

Strategic leadership for local government

by Rick Elligott and Beth Johnson, *Johnson & Elligott*



We believe in having fun while we work, just as we did when we were, respectively, Director of Corporate Services and Mayor of the City of Delta, BC. That's why we enjoyed working with those from AMM who attended our workshop in April. These good sports went from puzzlement to delight when we walked in together playing our former roles. 'Mayor Johnson' was bubbling with the enthusiasm of the elected community booster and was asking her senior staff for the impossible, while 'CAO Elligott' was doing all he could to get the mayor to see reason.

Our role-play was a humorous illustration of the challenges and rewards of the working relationship between elected and staff folks. Through our presentation, we explored what it means to be strategic leaders in local government.

Here is a summary of the ground covered in the first half of the workshop.

A strategic approach to leadership

What is *strategic* leadership?

Here is an analogy: if ordinary leadership is like a car with a driver who sets out with no map, not really sure where to go, then strategic leadership is like a car with a driver who knows where to go and knows the best way to get there. Strategic leadership is an approach to carrying out the community's business. It is council-driven; it identifies and balances the responsibilities of council and staff, while ensuring the needs of both

are addressed; and it promotes a productive partnership based on understanding and mutual respect between council and staff for the ultimate benefit of the community. This partnership is only possible with council and staff motivation, support, and commitment.

The strategic leadership environment created by such a partnership allows council and staff to do the very best for their community at problem solving, priority setting, making tradeoffs, and allocating resources. Like the car and driver, a council practicing the principles of strategic leadership, supported by a committed staff, knows where it is going, and gets there in the most direct way with the least cost and best results.

The gavel and the grovel: building a balanced partnership

How do you begin to build a balanced partnership between council and staff? Surely, the best partnership does *not* consist of council wielding a gavel and staff constantly groveling before them.

First, let's clarify what we mean by 'balanced partnership.' In this relationship, the roles are clear: council leads and staff follows. Council sets policy direction and makes decisions, while relying upon the professional expertise and support of its staff partners. Staff follows and supports its council partners, always providing the best information to help council be better leaders. This isn't groveling – it's a profes-

sional approach to this essential role in local government.

Think of the balance as a pendulum swinging between two extremes, with each role critical to providing the best service to your community. If the pendulum swings too far one way, council doesn't work with staff and use their expertise, but keeps them at a distance. In this case, council loses the benefit of its staff's expertise, initiative, and creative problem solving. At the other end of the pendulum, council passes everything over to staff and abrogates its role as decision-maker, allowing control and most decisions to rest with staff. In this case, council sacrifices its role as the voice and expression of the community's wishes.

These are very extreme cases of the pendulum's swing, and every council moves back and forth as the situation demands, sometimes 'taking charge' and sometimes recognizing that staff needs to lead the process. A healthy, balanced partnership of council and staff has a 'zone of balance' between the two extremes – where council and staff members work together in a coordinated, strategic manner. When you're in your zone of balance, you're in the Strategic Leadership Zone.

How does a council and staff find the zone of balance that meets their needs? Remember that the zone of balance differs depending on many factors – from the size of the community, to the time commitments of council members, to the demands of the

Getting it Right

citizens. Some councils are happier focusing on the larger issues and the big picture; others want more detail. Wherever the zone of balance falls, it will be determined via thoughtful and open discussion between council and staff members.

At the workshop, we suggested one tool to help that discussion occur. There are others. Developing a *Charter of Rights and Responsibilities* offers an excellent opportunity for council and staff to tell each other what they need to do the best job they can. Participants brainstormed what some of these rights (needs) would be, and came up with some good ideas on the needs of both council members and staff. For example, they suggested that council needs access to complete information, and the expertise of their own staff, or, if necessary, outside expertise. When they get a report, they need clear options, the ramifications of those options, and clear recommendations. They need to hear all sides of the story before making a decision. In the end, when the decision is made, they need staff to be supportive of implementing it.

Participants (mostly elected officials) were equally good at recognizing the needs of staff. These included: clear direction from council, clearly stated questions and motions, timely decisions, realistic expectations of time lines and work volume, adequate resources, and leeway to do their jobs. Both staff and council need to be treated with respect, to be supported, and to be acknowledged for their work. All in all, elected and staff participants knew intuitively what their (and their colleagues') 'rights' are – what they need to do their job and do it well.

Remember we called this tool a *Charter of Rights and Responsibilities*? In a balanced partnership, an interesting thing happens: your rights become my responsibilities, and vice-versa. For example, if I as a council member have a right to some clear recommendations, it's a staff member's responsibility to provide them. Yet, it works both ways. If a staff member has a right to adequate resources to carry out council's directives, then that person has a responsibility. That responsibility is to find out what resources are needed, what other projects may be affected by a shift in resources, and to accept the responsibility for the decision (by either providing more resources or accepting the repercussions of a shift in funds).

In each community, council and staff will have a different idea of their rights and responsibilities. This is where you can spell out your needs in many other areas; staff-Council communication, and staff-citizen relations are just two examples of areas in

which you will have particular needs in order to stay within your comfort zone. This Strategic Leadership Zone is where you work best. There is no one-size-fits-all list.

What's important is that after each group develops its lists, they meet to discuss them to ensure that there is an understanding of what is meant and what is behind the listed needs. Here, some councils and staffs want to formalize their understanding, while others see it as an informal guideline. In either case, it's a living, changing document to reference in order to keep in the zone of balance. As such, the *Charter of Rights and Responsibilities* should be reviewed periodically to ensure it remains relevant and appropriate, and to make sure it continues to contribute to your balanced partnership.

There are outstanding benefits when your council and staff work as a balanced partnership. Council and staff know where your Strategic Leadership Zone is – where you understand and respect one another's roles, share priorities, and commit to common goals. You have empowered staff to meet

your needs, and make you a better leader. You work as a strategic team on behalf of your community, whether you are working on a specific project, your business plan, the budget, organizational changes, or any of the goals you have set out to accomplish.

In the afternoon session, we addressed two further aspects of strategic leadership – how your council and staff can improve your organization to support and enhance your productive partnership. Then, we discussed how the principles of strategic leadership apply to public consultation – and gave practical examples of how you can use them to make public consultation a more meaningful and positive experience for citizens, Council, and staff.

Strategic leadership brings out the best in Councils and staff. If you have any questions or comments regarding its many practical applications, or about any other organizational challenge, please email us at beth@johnson-elligott.ca, or rick@johnson-elligott.ca. Or browse our website, www.johnson-elligott.ca. ●



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