Mental/Emotional Health

- Find/Develop a Support Network
- Talk To Your Family
- Find Healthy Ways to Escape
- Get Professional Help If Needed

“Reality is the leading cause of stress amongst those in touch with it.”

-Lily Tomlin

The Personal Cost

- Negative personal costs of organizational politics are often unavoidable
- Outcomes can be improved through “artful practice” and awareness of organization politics

Organizational Politics

“The secret of success is sincerity.
Once you can fake that you've
got it made.”

Jean Giraudoux

Organizational Politics

- Think you understand it?
- Think you're good at playing the game?
- Is it a game?
- Are there rules?
- What if you're playing by the wrong set of rules?

Exercise

Individual activity:

- Organizational politics questionnaire

An Organizational Politics Primer

- What is your “political aptitude?”
- What does it mean to be politically astute?
- Personal Integrity
- Organizational survival
- Where is the line you will not cross?

Exercise

- Develop a **personal organizational politics primer**
- **Share results**/create composite

Personal Primer

- Be Honest
- Set your goals
- Build and cultivate relationships
- Pick your battles
- Pay attention
- Know your business
- Common sense

Exercise

Group Activity:

“The Influence of Politics”

Typical Responses (the five “B” s”)

» Bargain

» Battle

- And Now a Sixth –

» Buck-up

» Bunker

“Balance”

» Bail

Remember...

- Nobody wins at organizational politics unless everybody wins
- Know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em

“Reality is something you rise
above.”

-Liza Minnelli

Recap/ Summary

- Accept that **organizational politics happens** and we must **approach it positively**
- Develop an organizational politics **personal primer**
- Recognize the **warning signs**
- **Understand yourself** and seek balance
- Base decisions on a **strong foundation**

“The statistics on sanity are that one out of every four Americans is suffering from some form of mental illness.”

-Think of your three best friends. If they're okay, then it's you.”

“To survive as a City Manager you must satisfy the governing body; to survive as a person, you must satisfy your own conscience and sense of responsibility and integrity”

- George W. Pyle

The Effective Local Government Manager