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The Roles of Local Government Managers: A View from the Trenches

Even if our profession sometimes downplays it, and academia may not appreciate it, I suspect that my colleagues in local government would readily agree with Kimberly L. Nelson and James H. Svara’s point: city and county managers play an important and fairly active role in policy setting, and probably always have.

This observation is of little help to us. It is like telling the parched plane crash survivor crawling over a sand dune, “Look what I’ve discovered: you’re in a desert and you need water!”

But this is precisely why their message is so critical. They are correct in their assertion, and they back it up with plenty of evidence. I can imagine the response from local government managers to our scholarly colleagues would be, “Listen to them, stop debating this, and bring us solid, research-based tools we can use to succeed in this reality.”

Here are just a couple of examples. First, I have observed that governing bodies are actually more willing to follow the policy advice of the chief executive officer (CEO) when they know the CEO will fully empower them with the final decision and carry out whatever decision they make without hesitation. To actually create this situation, though, seems to take a wide variety of skills on the part of the manager, even including body language during a city council meeting. I know there is much that a multidisciplinary field such as public administration can teach us on effective interpersonal skills to use in interacting with a governing body.

Second, few policy decisions in the public realm are made with the kind of rationality that good scholars would use in approaching a complex community problem. In this nonrational environment, how exactly does a manager recognize and advocate a “good” solution to a problem? And how does the manager create a little more space for evidence-based solutions to problems without offending the torch-and-pitchfork mob?

This kind of work is important to the field because, while the politicians that fill the CEO position in the state and national governments receive more attention, the professional CEOs appointed by governing bodies account for, by numbers, the vast majority of governmental chief executives, at least in the United States. This includes city and county managers, certainly, but also the CEOs of special districts. School superintendents, by my own observation as well as studies I have come across, have an even more active role in the policy domain, and they are less willing than city managers to trust their elected officials with it.

There seems to be an explosion of research by psychologists and sociologists on how we can be more effective in working with other people and groups of people. Much of this work leads to surprising, if not counterintuitive, conclusions; common sense and past practices have failed us. Those in my profession appear to get access to it through business publications or books aimed at private sector managers rather than the public administration literature. But the public administration field could at least help apply this research to the challenges we face in working in the policy domain and helping our communities come together to tackle difficult problems.

Finally, as critical as this role is, even in larger cities, the manager spends a great amount of time leading and managing the organization, dealing with difficult personnel problems, and providing efficient and effective services. This is confirmed by a number of the scholars whom Nelson and Svara cite and, more recently, by Richard Clay Wilson in Rethinking Public Administration: The Case for Management. So my plea to our colleagues in the academy is to help us be effective in the role that Nelson and Svara have identified. We know that we are in the desert, and we do not need to know whether the temperature is 100 or 110 degrees; what we really need is water. But we also need your help, now more than ever, in tapping into the research that will make us more effective in managing increasingly complex organizations.