Meeting Today's Challenges:
Competencies for the Contemporary Local Government Professional

*This is part 2 of our "Contemporary Challenges in Local Government" series.
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n a previous article, we outlined two contemporary trends—community building and modernizing of the organization—that affect the work of local government professionals. In that article, we also identified some approaches to dealing effectively with the problems of these trends. In this follow-up article, we propose some competencies that contemporary local government managers will need in order to meet their responsibilities and roles in this new world successfully.

Before we proceed, let's briefly review these trends, which have been derived from recent research, including an international database assembled after examining innovative and democratic local governments:[2]

- Community building, this is, helping to build and maintain a sense of community and the value of public life. This is today's external focus for the local government professional. This trend reinforces the axiom that organizations are continually interacting and adapting in the light of environmental changes. Today, a greater emphasis is being placed on citizen engagement that goes beyond the required hearings and public comment at formal meetings. It challenges traditional orientations on service delivery and regulatory responsibilities to fit into a community paradigm.[3]

The importance of creating open, transparent policy-making processes is apparent and has begun to extend into the administrative arena itself, as politically active citizens grow to understand the influence of professional staff on government decisions and, therefore, expect to know how staff members reach their conclusions and recommendations.

This trend entails an examination of the role of government and its relationship to the private and non-profit sectors in building collaborative partnerships.

Finally, it also involves the emerging presence of regionalism, with the opportunities and threats that it poses for traditional ways of thinking about communities.

- Modernizing the organization. This is today's expression of the traditional, internal administrative focus for local government management. The fusion of technology with efficiency had created inexorable forces of change. An explosion of consequences has resulted, not the least of which is the sudden transformation in expectations about time, accessibility of information, and responsiveness.

Software that enables accounting practices; tracks capital projects; provides for e-government; and manages pavement maintenance, traffic control, the routing of solid-waste collection vehicles, and inventory has given rise not only to "better practices" but also to higher expectations for professionalism and technical expertise.

The technology and software that modernize the organization's internal operations also allow citizens more access to reports, agendas, minutes, drawings and renderings, GIS-based documents and data, and other information. This accessibility affects how the manager and other professional and technical staff must deal with the public, neighborhoods, and special-interest groups. Managers

must act quicker and more transparently, as they prepare for public involvement based on a review of material shared by elected officials and other staff.

Challenges

For the local government manager, the first challenge is to understand the differences between a community orientation and a traditional institutional paradigm. Community orientation places more emphasis on process, norms, and direct engagement of citizens, in contrast to the institutional perspective, which emphasizes structure, the law, and representation. The manager must be able to operate well in both arenas and must resist the temptation to make one more like the other. The two spheres are necessarily different because their purposes are different.

The second challenge occurs within the organization, as employees attempt to make better use of mushrooming knowledge. As information and knowledge proliferate, managers find that work teams, decentralized decision-making processes, and new managerial competencies are better able to apply this knowledge effectively and creatively. However, this egalitarian group approach challenges traditional departmental structures and hierarchical decision making.

Additionally, in the third challenge, these trends combine to accentuate the tension between the two different perspectives. The first set of trends involves an increasing emphasis on citizen engagement, accessibility to information, transparency in government, and greater visibility and expectations for mayors. In contrast, the second set of trends increasingly emphasizes technical specialization, expertise, and the norms and discipline-based language of the professions.

These three challenges—which parallel remarkably closely some enduring questions about the relationship between democratic and bureaucratic perspectives—provide the backdrop for our further discussion.

Responsibilities, Roles, And Values of the Local Government Professional

The primary responsibilities of management professionals are 1) to assist the governing body and to mobilize the administrative apparatus of local government toward building and maintaining *a sense of community*—in many instances also acknowledging a regional community; 2) to *modernize the organization* and deliver services efficiently, openly, and equitably; and 3) to *bridge the gaps implied in the challenges*: those between community and institutions; hierarchy and teams; and citizens (politics) and experts (professionalism).

The primary *role* is facilitative and collaborative, with the intent of increasing mutual understanding and building consensus. It includes helping to develop and nurture: collaborative partnerships, policy-making processes, communication among the professionals in government and citizens and their elected representatives, and communication within the organization between diverse professionals and technical specialists.

In part, this primary role involves working to identify and remove barriers so others can get their work done and find meaning in that work. Perhaps most important, the role is one of representing political and community perspectives when necessary and professional and administrative perspectives when that is necessary. All this must be done while still maintaining the manager's own personal integrity.

While building community, modernizing the organization, and translating perspectives, the local government professional confronts conflicting expectations rooted in value differences. On the one hand, community building is based fundamentally on an understanding that values like representation, equity, and rights are necessary, even if not sufficient, to build a social contract that obligates citizens to the collective good. On the other hand, efficiency—along with

effectiveness—is the fundamental value that drives modernizing the organization and marshals resources toward targeted ends.

The responsibility of community building requires working through conflicts among these four values—representation, social equity, individual rights, and efficiency—a time-consuming and unavoidable process that defies the expectations for faster, more responsive, and less costly government.

These values are more than a means to an end. In democratic government, they are ends in themselves. They are fundamental to democracy, and in that sense alone they provide a foundation for any public service profession. As author Donald Schon asserted years ago, in an unstable era, values provide identity, continuity, and stability.[4] And for the management professional in situations of political and technological flux that question the traditional role expectations, values are an anchor for legitimacy and credibility.[5]

Competencies

In summary, the contemporary challenges of local government management can be described as follows: He or she must lead facilitatively and collaboratively in order to help build and maintain a sense of community and respect for public life, as well as to modernize an organization of divergent perspectives and conflicting values. This is a mouthful, but we think it captures in one sentence the essence of what local government professionals do. What competencies are needed in order to respond effectively to these challenges?

Donald Wolfe has invested fruitful effort in thinking and writing about the nature of professional competence in the applied behavioral sciences.[6] Wolfe has drawn these conclusions about competence:

- **Competence always has a context.** Producing a desired result always involves a relationship

The competent professional thinks hard about what he or she is doing and must be able to move back and forth between concrete realities and the abstract theories that give meaning to the situation.

between factors in the person and in the situation. What a person may be able to accomplish in one situation may be more difficult, if not impossible, in another. Thus, aspiring learners—whether managers or their staff—need models that can lead to understanding in a wide variety of environments. They need exposure and practice in a variety of situations.

- **Competence is rooted in a knowledge base and in analytical skills.** The able professional thinks hard about what he or she is doing and must be able to move back and forth between concrete realities and the abstract theories that give meaning to the situation. On this point, Donald Schon has observed that effective professionals are not experts because they diagnose, apply knowledge, and evaluate. They are experts because they can engage the complexity, uncertainty, and uniqueness of a situation and probe and ask questions until a decision-making framework emerges.

- **Competence and values are inevitably interdependent.** Wolfe argues that we value what we can understand and that our values are modified by changes in the way we construe the world. Most likely, what is meant here is that untested values are more rhetorical than behavioral guides and that a person's values are indeed shaped by his or her experiences, even as they provide guidance to ways of thinking and acting. There also is an instrumental relationship between competence and a value system that guides the use of that competence. "We value the competence because it enables the creation of valued outcomes." And it might be added that valued outcomes are those that give an individual's life meaning.

- **Competence involves the whole person.** "To treat knowledge and skills as tools to be picked up and added on would be to miss the creative adaptation and incorporation of such skills into a unified personal style. The development of a professional identity involves the integration of many different factors (knowledge, skills, values, personal strengths, and propensities) into an organic whole that gives the professional's competence fluidity and creativity."

Wolfe's ideas have provided the guidance necessary for us to connect the responsibilities, roles, and values of contemporary local government managers with their competencies.

The accompanying figure summarizes the responsibilities, roles, and values that underpin the professionalism of the contemporary city or county administrator. Augmenting the figure, we have identified what we consider the elements of competence associated with the responsibilities, roles, and values. The figure and competencies should be viewed as complements to the 17 practice areas ICMA has identified as the core of professionalism in local government.

Responsibilities	Roles	Values
• Community building. • Modernizing the organization. • Closing gaps in divergent perspectives.	• Facilitate. • Build partnerships.	• Representation. • Efficiency. • Individual rights. • Social equity.

Competencies: Knowledge, Skills, and Talents; Emotional and Personal Attributes

Based on the figure then, what are the specific areas of knowledge, skills, and talents, as well as emotional and personal attributes, that a local government professional needs to develop?

Knowledge

Knowledge of the political and policy arenas
- Understanding the role of the governing body and the staff in community building.
- Understanding the role of the local government in helping to build and maintain a sense of community.
- Understanding the impact of regionalism and broader forces on community building.
- Understanding the differences among political, administrative, and community perspectives and the policy-making processes where these divergent perspectives come into play.
- Understanding how these values contribute, individually and in combination, to community building.

Administrative knowledge
- Understanding how modernization and making information accessible to citizens affects expectations about local government processes.
- Knowledge of better practices.
- Understanding how these values anchor democratic government and successful relationships between elected officials and professional staff.

Knowledge about change
- Understanding the dynamics of change and stability.
- Understanding the planning of change.

Knowledge about oneself
- Understanding the way in which personal attributes influence how a person chooses and fulfills his or her roles.
- Knowing the difference between facilitative and authoritative ways of fulfilling that person's roles.
- Understanding how values influence a manager's perceptions, including problems worthy of effort, appropriate solutions, and standards of evaluation.

Skills and Talents

Political and policy skills and talents
- Bringing the right people together for problem-solving purposes and then fostering a climate that promotes trusting relationships, loyalty, and commitment.
- Articulating unspoken values and perspectives.
- Helping to identify and state problems in ways that facilitate decision making, learning, and change. Being able to identify partnership opportunities.
- Resolving and managing conflict.
- Being able to articulate and translate political, administrative, and community perspectives.
- Being able to educate others about the way government works.

Administrative skills and talents
- Developing cooperation and collaboration among departments and governmental units.

- Connecting the work of the governing body with that of the professional staff.
- Recognizing and promoting opportunities for adopting best practices.
- Influencing people effectively toward organizational goal achievement.

Skills and talents related to values education
- Communicating and serving as a model for the value of public service.
- Expressing the values that provide a foundation for public service.
- Encouraging the development of organizational values consistent with those of the community.
- Challenging community values when they are narrowly defined.
- Being able to educate others about the value implications of their choices.

Emotional and Personal Attributes

According to author Edgar Schein's research, there are essential traits that characterize the effective manager:[7]

- Capacity to be stimulated by emotional and interpersonal issues and crises, rather than become exhausted or worn down by them.
- Capacity to bear high levels of responsibility without becoming paralyzed.
- Ability to exercise power and make difficult decisions without guilt or shame.
- Capability of absorbing the emotional strains of the uncertainty of interpersonal conflict, responsibility, and other stressors.

Donald Wolfe's research concluded that a public manager needs to have:[8]

- A spirit of inquiry into how things really work, including a commitment to one's own learning and growth.
- An integration of one's personal self—who the person is—into one's professional work.
- A commitment to public service values.

> **T**oday's local government professional is not expected to be superhuman . . . or so we hope.

- The capacity to function independently without limiting one's ability to collaborate.

Today's local government professional is not expected to be superhuman . . . or so we hope. However, the widely varied knowledge, skills, talents, and personal attributes that appear necessary for success certainly encompass enough breadth and depth to involve a willingness to grow continually and to learn from others through one's entire career. **PM**

[1]This article is taken in part from John Nalbandian, "Educating the City Manager of the Future," which was published in H. George Frederickson and John Nalbandian, eds., *The Future of Local Government Administration: The Hansell Symposium* (Washington, D.C.: International City/County Management Association, 2002). A version of the original article also was prepared at the request of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) as input into its 2002–2003 strategic planning process.

[2]Frieder Naschold with Glenn Daley, "Learning from the Pioneers: Modernizing Local Government, Part 1," *International Public Management Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1999), pp. 25–51; John Nalbandian, "Facilitating Community, Enabling Democracy: New Roles for Local Government Managers," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 59 (May/June 1999), pp. 187–198.

[3]H. George Frederickson, Steven Maynard-Moody, and John Nalbandian, "How City Officials Face the Community." Unpublished manuscript. (Lawrence, Kansas: Department of Public Administration, University of Kansas, 2002).

[4]Donald A. Schon, *Beyond the Stable State* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1971).
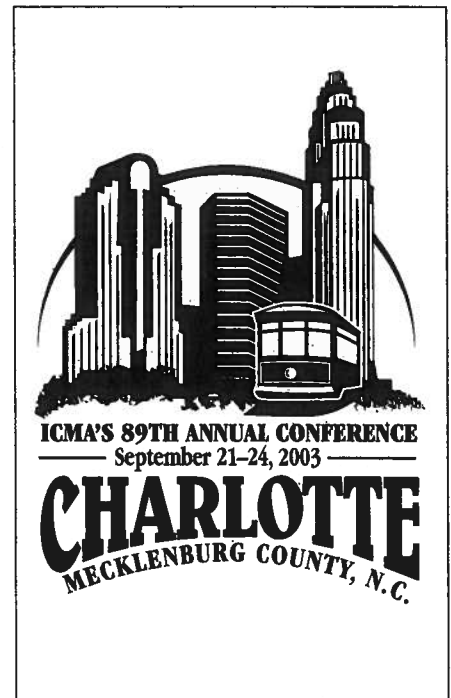
[5]John Nalbandian, "The Manager as Political Leader: A Challenge to Professionalism?" *Public Management*, Vol. 82 (March 2000), pp. 7–12.

[6]Donald M. Wolfe, "Developing Professional Competence in the Applied Behavioral Sciences," in Eugene Byrne and Douglas E. Wolfe, eds., *Developing Experiential Learning Programs for Professional Education*, Series called New Directions for Experiential Learning, No. 8 (1980), pp. 1–17.

[7]Edgar H. Schein, *Career Anchors*, revised edition (San Diego: Pfeiffer and Company, 1993).

[8]Donald M. Wolfe, op. cit.

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