

John Nalbandian: Dallas needs an adaptive city manager, not a heroic one



By John Nalbandian

Published: 17 November 2013 08:03 PM

Updated: 17 November 2013 08:18 PM

One in a series of Viewpoints columns related to the Dallas city manager search.

Many of the writers in this series have focused on the personal attributes needed in the next city manager. I would like to take a different approach and look at the environment contemporary city managers operate in. The most visionary, courageous leader who fails to appreciate that context is doomed to failure.

The bedrock of effective city management comes from an understanding that nothing significant can be accomplished unless it is both politically acceptable and administratively sustainable. Political pronouncements, even consensus decisions, without a practical implementation strategy are as pie-in-the-sky as an administrative initiative that has no political legs to stand on. Bridging the inevitable gap between political and administrative arenas requires, above all else, political astuteness in a city manager.

How can we recognize political astuteness in a manager? Start with the idea that running a city is not like running a corporation. Unlike the corporate CEO, the city manager must respect an array of democratic values — representation, efficiency, social equity and individual rights.

The astuteness comes not only from recognizing these values in virtually all policy arenas, it also builds on a keen appreciation that these values will conflict — and that's why we have politics. Ignoring any of the values will come back to haunt the city.

Political problems are those that surface when all the facts are known yet we still disagree on what we ought to do. At this point, we do politics — we work with conflicting values, seeking consensus/majority. The manager who recognizes that efficiency is just one of four values in the political world is an immense help not only to the City Council but also to a staff wondering what on earth the council is doing!

Consider it this way: The politically astute city manager can understand both political and administrative logic. The 12,000 or so employees of the city communicate with the same words that the council and mayor use, but politicians and administrative staff actually speak two different languages. The logic of politics and the logic of administration are different; serving as translator falls to the city manager, with the help of the mayor or other skilled council members and key administrative staff.

Additionally, it's imperative to understand that Dallas does not exist in a vacuum. It is part of a region — and while it heavily influences what happens in the region, it cannot dictate. The challenge is focusing not on the boundaries that separate jurisdictions, nonprofits, foundations, private businesses and neighborhood groups but on soberly asking all the players: "What problems are we trying to solve?" And then confronting the most difficult question: "How should we organize ourselves to deal with them?"

In effect, the next city manager must be able to "manage boundaries," focusing on problems to be solved without becoming overwhelmed by the interests represented by the players.

Last, citizen engagement is at the forefront of a city's challenges. I read much about ways to use social media to engage citizens, but we are missing the point. I think there are plenty of ways for citizens to make their views known. The issue in engagement is creating forums that encourage deliberation — encouraging citizens to confront the consequences of their views — these forums are rare.

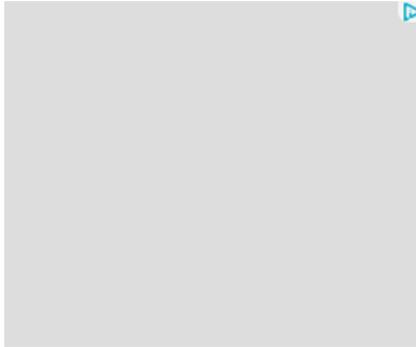
If the citizens and leaders of Dallas are looking for a "heroic leader" as city manager, they are missing the boat. The problems cities face require city managers who engage in adaptive, not heroic, leadership. Adaptive leaders understand that challenging problems do not have technical solutions; there are no right answers. What must be most valued is engagement that embraces divergent views, respects conflicting values and fosters deliberation.

That realization leads here: A city manager's ability to effectively embrace collaborative processes and divergent values is key to

success.

John Nalbandian is a professor in the School of Public Affairs and Administration at the University of Kansas. SPAA is ranked as the No. 1 academic program in the country focusing on city management and urban policy. Nalbandian also served on the Lawrence, Kan., City Council for eight years, including two terms as mayor. He may be contacted at nalband@ku.edu.

Did you see something wrong in this story, or something missing? [Let us know.](#)



ADVERTISEMENT



Do You Approve or Disapprove of President Obama's Job Performance?



Electricity "conspiracy" exposed. 1 weird trick to slash your power bill. Watch now before banned!

Comments

To post a comment, log into your chosen social network and then add your comment below. Your comments are subject to our [Terms of Service](#) and the privacy policy and terms of service of your social network. If you do not want to comment with a social network, please consider writing a [letter to the editor](#).



Login to post a comment

Login ...

Post

0 Comments

[RSS](#) | [Subscribe](#)