

# Serving as an Effective Local Official

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MML Seminar  
Jefferson City, MO  
June 13, 2008

## Foundational Elements

### 1. Honesty - Integrity

Democracy is grounded in the requirement that elected officials are honest. Honest in their dealings with the public, honest in their dealings with employees, honest in their dealings with the public, and honest with their dealings with each other.

The Honesty of elected officials is challenged in the mind of the public due to scandals in various levels of government. This is reinforced by the media in their efforts to attract viewers by discrediting elected officials. As you begin your term in elective office you should assume that some of your constituents believe that you are at least a little dishonest.

This means that you will find it necessary to be deliberate in conveying honesty. Remember, just because you have never lied, does not mean that residents and the media will assume that you are honest.

Issue: Be honest in handling mistakes. Elected officials can make mistakes in decisions involving public money for building projects, creating programs, and handling complaints. Hiding mistakes or refusing to acknowledge problems, strengthens public perceptions concerning the lack of integrity in public officials.

Issue: Be honest with fellow council members. Once their confidence in you is broken, it may take years to restore (if ever) to restore trust. The absence of trust hinders effective public policy making

### 2. Forward Looking - Vision

In the Book of Ecclesiastes we find the words: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

An effective local official faces the challenge of determining:

- 1) Where the city is now (financial, service delivery, economic condition)
- 2) Where the city should seek to move (continue the status quo, adopt new and innovative programs)
- 3) Adoption of that "Vision" by the entire Council, and
- 4) Effectively communicating the "Vision" to
  - a. City Staff
  - b. Constituents
  - c. Business and the Larger Civic Community

There are two issues or obstacles that sometimes face local officials.

1. The official lacks a vision for the city – too “present regarding” not “future regarding”  
Take time to plan, to develop a strategy for the Council and the City
2. The official is afraid to share the vision with others  
“Fear” is a great paralyzing agent.

### 3. Competent

Competency is somewhat different from expertise. The ability to make informed decisions when tough and routine policy decisions are encountered.

Routine decisions are sometimes the most difficult to make.

Effective Council members demonstrate competency by:

- Seeking expert opinion
- Seeking to Build Consensus on the Council
- Acknowledging the importance of insights by others
- Strive to acknowledge the “Team”
  1. Council – Council and
  2. Council - Staff

### 4. Inspiring

Much of what we do is routine and therefore may be somewhat uninteresting.....even boring and dull.  
The result is that the City can move forward in the absence of conflict.

Yet there are times when the effective official needs to be inspiring.

Staff are in the trenches daily, their effectiveness is enhanced when YOU inspire them  
Constituents need to be inspired when faced with tough choices: tax for streets, parks,  
decisions concerning growth and change

Work on this trait. Develop the ability to communicate with stories about challenges and triumphs of others.

### 5. Intelligence – Informed Knowledge

A commitment to what we refer to in higher education is “life-long learning”.

Read several sources for news.

Take classes such as those offered by the MML and the National League of Cities

Spend time each day reading to be informed.

This is demonstrated when we can communicate to others our level of understanding of complex issues

A Pitfall to avoid is arrogance:

Respect the knowledge of others (Staff, Council, Constituents)

Seek opportunities to learn together (with Staff and Council and Citizen groups)

## Other Elements of Effective Elected Officials

### 1. Use the chain of command.

Do NOT undercut the authority of Professional Staff. Once the authority of the chain of command is broken, it is difficult to restore, and everyone....and I mean everyone will feel free to break the chain of command. The result will be administrative chaos for the city.

### 2. Understand the Importance of Place.

Complaints with staff should be done as privately as possible, such as in someone's office, not in the lunch room or in the workplace. Place is important for expressing complaints with / about other elected officials as well.

### 3. Understand the Importance of Time.

Quick, unscheduled meetings do not allow for informed discussion. Schedule times for "formal" meetings to discuss complex issues. Remember to consider the time constraints of others when seeking to discuss policy or management issues.

### 4. Understand the Importance of Accurate Information.

Check and double check your facts. Do not become inflamed over false or incomplete information.

Be objective. Credible information reduces the prospect of personal attacks.

### 5. Understand the Importance of Alternative Solutions.

There are typically more than one solution to problems. Be open to solutions proposed by others and from unexpected sources.

### 6. Understand That Government Moves Slowly.

We are tempted to be impatient, but public trust often dictates that we move with deliberation. We have multiple constituencies to serve. Obtaining input and developing an appropriate course of action typically takes time.