Managing in a Hostile Work Environment

TCMA
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Consequences of a hostile board...

- A tendency to spend time and energy developing “defenses” and unnecessary justifications for actions.

- Becoming immobilized - afraid to take risks - fear of failure. Creativity is stifled.

- The organization’s focus becomes smaller, more short-term.

- The general tendency to feel as though you have not and are not doing a good job.

- Feeling as though your expertise is not being utilized and/or is being ignored. Thus feeling unimportant to the organization.

- Motivation and teamwork-related problems appear amongst employees.
- Turnover increases, especially at or near the top.

- Not knowing what to do in terms of job function. Receiving ambiguous direction.

- Inadequate communication develops - generally between middle and upper management and between the governing body and upper management.

- The longer and more intense the dysfunction occurs, the deeper it will extend into the organization, eventually reaching the line level.
And if it goes on long enough, you the City Manager will go nuts...
My Career Path as CAO

• City Administrator Sevierville, TN 1978 – 1993
• City Administrator Mauldin, SC 2001 – 2006
• City Manager Elizabethton, TN 2006 – 2007
• City Manager Snellville, GA 2008 – 2012
• City Administrator Sevierville, TN 2012 - present
Snellville, GA  
“Where Everybody is Proud to be Somebody”

- Gwinnett County  
  • 805,321 (2010 census)  
- 1 of 15 cities  
- Council-Manager  
- 18,242 (2010 census)  
- Home Rule city  
  • Easy to amend charter  
    • 2005, 2010

- Mayor (1)  
  • Popular election  
  • 4-yr term  
  • Term limited (2)

- City Council (5)  
  • Designated seats  
  • At-large  
  • 4-yr term  
  • Term limited (3)

- Overlapping terms
- All members vote, including the Mayor
The “Hostile” environment

• Was not a Council vs. Manager issue.

• Virtually every issue had two sides.

• Council was divided and openly hostile.
  • Evenly at first.
  • Then Mayor was on minority side.

• Council meetings were long and contentious.

• In less than 3 ½ years:
  • 2 Mayors
  • 10 Council members
  • 4 City Attorneys
  • 2 City Clerks

• Staff was guarded and on-edge.

• Unfavorable media coverage.
A Tale of Two Toilets
The “Stakes”

- City Attorney
  - Appointment and termination
- Mayoral voting
- Mayor-Pro Tem
- Board & Commission Appointments
- City Clerk
- Stormwater fee
- Development of Town Green
- Town Square development
Who and what is in danger?

• The City Manager
• The form of government
• Council members
• Community reputation
Points to ponder ...

**Everyone**
- What was the root cause of the conflict?
  - Competing community visions?
  - Power?
  - ????
- How does the conflict manifest itself?
- Does structure contribute to the conflict?

**Manager**
- What is my role / responsibility in all this?
  - Is it my job to fix it?
  - What is my allegiance to FOG, City, profession, myself?
  - “Endeavor to persevere.” – Chief Lone Watie
- What is the Mayor and Council’s role / responsibility in this?
“What can a poor boy do ............

• Respect the Mayor and Councilmembers.
• Don’t take sides.
  • Be very emphatic about this in all situations, public and private.
• In private, be open and frank with council members about the conflict.
  • (Sometimes they are right and sometimes they are wrong, respectfully tell them.)
• Try to find common ground and build bridges.
• Be supportive (and protective) of staff.
• Protect and defend the form of government.
... except to sing for a rock and roll band?” — The Rolling Stones

• “Stand tall, don't you fall oh, don't go and do something foolish” — Burton Cummings

• Consult colleagues and peers.

• Take the opportunity to reflect on the profession and your passion.

• Get reacquainted with your spouse.
  • Date nights
  • Impromptu trips

• Update your resume
What if all else fails?

• It’s a learning experience and a teaching moment (and a source for great stories).

• Get out of town.
  • You realize you can’t fix it alone.
  • It wears you down.
  • You still have a career and reputation to protect.
  • Don’t look back.
    • They will use you if they can.
My Education & Career Path

• Bachelor of Arts in Public Administration, Memphis State University – 1979
• Director of Public Works – Brentwood, TN 1979 – 1990
• MPA, Tennessee State University – 1995
• Assistant to the City Manager/DPW – Brentwood, TN 1990 – 1997
• Private Sector 1997 – 1999
• City Administrator – Tullahoma, TN 1999 – 2018
• Retired as Tullahoma’s longest serving city administrator
Fresh out of College

“City managers are Nomads.”

Joe Sweeney, Brentwood Mayor

My First Lesson about the Profession:

“City managers are Nomads.”

Joe Sweeney, Brentwood Mayor
What is not dysfunction

• Debate is not dysfunction.

• Differences of opinion are not dysfunction.

• Passion regarding either of the two above is not dysfunction.

• The absence of the above on your Board will make the public start to ask: ‘Where are the real decisions being taken?’
Dysfunction or hostility can be manifested by:

• The Mayor attempting to undermine the decisions taken by the Board;

• Differences of opinion become personal among Board members (Opposition for spite);

• The Mayor or Board members attempt “end arounds” and attempt to get your staff involved in Board politics; or

• The Mayor or Board members do not respect the statutory authority of the city administrator/manager.
Tullahoma experience

• Our situation was the last listed:
  
  • The Mayor did not respect the statutory authority of the city administrator/manager.
  • In short: When the Mayor wanted to be the City Administrator.
What happens in your neighboring cities matters

• City administrator positions are usually created in Private Act cities by municipal code.
• Manchester fired their city administrator.
• The position was not filled as it was “not needed.”
• Manchester quietly muddles along for a couple of years.
• A new mayor in Manchester is elected.
• The Manchester mayor and Tullahoma mayor were political ‘kindred spirits’.
• And they talked...
Tullahoma experience

• So the Mayor wants to do your job.
• This is an attack on the ICMA Code of Ethics tenet No. 10:

  Resit any encroachment on professional responsibilities, believing the member should be free to carry out official policies without interference, and handle each problem without discrimination on the basis of principle and justice.
Board Interaction

• The position of your Board members is critical in this situation.
Strategies and Remedies

• Immediate & Short Term:
  • Don’t give in!
  • Inform your other board members.
  • Assess the position of your board members.
  • Reinforce staff education and loyalty.
Strategies and Remedies

• Immediate & Short Term:
  • Don’t think the public does not know when trouble is brewing!

  • Publically defend against encroachment.
Strategies and Remedies

• Long Term:
  • Remain active in the community and stay in contact with civic organizations.
  • Continue to highlight successes.
  • Try to reach a modus vivendi with your mayor that does not hamstring or infringe on your job.
  • Take advantage of the many opportunities for interaction in regional organizations and to demonstrate the value of a city administrator to a community.
What happened?

• In Tullahoma:
  • The city administrator’s authority was maintained intact.
  • Eventually a functional working arrangement with the mayor was developed.
  • But, the legacy cost him. The mayor is defeated in part by the candidacy of a returning former mayor who had as one of his positions respecting the value of a city administrator to a progressive community.

• In Manchester:
  • Mayoral candidates begin to raise the issue of re-establishing the city administrator position.
  • Manchester discusses funding the position in FY20.
But as Rusty asked – What if all else fails?

- Having to leave isn’t failure.

“The only way to make money as a manager is to win in one place, get fired and hired somewhere else.”

‘Whitey’ Herzog 1981