

Playing Nice: Using teamwork to achieve council effectiveness

By Jeff Schott



The city council is responsible for determining the direction and use of resources within the city. The council performs this role by adopting legislation, approving plans and programs, and establishing city policies. But the city council can only exercise its powers when acting as a group in official session and adopting ordinances, resolutions and motion. A majority vote is needed to accomplish anything. Council decision-making is, therefore, a group activity and as such requires a team approach to be effective.

The team concept has many important benefits in achieving council effectiveness:

- Blending individual talents can produce better problem-solving and enhance the quality and quantity of results.
- The scope and magnitude of the issues and tasks confronting the city are complex and difficult greater than any one person can handle.
- A team approach can focus the energy of the group on critical issues and maximize benefits within the constraints of limited resources and time.
- The team concept can yield more productive meetings and enhance communications between the team members.

As pointed out in the *Mayor's Handbook* published by the Association of Washington Cities and Municipal Research and Services Center, (and reprinted in the 2012 *Iowa Municipal Policy Leaders' Handbook*):

“Teamwork is a natural and necessary part of serving on the council. Teamwork does not mean that all council members need to agree on every issue or they even like each other on a personal basis. But it does mean that they must respect each other’s opinions and learn to deal with each other on the basis of mutual honesty.”

Teamwork has been defined as an organization functioning effectively as a group. Here are a few methods by which city councils can become effective teams:

Mutual Respect

Show respect to all team members at all times. Recognize the value and importance of individual contributions. Trust each other’s abilities and listen carefully to what is being said. Put aside personal differences and consider without prejudice the particular issue or situation. Remember - staff is also an important part of the team and should be treated respectfully. Staff is a valuable asset and an essential component in accomplishing council’s goals.

Council Goal-Setting

By establishing a shared sense of direction and determining goals and priorities, the city council as a team identifies what it wants to accomplish within a specific time period. Council goal setting provides a clear message as to what the council wants to accomplish for the council as a group, as well as to the staff, other governmental jurisdictions and the public. It also provides valuable direction for developing the annual budget and capital improvements program, allocating staff resources, evaluating performance and other important city functions.

Clear Roles and Responsibilities

A major impediment to effective teamwork can be role confusion or conflicts among team members as to the appropriate roles and expectations of various team members. It is, therefore, essential that the roles and responsibilities of the team members are well understood by all. The team – including the mayor, city council, city attorney and key staff – should periodically review and discuss the various roles and responsibilities of all the team members – and then act accordingly. It is especially important that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and understood when new members become part of the team.

Rules of the Game

Developing and agreeing to “rules of the game” can help policy leaders work together and avoid unnecessary conflict. For those cities that have previously developed council rules of procedure, those policies should be reviewed and discussed with the team. Compliance with these rules should become a routine part of council operations – not just reserved for “special occasions” when a particularly contentious issue is on the agenda. Some important areas that should be part of council rules of conduct are:

- Insistence on civility
- Meeting management practices and roles
- Parliamentary rules of order
- Use of consent calendar
- Use of work sessions
- Conflicts-of-interest
- Confidentiality
- Guidelines for representing the council
- Guidelines for citizen input

Processes and Methods

Governance and teamwork are achieved through processes. It is important for all team members to understand those processes, to respect them, and to improve them when necessary. Policy leadership requires the capacity to effectively use the processes that support the team’s efforts and achieve the desired outcomes. Some key city processes include:

- Agenda development
- Information flow
- Program, project and financial monitoring and reporting
- Complaint handling
- Making requests of and giving directions to staff
- Goal and policy implementation review
- Personnel policies and performance reviews
- Boards and commissions – contact and information
- Intergovernmental relations

Agree on the Decision-Making Process

For difficult, complex, or controversial issues, work together to agree on the process the council will use for decision-making.

Frame the issue and determine what information – technical, operational, financial, legal, etc. - is needed for the council to make an informed decision. Determine the process for citizen input. Give yourself adequate time to make a decision. Consider alternative actions, including the “do nothing” option. Work toward consensus; try to find areas of commonality. Recognize the need for compromise and the importance of reaching agreement. Most importantly – respect the process – support the decision unambiguously regardless of your own views.

Council Orientation

An effective and timely orientation program can help provide newly elected officials with the kind of information they need to be knowledgeable and effective members of the team. Items to include in the orientation are: city organizational structure, review of significant city issues, goals and priorities, major city projects and initiatives, finance and budget, complaint process, council meeting processes and procedures, providing important city documents, and a tour of city facilities. All members of the team should take advantage of additional training opportunities through the Iowa League of Cities, regional leagues, councils of governments, etc.

Personal Attributes

Every team member should commit to striving to achieve the following attributes:

- Mutual respect and trust
- Civility
- Ability to de-personalize issues or conflict
- Ability to see the other side of the issue
- Valuing differences
- Flexibility
- Professionalism

Bear in mind the admonition of the late Tim Shields, former long-time Director of the Institute of Public Affairs:

“It takes an ‘I’ to get elected, but it requires a ‘we’ to govern and lead.”

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