



# Different strokes – the real challenge

by Wally Melnyk, CGA, CMMA and MMAA President

Since the 2002 election, the face of municipal administration in the province has been changing significantly and it continues to evolve. A number of Chief Administrative Officers' (CAOs') and Assistant Administrators' positions have been vacated in the past six months. The reasons for the vacancies seem to be as varied as the individuals who held the positions. They include retirement, illness, career advancement and sometimes simply career change.

An aging work force and retirements certainly play a role in the turnover levels that we are currently experiencing and this is a reality that is impacting every sector of society, not only the municipal administrative profession. But that is only part of the explanation. Career choice and the opportunity to climb the corporate ladder also play a role. The turnover then creates a domino effect that occurs regarding these positions.

Retirement and advancement are issues that impact the administration of a municipality but are normally viewed as fairly positive events. The issue I would like to address involves the less desirable situation where the CAO and councillors can no longer work as a team; where the strong partnership needed to run the municipality no longer exists.

At the Municipal Officials Seminar in Brandon in late February, the AMM had a speaker by the name of **Linton Sellen** speak about the role of the Council and CAO. Mr. Sellen's presentation was informative, interesting and attempted to explain in simple, real life terms the role of the CAO and Council. He spoke about where the responsibilities of Council and the CAO started and ended as they related to personnel issues, however, the examples could easily be expanded to a whole host of management issues.

Mr. Sellen's speech was well presented, provided a great deal of food for thought, and, in theory, was quite relevant. In reality however the impact of a variety of factors can make 'what should be' and 'what is' dramatically different:

1. **Local politics:**

In Manitoba, a majority of municipalities are fairly modest in size, from the perspective of their employee base. With small numbers of employees, the desire to establish complex and stringent reporting and communication policies is reduced. The result, however, is that the integrity of the entire management system as described by Mr. Sellen is compromised.

“ ...We must work hard to maximize the strengths of all while minimizing the effects of the challenges... ”

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Without formal structure and adherence to policy, the opportunity to have employees, the CAO or council manipulate the system is significant. In addition, the ability of any supervisor to truly hold his or her employee accountable is reduced.

**2. Ability of managers:**

Competence of individual managers is always an issue. The ability of managers to effectively deal with a variety of complex issues, from procurement to personnel, from provision of services to capital acquisition, in an ever evolving environment is a concern not only in the public sector but also in private enterprise and not for profit organizations.

There is a saying amongst human resource people that states ‘people will advance through the corporate hierarchy to a point of incompetence.’ In other words, technically competent individuals will rise along the management chain until their abilities stop them. At this point, if they are unprepared to advance themselves, their career path has reached a plateau. In fact, depending on their ability to deal with problem solving and decision making situations, the individual’s employment future may be in jeopardy.

Weakness on the part of managers will result in superiors wanting or needing to become involved in management issues. In the municipal context, this results in councils that are forced to act as managers because the CAO is unwilling or unable to do so.

**3. Unique partnership:**

The CAO and Council find themselves in a unique position when it comes to management of the municipality. At times, the CAO and council are part of the governing team establishing policy for the entire municipality. At others, the CAO is an employee requesting salary considerations, dealing with concerns regarding working conditions or grieving a specific employment incident.

This dual role places the CAO in an awkward position, once being a full partner working in tandem with a group for the overall betterment of the organization and at others at odds with Council on issues of personal priority.

**4. Personality conflicts:**

We have all heard of the situation where a CAO has worked efficiently and effectively for a municipality for years. Then suddenly, after an election, the CAO has left and the position is posted.

Personality conflicts, differences in opinion, and clashing perspectives will occur regardless of the abilities of the people involved or the strength of the policy in place. In these types of cases, making a clean break may be mutually beneficial to both parties.

The world of the CAO will continue to be fluid and ever evolving as it is for most managers in business or government. The ability to maintain or attain a specific job will be contingent on a number of factors including one’s desire to improve themselves, the strength of the management structure and their ability to work with a

team. Ultimately, the Council and CAO must determine a structure and policies that allow them to function effectively, efficiently and in the best interests of the municipality. This structure will not always be the same for all organizations nor should it be given the uniqueness of the individuals involved.

Since all those who come to the table are unique and function best in different environments, it is critical to understand that ‘different strokes for different folks’ theory and work hard to maximize the strengths of all while minimizing the effects of the challenges that we all encounter. ●

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