



The Role of a Good Mayor

By Don Racheter, Ph.D.

Some cities have a Strong-Mayor System, while others utilize a Weak-Mayor System in which the city is run by a professional City Manager who is hired and fired by the City Council. However, in both types the Mayor has at least three main duties to perform: 1) fulfilling ceremonial roles; 2) engaging in meeting management; and 3) acting as a role model.

As the elected or appointed head of a city, the Mayor serves as an ambassador, spokesman, and cheerleader for the municipality. In the United States, representatives of the state or national governments frequently visit a city for a variety of reasons, and it is often the Mayor who welcomes them to the city and serves as their host. If a city has an international sister-city relationship, a Mayor may also welcome visitors from abroad. To perform this role well, the Mayor needs to be an outgoing person who can make small talk with individuals from all walks of life and project a positive vibe and genuine concern for others.

If members of the public or media want to learn more about something they have heard a given city is doing, or considering doing, they often seek out the Mayor for comment. It is much easier to deal with one leader than a group, which is why Mayors, Governors, and Presidents get more media attention than City Councils, State Legislatures, or Congress. To perform this role well, the Mayor needs to be someone who can speak off the cuff in an intelligent and informed manner without distracting speech tags like “um,” “er,” “ah,” and so on.

Mayors also need to be well-informed about all matters handled by the city government and able to succinctly summarize the same for listeners. They must not bore people by rambling on and on, going off on side tangents, or taking unwarranted credit for the work of others. When faced with potentially hostile inquiries, a good Mayor will put the best possible spin on the given situation, just as cheerleaders try to maintain a positive attitude even when their squad is behind in a given competition.

As the presiding officer at City Council meetings, it is imperative for the Mayor to take a crash course in parliamentary procedure if they are not already familiar with it. This should be done as soon as they learn they are going to be in charge of these meetings.¹ Nothing frustrates people like a poorly run meeting! Contrariwise, it is better to try to reach consensus in small groups like a City Council using “Bob’s rules” rather than insisting on following every tittle and jot of *Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised* at every single moment of every meeting. This will also frustrate and turn off what should be a group of colleagues, and, as time passes, perhaps even friends.

If in fact the members of the City Council do not get along well with each other or with others in city government, it is up to the Mayor to take the lead and try to smooth out these relationships:

The mayor is in an ideal position to foster positive relationships between the various elements of local government by setting a good example. This includes relationships between the Mayor and Councilors, Council and the administration, and the Mayor and Chief Executive Officer [City Manager].²

To perform this role well, the Mayor needs to be a mediator who seeks a win-win solution rather than someone who aggressively pursues an agenda of his own by trying to browbeat, bribe, or otherwise get people to temporarily go against their natural instincts in any given situation.

The fact that Mayors in Iowa are elected on a non-partisan basis is designed to further this objective. Any Mayor who comes to office with a chip on their shoulder and tries to drive an ideological agenda not shared by the other members of the decision-making group is likely to quickly lose any political honeymoon they may have generated with their election. Whether or not any progress is made during a given Mayor's term, they are likely to be remembered years later as a "Good Mayor" if they perform well in their roles as ceremonial leader, meeting manager, and positive role model for everyone in city government.

Endnotes:

¹ An easy-to-use source is "Chapter Ten: Parliamentary Procedure" by Dr. Donald P. Racheter in *Iowa Government and Politics* (Octagon Press: Muscatine, IA), pp. 121-135.

² "Helping Local Governments Govern Better," *Good Governance Guide*, <<http://www.goodgovernance.org.au/roles-relationships/roles-in-local-government/mayor/>> accessed on March 17, 2017.

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