

ORGANIZATIONAL GUIDE FOR MUNICIPALITIES

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Although the principles enumerated in this document apply generally to all municipalities, it was developed specifically for larger towns and smaller cities. I prepared this paper a few years ago when asked by a medium sized town to assist them with some organizational concerns.

I feel it may be a useful document for administrators and elected officials and I am pleased to share it with you.

Structure and Management Principles of Municipal Organization

(Note: references to “he” shall also mean “she” throughout this document)

The following is a summary of accepted management and organizational principles:

- goals of the organization
- definition of management
- division of responsibilities, job descriptions
- use of committees of council
- reporting to council
- written and verbal communications
- the “organization chart”, chain of command, formal line authority and informal communication

1. Goals of the Organization

The goal of a municipality is the provision of municipal services, regulations and laws, which are available within the legislative power of a municipality to provide, and subject to available resources, to meet the collective aspirations and expectations of its citizens.

Both the elected council and the employees of the municipality should have a common interest, and work as a team to accomplish those goals. The employees, in performing their duties in an effective and conscientious way, are doubly rewarded, in that they gain job satisfaction and also enhance the community in which they live. The council, with the employees can view with pride, the enhancement of municipal services and improving the community for their neighbors and friends.

If both the council and the employees understand and identify with common goals, all involved in the organization will be motivated to put forth their best efforts.

2. Management

Management is defined as “**getting things done through people.**” A person who runs a small business without any employees only requires limited management skills. He is in a position to perform all the tasks by himself without having to give directives or delegate authority and responsibility to his employees.

The primary functions of a manager are to, plan, organize and communicate. These functions are common to all managers within the hierarchy of an organization

A council must use qualified staff to achieve its goals. It is unlikely a member of council is elected because he has any technical or professional skills related to the actual delivery of municipal services. Persons are elected to council for a variety of reasons; perhaps because of his attractive personality, - his communicative skills, - common sense, - special interest, - and sometimes apathy in the community at election time. Persons are seldom elected to council because they can operate a motor patrol, maintain an artificial ice plant, operate a computer or establish grade levels.

It is very important that council employ persons with the ability and skills to get the job done. The council collectively must be a good manager by employing appropriate persons, describing their jobs and defining their authority. Even though some members of council may have skills in certain areas of service delivery, they must remember they are policy makers and should not interfere with those employed to perform the tasks.

3. Division of Responsibilities, Job Descriptions

Councils must be continually reminded that they are policy makers and not practitioners. The Council is ultimately responsible and accountable to its electorate. It must establish an organizational framework and intelligently delegate responsibilities and authority to qualified employees to achieve the goals of the municipality.

Department heads are appointed who similarly are responsible and accountable to their superior if not directly to the council.

The principle that almost everyone understands who has worked within any organization, but bears repeating, is that **no employee should take directions from more than one person.** There is nothing more disheartening and confusing than, for example, a motor grader operator being told by the foreman to remove snow from a certain street, and then the Administrator or a member of council approaching the same employee, directing that he proceed to do the work on another street. If it was necessary to change tasks, the foreman should have given the redirection.

A written position description is important so employees understand their duties, to whom they report, and the limits of their authority, responsibility and accountability. The detail of a job description depends where the employee is within the hierarchy. The position description of the Administrator and department heads should be broad in scope allowing for flexibility to enable him to cope with a wide variety of unexpected circumstances and decisions that must be made. If there is a major water main break, the public works foreman should not be required to seek out his job description to determine if he has the authority and responsibility

to repair the damage. Hopefully, the job description would state that he is responsible for the maintenance and operation of the water and sewerage system. If job descriptions are too detailed and rigidly adhered to, an employee will be reluctant to take common sense action for fear of being reprimanded.

The council is responsible for preparing the job description of its chief executive officer (Administrator). He in turn, probably in consultation with the council, prepares the job description of the department heads. The department heads then provide job descriptions for their subordinates. It may be useful for the department head to draft his own job description and then have it modified by the Administrator and the council. A qualified department head knows what it takes to get the job done; authority and flexibility he must be given.

Responsibility must always be linked with adequate authority to meet the obligations of the job. There is no purpose in assigning the responsibility to a department head for the operation and maintenance of certain facilities without giving him the necessary authority to direct his subordinates, purchase materials and make other operational decisions required to complete the task.

Once the initial job description has been prepared and understood, it should seldom have to be referred to in the future.

4. Committees of Council

Authority to spend money, pass bylaws, and to make a whole range of decisions related to the operation of a municipality is vested in the council. Some of this authority can be delegated to the employees through job descriptions and council policy, however, the same does not hold true with council committees. Apart from the questionable legal authority of a committee to make decisions, unlike a department head, a committee is not accountable for its actions. A committee cannot be fired, only dissolved.

Committees should only be formed to study and recommend on certain matters referred to it by the council. **A committee should not have operational functions.** The day to day operation of the municipality is assigned to staff in accordance with policy and procedures established by the council.

Generally, there are three types of committees;

- **standing committees** of council; consists of members of council, generally appointed at the beginning of the year, and responsible to report and recommend on issues referred to it on matters relating to the operation of a particular department or departments. Standing committees are appointed to avoid having to name individuals to the committee each time a matter arises in a particular department.
- **special committees**; the definition is self descriptive. A matter may arise at a council meeting that can better be handled by a specially appointed committee rather than assigning it to one of the standing committees. This may happen if the issue does not clearly fall within the mandate of a particular department, or if some members of council have a keen interest or knowledge in the matter at hand. This committee would meet, study the issue, recommend and report to council and then would automatically dissolve.

- **Citizens committee;** used only in very unusual circumstances when a very broad consensus of the citizens at large is desirable. Such a committee should not be used if it effects the day to day operation of the municipality or has implications on the current budget. Citizens committees may be useful, but it must be remembered, it is the council, not the committee who is ultimately responsible for the final decision.

Advantages of using committees;

- enables the avoidance of making a hasty decision under pressure of a special interest group or person. A resolution “to refer the matter to the Administration and Finance Committee for further study and recommendation” is a non-offensive action. There are consequences in making hasty decisions. A time delay provides for sober second thought.
- provides for broader support of council members for a certain issue when the matter is debated by the council. A recommendation placed before council by the Administrator may be denied by council. The same issue referred to a committee, resulting in the identical recommendation made by the appointed official, may well be approved by the council. In depth study by the elected officials places them in position of taking ownership of the recommendations and provides broad support for the final decision.

Disadvantages of committees

- may create an unnecessary delay in the decision making process
- a committee may assume it has “operational” authority and attempt to go beyond its terms of reference.
- a committee or chairman of the committee, depending on the personalities involved, may tend to control the council agenda, relegating the council as a whole to “rubber stamping” recommendations.

Committees should be used sparingly. Committees should not be operational in nature; the day to day operation is the responsibility of persons employed to get the job done.

When suggesting that a standing committee should only deal with matters referred to it by the council, there may be exceptions to that rule. For example; there is a major breakdown of the pumping system for the city water supply. The cost of repair is say \$20,000.00. The Superintendent knows what must be done but feels uneasy authorizing such a major expenditure. The matter is referred to the Administrator, who consults with the Mayor. The Mayor, in his judgement, feels that some support of council members is wise prior to proceeding with the work. He may quickly convene a meeting of the Works and Utilities Committee rather than calling a special meeting of the council to deal with the issue. With the support of the Mayor and a committee of the council, there is little doubt the matter will be ratified by the council at its next meeting.

5. Reporting to Council

All meetings of Committees should be reported in writing to the Council, providing a brief statement of the purpose of the issue(s), information studied, the conclusions, and a clear

recommendation for consideration of the council. The Administrator, and relevant department head, should participate in the committee meeting. The Administrator should cause to be recorded the minutes of the meeting and should place those minutes on the next agenda of the council.

The more responsibilities and authority given to staff, the more important it is to provide written reports to the council each month so the council will be well informed on all issues related to the day to day operation of the city.

Some councillors will have the expectation that when they are elected, they can influence and become involved with the day to day operation of the city. They may find that significant things are happening of which they are not apprised, and this may cause them some embarrassment when questioned by the citizens. Councillors may feel they are redundant and relegated to “rubber stamping” matters attended to routinely by the department heads.

It is critical that the Administrator and department heads provide monthly written reports summing up major work that has been done within the departments, highlighting issues and concerns requiring council attention, and making recommendations on matters requiring council authorization. The department heads should attend the regular meeting of council to answer questions related to their reports. If reporting is not done in a sensitive and thorough manner, the administration will eventually find themselves operating in isolation of the council and without its support. Council will support action taken by the administration if it has full knowledge of the issues surrounding the reasons for the action. Without this information, the councillors will be no better informed than the average citizen, and will then tend to criticize in a similar manner as the average citizen.

The councillors can keep abreast with the day to day operations between council meetings, by dropping in at the city office and being updated by the Administrator or department heads. Without attempting to do business on coffee row, in a small city, there will always be informal communications between members of council and between staff and members of council. This is helpful providing the member of council is not attempting to interfere with the conduct of an employee in the execution of his assigned duties.

6. Communications

Communications within the administration takes place both verbally and in writing. Although council directives may be communicated in a council meeting in the presence of the department heads, the Administrator should follow up that directive by restating it by written memorandum. The Administrator must provide the coordination between the council and the department heads, in addition to coordinating the activities of the department heads.

There are formal and informal lines of communication. The formal line of communication is similar to the chain of command shown on most organizational charts. Typically, a directive may originate from the council, -to the Administrator, and from the Administrator to the department head assigned to do the task. The Administrator may issue a directive to a department head, and the department head may assign the work to one of his subordinates.

What should never occur is the Administrator bypassing the department head and issuing orders directly to a person responsible to the department head.

Just as important as the formal “vertical” lines of communication, is the informal “lateral” communication. For example, the caretaker of the arena may detect a leak in the header for the brim lines. He reports this to his superior, who may be the Recreation Director. The Recreation Director could contact the Public Works Foreman who may have the expertise and resources to do the work. In this case there is no need to communicate through the Administrator, although it may be prudent to advise what has been done in this particular situation. This could also be an item to include in the monthly report of one of the department heads to council.

In addition to communicating items of some importance, verbally, a written memorandum should also be prepared for future reference, and also to serve as a reminder to the person responsible for performing the work. If a “stop” sign has been destroyed at a critical intersection, and since safety to the public may be involved, the Administrator should prepare a memorandum to the Superintendent in addition to conveying the message verbally. Also, a request to perform a certain function prior to a future date should be in writing, so the department head required to have the work done will not overlook the matter.

Direct communication is most effective and provides for good coordination in completing projects. Frequent informal meetings should be held involving the department heads and the Administrator. In this way ideas can be exchanged and strategy planned. Depending on the project or task at hand, the Mayor could be involved so that a linkage is provided with the elected officials.

The importance of the Mayor and Administrator communicating regularly cannot be overstated. The Mayor must be kept abreast of all significant issues so it is not left entirely up to the administration to guide items through the council process.

Communications should flow freely in all directions throughout the organization. Lack of good communications is a symptom or the cause of an administration not operating effectively.

Good ideas do not always originate with the department heads or the Administrator. Often a laborer, caretaker, equipment operator or stenographer will have a sound suggestion on how to improve a certain function. Listening to everyone’s suggestions will build a spirit of teamwork within the organization.

6. The Mayor

The Mayor sets the tone for the governance of the city. He plays a vital role in establishing good communication between the employees and the members of council. He puts a public face to the administration of the city.

The following is an excerpt from an article written in the publication “Municipal World” written by Joseph Kushner and David Siegel. I could not express it in better words and I will therefore make a direct quote.

“The head of council must be certain that staff members are treated fairly, both in the council chamber and in day-to-day dealings. It is traditional that councillors direct their questions to staff through the head of council, and staff respond in like manner. This is done to prevent direct confrontation, which would put staff members in an awkward position, but it also gives the head of council the opportunity to act as a buffer between councillors and staff. The head of council should not be reluctant to chastise a councillor when a question to staff is phrased in a personal or vindictive manner. Since the question is being put through the head of council, he or she could simply refuse to allow the question to be asked unless it is rephrased in a more appropriate manner. The head of council also has the responsibility to ensure that staff members are responding appropriately to the reasonable questions posed by councillors.”

8. Organization Structure

An organization structure should be established so that it will be appropriate regardless of the personalities involved. The structure should not be changed to accommodate the strengths and weaknesses of individual department heads, and should remain substantially unchanged as employees come and go.

The organizational structure most definitely should not be changed to suit the personalities and character of a particular council. Being subject to the election process, terms can be short lived, and there is no real control on the competence of members of council.

On the other hand, it is reasonable to assume that the council will engage competent, qualified persons, and therefore the organization should be structured to assist in the performance of those hired to get the job done.

Job descriptions can be modified to match special strengths of department heads, but the basic structure should remain unchanged.

All councils engage a chief administrative officer, usually known as an Administrator or City Manager. That person is given the responsibility for coordinating the activities of the department heads in addition to communicating directives from the council to the appropriate department head.

The coordinating responsibility of the Administrator must be linked with the authority to direct the department heads.

The job description assigned to the Administrator (chief administration officer) may be modified somewhat to match the experience and abilities of the individual, or to recognize the tradition of the organization. In some instances the Administrator will serve primarily in the role as coordinator between departments and between council and the departments. In other

situations, the Administrator will be delegated far greater authority to make decisions, and to direct staff, rather than acting as a mere coordinator.

Similarly, the job descriptions of department heads can be modified to recognize their special skills, interests and abilities.

9. **Conclusions**

Most theoreticians and practitioners in the field of management can agree upon the principles of management, and the suggested form of organization for a municipality. Adjusting elements of an organization that has a tradition of conducting its business in a certain way, taking into consideration the strengths and weakness of the various players within the organization, is where the greatest challenges lay.

Members of council, and department heads, as the Mayor may deem appropriate, should examine this submission and compare the principles and structures suggested with the actual structures in its administration.

Where are its strengths? Where are its weaknesses? What adjustments can and should be made?

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