

## Appendix A: City Management Competencies Identified by the Delphi Panel-- Commentary<sup>1</sup>

The city management competencies identified in this study were found to be important by a panel of experts (practitioners, scholars, and executive recruiters who specialize in placing senior local government managers) using a Delphi process. The initial list of competencies was developed with the help of a four-person "key informant" panel (all seasoned practitioners, one of whom is now in his second career as a scholar). An additional twenty-two competencies were added in response to suggestions from the Delphi panel members.

Partly because many different people proposed the competencies (and their associated labels or wording) for the study, there is some overlap in the areas of skills and knowledge. Further, there is some variation in the level of detail or specificity within the list of competencies. For example, the "ability to translate [city] council policies into action" must surely depend on many other competencies (leadership, supervision, project management, etc.). Others, such as "disciplining employees," are more specific.

There was no attempt to provide definitions for the competencies, but in some cases explanatory language was added. For example, the competency, "aesthetic sense," was qualified by the words "recognizing both beauty and ugliness (e.g., in urban form, building design)." Organizational theory included the description, "what organizational processes and structures work best under different circumstances."

The following comments are offered as a guide to the simple list of competencies that the Delphi panel identified as being necessary (or at least useful) for local government management. The comments are based partly on the literature on public administration and local government management. They are also based partly on the researcher's thirty years of experience in the profession, and are thus subjective. For this reason they are included in an appendix rather than in the body of the dissertation.

The competencies are organized by four categories and twelve subcategories, and within the subcategories, by importance as rated by the expert panel. The aggregate mean ratings are shown in parentheses. A rating of five means the competency is viewed as being essential; four means it is important, and three means it is useful.

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<sup>1</sup> From Scott Lazenby, *City Management Theory & Practice: A Foundation for Educating the Next Generation of Local Government Administrators*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Hatfield School of Government, Portland State University, 2009.

**Competencies****Comment****1. Foundational Traits and Skills****A. Ethics****Essential**

- Personal integrity (4.9)
- Modeling ethical and public-service-oriented behavior (4.8)
- Public service ethic (4.6)
- Processes for resolving ethical dilemmas (4.5)

Appears near the top of the list of required competencies for managers of all sectors. It is manifested by behaviors such as honesty and following through on personal commitments.

Includes "walking the talk," but also aspects of servant leadership, where serving the public is modeled by the manager's interactions with staff and council.

Manifested especially in unhesitating service to individuals who are the most unpleasant or society's outcasts.

ICMA has for many years worked to give its members tools to resolve choices among competing principles, and to deal with the gray areas of public service ethics.

**Important**

- Cultural competence; appreciation of diversity; promoting diversity in the organization (4.0)
- Ability to factor social equity in policy decisions (3.8)

Similar to competencies in the interpersonal communications and human relations subcategories, with an emphasis on personal values. Evidence for competence in this area is the manager's words and actions that support and encourage diversity in the organization.

Clearly a normative and active role for the city manager as a positive influence in social equity. Consistent with a public service ethic.

**B. Interpersonal Communication Skills****Essential**

- Interpersonal communication: one-on-one (4.5)

Most training and education seems to focus on writing and formal presentation skills, although there exists a body of literature on effective informal one-on-one communications.

**Important**

- Written communication (4.3)

Especially business writing: staff reports, memos. Now professional use of e-mail and blogs must also be included.

**Competencies**

- Interacting with news media (4.2)
- Formal presentation skills (4.2)
- Speaking (extemporaneous) (4.1)
- Ability to communicate complex technical information (3.7)

**Comment**

A number of best practices, if not theory, underlie this competency.

Extensive resources exist for building this competency, although some managers still punish audiences with PowerPoint.

Extemporaneous speaking with groups of people, which occurs far more often than formal presentations.

"Technical information" can range from truly technical details—such as the most effective way to treat sewage—to solutions to complex public policy problems.

**C. Human Relations**

There is some overlap between this subcategory and the previous one (interpersonal communications), since we often relate to other people by communicating with them. The emphasis here is on understanding what makes other people tick.

**Essential**

- Ability to build trust (4.8)
- Listening skills (4.7)
- Ability to communicate among diverse groups (4.5)

The manager must build trust with others in his or her personal relationships, and also know how to build citizens' trust in their local government. There has been excellent theoretical work in both of these areas.

Includes communicating to others that they are being heard and understood.

Could be categorized as an interpersonal communications skill, but the emphasis is on awareness of cultural or social group differences that provide cues for different communication tools and styles.

**Important**

- Interacting with individuals from different cultural or socio-economic backgrounds (4.4)
- Ability to cope with difficult people (4.0)

Similar to the preceding competency, but in the context of understanding how diverse backgrounds affect communications with individuals.

A skill that is used often, with individuals in the organization, with citizens and other individuals outside the organization, and occasionally with individual city council members.

## **Competencies**

- Persuasion (3.9)
- Understanding of personality differences (3.8)
- Understanding psychological needs of others; psychology of groups and individuals (3.7)

## **Comment**

It has been over seventy years since the publication of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, and there are still principles that can be applied to develop this competency. It must be based on a foundation of public service ethics to avoid becoming mere manipulation.

Management consultants have made the rounds with variations on the Myers-Briggs personality type indicators, and managers have found them helpful. More can be learned from the field of psychology.

The principle of walking in the other person's moccasins. Differs from the preceding competency in the emphasis on psychological needs, as compared to basic personality differences.

## **D. Personal Traits and Abilities**

In spite of repeated requests to focus on competencies limited to knowledge and skills, both the key informant panel and the group of experts in the Delphi process urged the addition of competencies that seem more akin to innate traits and abilities. The literature on private sector and general public administrator competencies includes these kinds of traits. Even if many depend on genes and experience, the application of theory can at least hone and extend most of these.

### **Essential**

- Decision making/problem solving (4.8)
- Judgment—knowing which issues to push and which to let slide (4.8)
- Ability to find solutions to complex problems (4.6)
- Initiative; self-motivation

Analytic techniques are useful, but for local government managers, skill in solving problems in conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity is especially critical.

Includes the ability to identify the key values of the organization or community in order to be able to choose among values.

Can include related competencies of innovation and creativity. Most complex problems faced by city managers involve people, not technical issues.

Arguably an innate trait, but if so, why do self-help books sell so well?

### **Important**

- Ability to anticipate issues and resolve them before they become problems (4.5)

Includes an understanding of the clues that tell a manager that things aren't quite right.

**Competencies**

- Team-building (4.4)
- Ability to acquire new knowledge and learn new skills (4.4)
- Ability to multi-task (4.4)
- Ability to accept constructive criticism (4.3)
- Resiliency (bounce back from setbacks) (4.3)
- Giving credit and accepting blame (4.3)
- Clear sense of purpose (4.2)
- Crisis management (4.2)
- Continuing professional and personal development (4.2)
- Personal time management (4.2)
- Innovation, creativity (4.2)
- Effective use of negotiation strategies (4.1)

**Comment**

A skill that the manager draws on under many circumstances: working with employees, with community groups, and as an advisor to the city council members.

Includes the ability to reflect on the things that are learned through experience.

Especially important for city and county managers due to the wide variety of services provided and simultaneous projects that are managed.

A competency that should be fairly well developed by the time an individual enters a graduate program.

Martin Seligman<sup>2</sup> has shown us that even optimism can be a learned trait.

The competency isn't demonstrated when the manager is *able* to do this, but only when he or she actually does it.

Requires several other competencies, such as public service ethic, and ability to identify and articulate the values and vision of both the organization and community.

Not just in the context of disasters or emergencies, but also in responding to shocks to the organization.

Similar to ability to acquire new knowledge, but specific to the process of self-assessment and intentional seeking of education and training. The guiding principle of ICMA's credentialing program.

Post-secondary education either builds this skill or filters for it, but it can be honed through the effective use of tools.

Largely dependent on the way an individual is wired, but exercises and practice can be helpful.<sup>3</sup>

An often-used skill, both professionally and in life in general. Labor contract bargaining is an obvious application, but the manager exercises some aspect of informal negotiations almost daily.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (New York: Pocket Books, 1998)

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005)

**Competencies**

- Professional personal appearance (4.0)
- Take care of one's own physical and mental well-being (4.0)
- Ability to set personal priorities (3.9)
- Sense of humor (3.9)
- Balance confidence with humility (3.8)
- Interdisciplinary problem-solving (3.8)
- Empathy and compassion (3.8)
- Risk-taking (3.7)

**Useful**

- Aesthetic sense: recognizing both beauty and ugliness (e.g., in urban form, building design) (3.2)

**2. Managing the Organization****A. Leadership****Essential****Comment**

Local government managers are not expected to be fashion leaders. Poor skills in this area, however, can hamper the manager's effectiveness in interacting with other people.

As with continuing professional development, requires self-assessment and a purposeful response.

Many researchers have written on both the importance of this skill and ways to build competence in it.

In a environment of mostly irrational people and processes, a well-formed sense of irony is helpful.

The Delphi panel member who suggested this competency (a veteran scholar of local government) put it this way: "Balance humility and confidence to be human: avoid being a gold-plated ass." Competence in this area probably requires some amount of self-awareness.

A component of this competency is being alert to new (or unfamiliar) disciplines that might hold answers to difficult problems.

Two separate traits, but related.

Includes not only the willingness and courage to take calculated risks, but the ability to identify the organization and community's level of risk tolerance.

Managers can hire individuals who are skilled at designing the built environment, but it is helpful if the manager can recognize when they get it right.

By identifying leadership and administration as two separate subcategories in managing the organization, there is a tacit assumption that the two areas are distinct. In many cases, however, this may be a false dichotomy, and leadership and administration skills lie on a continuum.

### **Competencies**

- Ability to translate council policies into action (4.8)
- Council/manager role/relationship skills (4.8)
- Developing and communicating the mission of the organization (4.6)

### **Comment**

The central element of a city manager's job description, and one that in turn depends on many other competencies (listening skills, council/manager relations, organizational leadership, direction, and project management, to name only a few).

A rich body of literature underscores the importance of this competency, and suggests skills and tools that can be used.

The importance of this skill has been clearly demonstrated in the case of private sector leaders.<sup>4</sup> The challenge for local government managers is clear communication of the organization's mission when it provides a wide range of services and functions to a wide range of citizens, customers, and stakeholders.

### **Important**

- Delegation; empowering employees (4.4)
- Motivating employees (4.3)
- Direct supervision of subordinates (e.g., department heads) (4.3)
- Mentoring and coaching individuals in the organization (4.1)
- Engaging employees during difficult economic times (4.0)
- Professional development of employees (3.8)

A management competency that has been known since the beginning of civilization.<sup>5</sup> Empowering employees goes beyond giving them challenging assignments, but also equipping them with the tools to be successful.

Includes awareness that different individuals are motivated differently, and skill in tailoring the motivational approach accordingly.

A competency necessary for any supervisor. For city managers, the ability to accept and accommodate strong egos (often seen in police and fire chiefs) is critical.

One of the "soft skills" that appears to distinguish leadership from some of the more technical aspects of administration.

The importance rating may reflect the fact that the Delphi exercise was conducted in the middle of the worst recession since the Great Depression. Always a useful skill, though, in view of the cyclical nature of the economy.

Beyond simple training of employees, it includes attention to building career paths and providing work experiences that stretch the individual.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, James C. Collins, *Good to Great : Why some Companies make the Leap--and Others Don't*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: HarperBusiness, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 18:1-27

**Competencies**

- Continuous re-examination of the core business (3.8)
- Collaborative labor/management relations (3.7)
- Effective handling of personal/emotional challenges faced by employees (3.7)
- Ability to adjust management approaches in response to generational differences (3.6)
- Entrepreneurial management (3.5)

**Comment**

Related to performance measurement and quality control, this requires vigilance to ensure that the organization is moving with changes in the environment.

The emphasis is on the word "collaborative." Often a challenge, since collective bargaining laws assume an adversarial, rather than collaborative, relationship.

Does not suggest that the manager need be a counselor and fix all employees' personal problems. But skill in the appropriate response and awareness of resources that employees can draw on is used often.

"What do you mean I can't update my Facebook page at work???"

The relative rating of this competency may have slipped somewhat since the initial publication of *Reinventing Government*.<sup>6</sup> Still an important competency in a continuing environment of low public support for taxes.

**B. Administration****Important**

- Strategic planning (4.4)
- Using the budget as a management tool; budget preparation (4.3)
- Project management: coordinating resources, staff, and schedules (4.2)

Applies both to the formal processes of strategic planning as well to the more informal "strategic thinking" (e.g., when to schedule a bond election, when and how to make an organizational change). Skills and knowledge in this area also apply to the process of community strategic planning.

A great deal of the research on budgeting focuses on the role of the budget as a policy instrument (typically at the federal level). But a competent manager can use the budget as a tool to work with, rather than against, principles of empowerment and motivating staff.

Includes both formal project management tools and practices, and more informal processes of direction and feedback.

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<sup>6</sup> Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government, how the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publ. Co., 1992)



**Competencies**

- Ability to do more with shrinking resources (4.2)
- Performance measurement (3.8)
- Efficiency in operations; "lean" processes (3.7)

**Comment**

See comment above (on difficult economic times). Goes beyond downsizing and related staff issues to the creation of new processes and systems to increase efficiency.

There has been much work in this area by both scholars and practitioners. Especially challenging for some municipal functions (e.g., operation of the municipal court, review of subdivision applications) with multiple objectives and stakeholders.

More specific than the "ability to do more with shrinking resources." Includes skill in adapting principles from industrial engineering to governmental services.

**Useful**

- Contract management (3.5)
- Risk management: general liability, employment law, insurance issues (3.4)
- Quality assurance; total quality management (3.3)
- Privatization—shifting former governmental responsibilities to the private sector (3.0)

An increasing challenge as governments are "hollowed out" and more functions are provided by contract. Initiating, maintaining, and terminating a contractual arrangement can be much more complex than most people realize.

All managers need some knowledge of these issues; in small cities, the city manager often serves as risk manager.

As with "lean" processes, managers have adapted, with changes, quality management principles derived from industrial processes to municipal services.

Distinct from contract management in that it requires competence in sensing when formerly public goods can be provided by the private sector, and in successfully managing the transition.

**C. Human Resources Administration****Important**

- Hiring employees (4.1)
- Disciplining employees (3.8)
- Establishing policies and procedures (3.8)

For the CEO, hiring key department heads such as police chief or planning director is especially critical. This competency area extends to the establishment of hiring practices for the entire organization.

The senior manager needs to be able to do this well, and to ensure that other supervisors are competent too.

Requires a balance between meeting the demands of legal and risk management concerns and giving staff room to exercise judgment.

**Competencies**

- Training/educating other employees (3.7)
- Organizational theory: what organizational processes and structures work best under different circumstances (3.7)

**Comment**

Differs from the professional development competency above by focusing on formal training programs, including new employee orientation.

Covers a very wide range of theory on organization structure and processes.

**Useful**

- Labor negotiations; collective bargaining law and procedures (3.4)
- Compensation systems (3.4)

Not as critical in some states and cities.

Useful to know, especially in the face of uninformed public discussions of ideas such as pay for performance.

**D. Legal/Institutional Systems****Important**

- General knowledge of national, state and local laws governing municipalities (4.0)
- Intergovernmental relations (4.0)
- Development of intergovernmental partnerships (4.0)
- Ability to be persuasive with state and federal government officials (3.8)

Includes knowledge of constitutional law, state law governing cities, and municipal charters and codes.

Includes competencies in collaboration and communications.

Similar to intergovernmental relations, but more specific to the formation of partnerships and crafting formal intergovernmental agreements.

Not merely lobbying, but ability to interact with state and federal officials as partners in governing.

**Useful**

- Forms of government (3.4)
- Administrative law; knowledge of legal institutions and processes (3.3)
- Managing relations with nonprofit organizations (3.2)

Helpful to know, but city managers are rarely consulted on changes in the form of government.

An important distinction between local government and private business management. The ability for local governments and its officials to act is often based on rule-of-law principles.

Increasingly important as governments contract with or shed service responsibility to nonprofits. Includes appreciation of the fact that nonprofits remain private, not public, organizations.

**E. Technical/Analytic Skills****Important**

**Competencies**

- Financial analysis of policy options (4.1)
- Capital improvement planning & financing (3.9)
- Using office technology (computers, PDAs) (3.7)
- Financial forecasting (3.7)
- Cost/benefit analysis (3.5)

**Comment**

Includes several other competencies, including estimating budgets, forecasting, and cost/benefit analysis.

Includes knowledge of the interaction between capital (one-time) and operating (ongoing) budgets.

Managers can no longer avoid this, when so many of their constituents, council members and staff are comfortable with personal technology.

Consultants can be used to establish complex econometric models (that will be only as good as the projections for independent variables). Managers need to master basic tools of graphical analysis and other techniques for making projections.

Includes the ability to quantify the value of externalities and other costs and benefits that do not have a market value.

**Useful**

- Tax policies and strategies (3.4)
- Setting prices of public goods and services (3.3)
- Applications of technology—IT, web design, other Internet applications (3.2)
- Trend forecasting (3.2)

Specifics vary by state, but knowledge of property, income, and sales taxes is often used by local government managers.

Increasingly important as entrepreneurial cities set prices for municipal Internet service, membership at the city fitness center, and library cards.

Ability to keep up with technological advances is as important as knowledge of current IT systems.

More general than financial forecasting. Includes identifying trends in demographics and changes in political climate.

### **3. Community Leadership/Facilitation**

#### **A. Group Processes**

##### **Essential**

- Ability to diplomatically disagree with elected officials and present alternative courses of action (4.5)

Includes many other competencies: judgment (when disagreement is appropriate), listening skills, policy analysis, ability to identify community values, political sensitivity, and persuasion, among others.

##### **Important**

**Competencies**

- Collaboration (4.4)
- Ability to analyze and communicate public policy alternatives (4.4)
- Developing consensus on community vision/mission (4.2)
- Mediating and resolving conflicts between individuals and groups (4.2)
- Facilitating group discussions and decision-making processes (4.1)
- Civic engagement skill (4.1)
- Educating and coaching elected officials and other community leaders to improve their effectiveness (4.1)
- Strengthening council-mayor relationships (4.1)
- Skill in appropriate accommodation of council and citizen interest in the administration of the organization (3.9)

**Comment**

Useful in many areas of the manager's work. Competence in this area includes skill in leading others to collaborate.

This competence is independent of any specific policy domain. A city manager will more likely be analyzing policy alternatives for dog parks or speed bumps than urban poverty or climate change.

Competence includes the ability to "lead from behind" by being an effective facilitator.

An (unfortunately) often-used skill. There is a good body of theory and excellent resources on building this skill.

Public hearings must be held to meet legal requirements, but they are notoriously ineffective for community decision-making. There has been good research on better alternatives.

Includes skill in using both traditional methods (e.g., advisory committees) and modern tools (e.g., web-based forums).

An important role for a city or county manager, but one that must be exercised with finesse: the council members are the manager's bosses, and community leaders are often co-equals.

Never in the city manager's formal job description, but nonetheless a role that can make a difference in the effectiveness of the local government. Requires tact and the understanding of the psychological needs of others.

Citizens and council members are not often encumbered by concepts of policy-administration separation, or the difference between ends and means. Effective managers must learn to deal with that reality.

**B. Community Building****Essential**

- Political savvy--sizing up community politics; political sensitivity (4.7)

Requires an understanding of dynamics of political processes and sources and uses of political power. The manager must avoid being a "political animal" while still being keenly aware that he or she works in a political environment.

**Competencies****Comment****Important**

- Articulating community vision/mission (4.7)
- Understanding and exploration of community values and needs (4.3)
- Community-building strategies (4.0)
- Methods for creating or enhancing the community's "sense of place." (3.6)

A subtle difference with "developing consensus" on community vision/mission, above. This competency emphasizes the ability to *communicate* an often ill-defined vision of the community's future.

Here the process itself—if it effectively engages citizens—can be a form of community building.

Tools range from modern forms of barn-raising (e.g., building playgrounds or homeless shelters) to development of civic institutions. There is some good recent research and experience in this area.

Especially important in times of rapid social change, and in the blurring of boundaries between suburbs.

**4. Service Delivery****Important**

- Effective implementation of programs and services (4.3)
- Functional/operational knowledge of common municipal services: police, fire, public works, planning, etc. (4.1)
- Public-private partnerships (3.8)
- Knowledge of specific services: emergency management; sustainability & environmental protection techniques; economic development; causes underlying urban problems (3.6)

A very general competency that requires many specific skills and areas of knowledge.

A local government manager is of necessity a generalist, but there is a set of services that most cities provide in common. The city manager should at least know why manhole covers are round.

Similar to contract management (above) and privatization, except the emphasis is on partnerships that are formed to provide a service.

The importance rating is a composite of ratings for individual services that were judged by the expert panel to be important rather than merely useful. These ratings would be subject to change over time; the term "sustainability" was not even in common usage two decades ago.

**Useful**

- Urban renewal and other redevelopment techniques (3.4)
- Urban/regional planning (3.4)

Not an issue for some rural or suburban cities, or for many county governments.

The relatively low rating is somewhat of a surprise. The competency is not as critical in low-growth or landlocked communities, and managers may see it as a technical (non-managerial) skill.

**Competencies**

- Code enforcement & community beautification strategies (3.2)
- Site development; urban economics (3.2)
- Marketing (3.2)
- Affordable housing strategies (3.1)

**Comment**

Includes knowledge of when it is better to use a carrot (e.g., grants and volunteer projects), and when it is better to use a stick (e.g., enforcement of city "nuisance" codes).

Similar to urban renewal, above, but includes development of industrial and commercial sites.

The relatively low importance rating might reflect the label's connotations with private advertising. An important role for the manager is to help the government earn the trust and support of its citizens, and this is partly done through effective public relations.

The importance of this competency depends largely on the location of the city (e.g., Vail CO versus a suburb of Detroit).