Words from the Trenches
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INTRODUCTION
During my 35 years as city manager of Mt. Vernon and Westmont, Illinois I picked up some very helpful hints that made a difficult job easier. These hints are geared to the professional just starting out. Some of these hints are very obvious but sometimes the obvious are the most difficult to remember. Not all city managers may agree with every hint. However they worked for me.

You young professionals are embarking on a career that does make a difference. YOU WILL AFFECT THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF YOUR CITIZENS.

CITY MANAGEMENT is the intuitive ability to use the knowledge and skills acquired from KU and life to inspire and motivate yourself and others to build and operate a responsive, efficient, well-run city government.

BE A LEADER NOT A BOSS
The boss says "I", The leader says "WE".
The boss inspires fear. The leader inspires enthusiasm.
The boss commands. The leader asks.
The boss drives people. The leader coaches people.
The boss takes credit. The leader gives credit.
The boss sees today. The leader sees TOMORROW AND BEYOND.

Maintain an open door policy with the public. Limit the amount of time your office door is closed. Do not give an irate citizen showing up at a council meeting and announcing, "I went to see the city manager but the door was closed."

Civil media relations are essential. Try to establish mutually accepted ground rules. There will be negative stories. Do not attack the reporter. It shows you are upset. Reporters especially, young reporters, think they are doing their job if they make you SWEAT. Keep Your COOL. Disarm them with kindness.

You were hired to run the city not each individual department. Don't micro-manage. Coach the department heads to become better managers.

The most important principle for a smooth running organization is to TREAT PEOPLE LIKE YOU WANT TO BE TREATED. Yelling and swearing accomplishes nothing. People turn you off once you raise your voice. They do not hear you.

Know your employees and the department where they work. GET OUT IN THE TRENCHES. Visit and be seen. Calling them by name will make you a HERO.

Discipline employees privately. Stress their positive points as well as the negative. Together come up with a plan of action that will keep the incident from reoccurring. Employees try harder when they know you care.

Be a good listener. Hear what people are saying. When responding look directly at the person to whom you are talking.

Budget your time wisely.

Do not keep people waiting. Their time is valuable, too.

Return telephone calls promptly.

Follow up on citizen complaints immediately.

Reports to the city council should be concise, detailed and easily understandable. Put yourself in the city council's place and ask "How would I vote on the city manager's recommendation?" If you have done your homework their only unanswered question should be: "WHEN DO WE START?"

The annual budget scares most city councils even though the budget is only DOLLARS IN / DOLLARS OUT. The budget should be the city manager's best friend. The manager should prepare the major portion of the budget. This provides you with an excellent opportunity to know in detail the workings of each of the departments without micro-managing.

In essence the BUDGET MESSAGE is the city manager's State of the City Report. It should in financial terms cover THREE AREAS: 1. Where we are; 2. Where we need to go; and 3. How we are going to get there!

City government's purpose is to provide services not jobs. Eliminate or consolidate unnecessary jobs. The least painful way is to have the city council declare a hiring freeze. When an employee leaves, that position is not filled. Today fringe benefits cost 35 to 40% in addition to salary.

Make your city more efficient and frugal through the elimination of duplicate or unnecessary services. Look at mutual aid agreements, intergovernmental agreements, joint purchasing, mixed use facilities, consolidation or even public referendum.

Be active in your state municipal league. Many municipal leagues do not allow city managers to be on the board of directors. Try to get on a meaningful committee such as the legislative committee.

Get to know your state and federal legislators, school and county officials.

The best way to get the pulse of your city is to become actively involved in organizations such as the chamber of commerce, civic and social clubs, school groups and the religious community.

City councils look for CONFLICT. They do not feel they are doing their job if they are not solving some problem. Smooth running organizations BORE them and they tend to wander into areas that are not in their job description. However a City Manager who spends time with council members individually and listens to their concerns and goals reduces potential conflict. Keeping your mayor and city council well informed is VERY important to your professional well being. Simply put, your job is to make the MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL LOOK GOOD!

Thank your employees when they make you look good. It shows appreciation and you are not taking all the credit.

You can DEMAND respect but you will not get it. You EARN respect through your work ethic and fairness.