

Reflections of a 'Pracademic' on the Logic of Politics and  
Administration

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## Reflections of a 'Pracademic' on the Logic of Politics and Administration<sup>1</sup>

Concerned about the future of professionalism in local government, the ICMA recently commissioned a future horizons task force, a task force on the future of council-manager government, and initiated a dialogue on the profession. These discussions reveal uncertainty and doubt about the roles and responsibilities of professionals in environments of political diversity and value conflict. Increasingly, professionals realize that success depends less upon staking out distinct and exclusive realms of administrative competence and more on forging relationships both individually and as a profession with governing bodies and associations of elected officials.

I am concerned that their lack of a sophisticated understanding of how elected officials approach and think about their own work hinders the professional's preparation for this partnership. After my own research efforts, and literally hundreds of conversations with professional administrators about this issue, and now with my own experience as an elected official, I would suggest that forging these relationships requires far greater insight by the administrator into the world of the politician as the elected official experiences it--as it makes sense to the politician.

How, then, do local politicians think and how do they approach their work? And what challenge does the elected

official's logic pose for the future of professionalism in local government? To address these questions I begin by contrasting the logic of politics and administration.

### **Politics and Administration--Constellations of Logic**

While the distinctions between politics and administration rarely are seen as useful guides to action, they can help distinguish the ways that politicians and administrators think about and approach their work. Often times apparent common ground is viewed and experienced very differently by the parties involved, especially when one contrasts the world of experienced politicians with that of technically trained professionals like engineers or planners (Aberbach and Rockman, 1988; Heclo, 1977).

Table 1 describes the way I see these differences in the prototypical politician and technically trained administrator with the city manager or other generalist chief administrative officer or political executive in the middle. For illustrative purposes, I draw the contrasts starkly. My aim is to convey two constellations of logic not to pinpoint on the chart every politician and every technically trained member of a professional staff.

Even though they speak the same words, politicians and professional staff often talk a different language because their perspectives are different. The worst politicians have no idea what an administrative perspective is like; they simply do not appreciate the erosion of staff respect that results from making

political exceptions to polices, resolutions or even ordinances when the reasons cannot be convincingly articulated. They do not understand that staff has goals and objectives, and the city could run for a long time without the governing body ever meeting, and that every time an elected official asks for something from staff some administrative routine is probably upset. And they do not understand that changes in policy mean changes in enforcement criteria and emphases, and if staff do not understand why a policy has changed they are left telling citizens, "It's changed because the politicians changed it!"

On the other hand, I think that the more technically trained local government professionals expect the governing body to deal with public policy as if the governing body was just another administrative committee. Gruber's (1987; 100) research showed that local government employees were able to talk about democratic principles with respect, but they had a lot of trouble incorporating them into their work and into their expectations of elected officials. Furthermore, when professional staff criticize the governing body for "failing to do what is right," they often reveal the isolated nature of their thinking, failing to appreciate that what is best for the community is rarely subject to right and wrong decisions without value judgements.

Beginning on the political side in Table I, I suggest from the standpoint of the elected official, politics frequently is

seen in some essential aspect as a game. Banfield and Wilson (1966) noted some time ago in examining urban government that an outsider simply could not understand political behavior unless politics was seen as a game politicians liked to play. Joseph Freeman (1992), an academician and elected official in Virginia puts it this way, "Like games and gambling, it [politics] takes some zest for the action, some passion for the involvement itself, to stay with it and make up for the inevitable losses" (p. 92).

**Table I.** Characteristics of Politics and Administration

CHARACTERISTICS	POLITICS		ADMINISTRATION
ACTIVITY Solving	Game		Problem
PLAYERS	Representatives	C	Experts
CONVERSATION	"What do you hear"	i	"What do you know"
PIECES	Interests/Symbols	t	
		y	
		M	Information,
		a	Money, People,
		n	Things
		a	
CURRENCY	Power		g Knowledge
			e
			r
DYNAMICS	Conflict,		Harmony,
	Compromise and		Cooperation,
	Change		Continuity

Council members making public statements in favor of issues they know will fail are playing a political game. When a mayor

perceived a city manager as favoring one council member over another, he said that the manager was not "playing the game" fairly. From my observations and experiences, unhappy and frustrated amateur elected officials are those who do not enjoy this aspect of their job. They count the days until they will no longer hold office. To some extent effective politicians have to like to campaign, to meet people, to speak for their community or district, to find out who is saying what and who is in favor of what and who is against it. They have to enjoy brokering interests, negotiating power, being the focus of attention, and satisfying the people they serve. They have got to like the thrill of making a proposal that others, including the media, find attractive. And they often find satisfaction in the "one upmanship" we associate among political leaders.

In this game of politics, the players are representatives, and they are expected to respond to the wants and needs of their constituents, district or community. They are accountable to the people who elected them and to the well-being of the community. Thus, their focus is often separated from the professional expertise that resides in city hall--which is rarely where elected officials do their most important work.

In this world of constituents and community no task is more difficult for most members of local governing bodies than understanding what citizens are thinking about and how they are feeling. Few have access to political aids like randomly

sampled public opinion polls or focus groups. Dominating the politician's conversation is the question "What do you hear?" With this question the council member attempts to find out what his or her constituents think. In these conversations, the reliability of the politician's conversation partner is essential because what one hears is a subjective, interpretive act. Two people in the same conversation do not necessarily hear or report the same story when retelling the conversation. Thus, who you are is as important to the politician as what you say you have heard because every politician knows that who you are (your interests and who you know) colors what you have heard.

Importantly, the question, "What do you hear?" invites a story. Politicians and citizens communicate with each other through stories and anecdotes because stories convey symbols better than statistics and reports. These representatives play the game of politics by trading, exchanging, manipulating, and dealing with interests and symbols. Politicians often times start thinking about political problems in terms of who wants what. And, where politics is practiced well, the interests get transformed into symbols like efficiency, justice, equity and dignity because politicians communicate most effectively with constituents through these symbols. Symbols give meaning to the diverse problems that politicians are asked to deal with at council meetings, and they connect council actions to a council

member's philosophy and the values and interests of community members. Again, Freeman (1992) explains,

I must try to find metaphors and illustrations that connect thinking and doing in government and at that place in democracy where people with limited patience for textbook answers can call you at home, stop you on the street, or approach you in a store to ask questions or tell you what they think. (p. 4)

The lesson here is that values are critical to governing and citizens search for symbols that convey the value judgements of their representatives. One of my biggest surprises as an elected official was the power of anecdotes over statistics in the public policy arguments of both citizens and elected officials. Frequently, citizens rely on stories to understand government because stories contain symbols that convey values. For example, when a citizen says to an elected official, "I heard that the police stopped two kids the other night; they searched the black kid and only talked to the white," that citizen is talking to the elected official about equity and justice. In contrast, statistics convey data and are much more suitable to problem solving than making sense out of the role of government and the relationship between citizens and their government.



Because values like representation, equity, individual rights and efficiency so deeply express the relationship between citizen and government, symbols expressing these values profoundly affect elected officials. Perhaps more importantly, the symbols are created and manipulated to influence the public policy process. Citizens understand intuitively that there are few questions more powerful when asking the governing body for something than "you did it for them, why are you treating me differently?" This simple question raises issues of justice that centrally affect the relationship between citizens and their government. An astute politician does not have to look very far to find expressions of values and value differences in conversations with citizens. Constituents can become profoundly philosophical as long as a politician does not expect to hear the language of philosophers.

The currency of value in the political game is power and influence. What good is an elected official if he or she cannot influence the course of events in the city? Power and influence derive from many sources, and members of the governing body are cognizant of the way their words and actions will affect their future ability to influence others. The other day I called a lawyer in town who had helped me in my campaign in 1991. We were talking about impact fees to fund growth and I was indicating my inclination to support them after I had rejected them in my campaign a year ago. His very first words were,

"That's not what you said in the campaign." He was not concerned with the pros and cons of impact fees; he was concerned with what the message conveyed about me as a politician and how this switch in my position (story) would affect the way people would regard me. In some ways he was telling me, "You do not have the power yet to change the meaning of your story and retain credibility with constituents interested in this issue." Power, politics and their expression in stories and anecdotes are essential to an elected official who wants to influence events in his/her city.

Last, the exchange of power that results in the satisfaction of some interests and dissatisfaction of others often involves conflict, compromise and change. This is because interests are not always compatible, representatives take their job seriously, and because rarely is there an objectively "right" solution to a problem when seen from a political perspective. Politicians do not discover answers to problems, they forge policies through negotiation of interests as well as the application of knowledge. Furthermore, if nothing changes in this process what can a politician show for time in office? During my campaign for city council I always interpreted the question, "Why are you running for office?" as "What changes do you want to bring about?" Similarly, when I am called to give an account to the people--if I run for re-election--I will

report on my role in bringing about change or, in some areas, making sure change did not occur.

Turning now to the prototypical administrative perspective, one is struck by the difference in the activity that dominates administration. Administration is about problem solving, and I rarely hear administrators talk about their work as a game. Sometimes they do, however, and that is when they acknowledge the political aspects--as distasteful as they often are--of their job. Administrators, whether they are engineers, planners, financial experts or fire chiefs, perceive themselves as dealing with problems.

While department heads represent their departments in budget preparation and in other allocational activities, more often professional staff see themselves as experts who often may have more in common with other members of their profession in other cities than they do with members of other departments within their own city. This would seem to be especially true of engineers and planners who bring expert knowledge gained through professional education and experience to bear on municipal problems.

The professional's conversation centers on the question "what do you know" because it is assumed that problems have solutions that can be discovered by collecting and analyzing data and facts. While conversation partners are important to the professional, the knowledge exchanged does not necessarily

depend on who they are in the same sense that it does in a political conversation. "What do you hear?" largely is irrelevant to the traffic engineer trying to decide whether a street light is warranted for traffic control. This fact-bound conversation between professionals, who frequently share assumptions about the goals and methods of their professional work, contrasts with the idiosyncratic and symbol-bound, value-laden conversations of politicians.

Experts deal with information, money, people, buildings, machinery and other tangibles, and when they have to deal with interests and political symbols they find themselves often moving uncomfortably outside the realm of administrative problem solving and into the realm of politics--an arena they justifiably do not like.

Experts solve problems by exchanging and applying knowledge. The symbolic world of the expert is much more narrowly drawn in comparison to the politician's because democratic values are broader than traditional professional values and because politicians must communicate with a broader audience than do technically trained professionals. Further, experts evaluate themselves and others on the basis of "what they know" and less often on "who they know" or "what they have heard." While one can never discount the value of experience, contacts and casual conversation outside of city hall, if that

was all our municipal engineers and planners brought to their jobs, our cities would be in big trouble.

Last, administrative problem solving operates best in an environment of harmony and cooperation where knowledge is exchanged and continuity valued. It is almost assumed that the "right" solutions to problems can be discovered; I think this is especially true of traffic engineering. It is interesting that when politicians ask for "the best engineering solution," their question implies that there are factors that may have to be taken into consideration that will modify the best engineering solution. To a politician the best engineering solution to a problem is not always best for the community even though the best engineering solution probably is relevant to the political decision.

The change that dominates political thinking contrasts with the value of continuity for the professional in some measure because implementation is complicated by policy change. Politicians rarely understand that the arbitrariness of policy implementation as perceived by citizens frequently stems from policy changes not administrative initiated changes. This is especially true in code enforcement where what one city council agrees upon another may change. Those who enforce codes remain the same and appear to citizens to be making arbitrary decisions from one year to the next.

Now, I turn to the question of how these differences between political and technical thinking challenge the role and responsibilities of professional staff.

### **Staff Support of the Governing Body**

Three transformations in the orthodox view of professionalism in local government have taken place during this century. I (Nalbandian, 1991) have written about these changes in detail elsewhere, and I will only summarize them here. They are part of a larger movement that seeks to infuse democratic values into professional practice (Cooper, 1991; Forester, 1989; Frederickson, 1980; Hummel, 1994). These changes have altered our conception of professionalism from a separation of politics and administration towards a sharing of governmental functions and responsibilities between elected and appointed officials (Svara, 1988); from political neutrality and formal accountability to political sensitivity and responsiveness to community values themselves (Thomas, 1986); from efficiency as its core value to efficiency, representation, individual rights, and social equity as a complex array of values anchoring professionalism (Nalbandian, 1990; 1991).

Underlying these transformations is the local government professional's growing acceptance that the city is a political and social as well as an economic and physical unit and that managers cannot deal with the one without attending to the other. As important as jobs and a growing tax base are for a

city, its viability depends on its capacity to make public policy in a context of growing diversity and interests.

Regarding the differences between political and administrative thinking, presently, and increasingly in the future, I believe that chief administrative officers--like political executives at other levels of government--who recognize this partnership between governing body and professional staff will find themselves in the middle of these different constellations of logic. Two forces will promote this. First, municipal governments are employing more professionals. More professional expertise is required to solve today's municipal problems. Yesterday, a city might not have hired a professionally trained expert in solid waste management; today they might; tomorrow they will. Second, it is clear to me that a significant number citizens take local government very seriously and more people representing interests rather than the city as a whole are being elected to local governing bodies. Curtis Freeland (1992), City Manager in Arkansas City, Kansas, acknowledges these forces when he writes, "In many areas key professional values have now become institutionalized and the new challenge is how to keep government moving in the face of complex bureaucratic processes and the increasingly competitive and vociferous desires expressed by many narrowly focused interest groups." Ehrenhalt's (1991) research suggests the same, and the specially

selected articles in the Fall, 1991 issue of the Kettering Review reiterate the changing nature of local politics and citizenship as well.

If these trends continue, the importance of a bridge between professional staff and the governing body will increase. And this is the role the chief administrative officer will occupy. I see the governing body and professional staff speaking different languages and the city manager or chief administrative officer acting as a translator. The manager must be able to work with the governing body and staff to help translate political pronouncements and aims into policies, goals, objectives and work plans. Similarly, the manager must see beyond administrative problems onto the political horizon. It is not enough for the manager to say to staff, "the council won't buy that so don't bring it up" because that kind of statement doesn't instill respect for what the council is trying to accomplish.

The manager must be able to listen with a third ear because amateur politicians often are not very good at articulating what it is they are trying to accomplish or how they are thinking. For example, in Lawrence we struggled with traffic control at an intersection, and a group of senior citizens in subsidized housing literally demanded first a crosswalk and then a traffic signal when informed that the crosswalk would be unsafe. From an engineering standpoint, the problem to be solved was simple:



did the intersection warrant a traffic signal? But politically, the calculations were very complex even if unarticulated. First, from a political standpoint, the senior citizens seemed to be saying, "There is a relationship between mobility and dignity for older people, and when we are isolated to one side of the street we lose self-respect. Further, the government should help older citizens maintain their independence and dignity." Second, the astute politician is not indifferent to the idea that if the governing body authorizes a traffic signal against the engineer's advice, it invites every neighborhood group to demand traffic control at their intersection regardless of engineering advice. Third, the people demanding the signal probably have never been involved in politics before and refusal to respond to their request may alienate them from future involvement. From the engineer's perspective, I suspect that there was a "right answer" to the problem, and the engineer might have asked, "will the council have the political courage to accept it?" But, as an elected official, I did not see the right answer. I saw a very complicated set of forces and a problem infused with choices about values symbolized by a decision about a traffic light.

It seems to me that before the city manager can help with this situation he or she must try to understand the governing body's perspective. Once the issue is seen as a mobility-dignity issue rather than whether or not to install a traffic

signal, there may be other alternatives to be considered. While it may be expecting a lot of the city manager's office to see the world politically as well as administratively, it is even more unrealistic to expect amateur politicians to be able to articulate a traffic signal decision (even if they felt it intuitively) as one where the real issue is mobility and dignity. Local government managers who are ready to embrace the translator role I have described already are probably in a better position to act as staff to elected officials confronting emotion-laden value questions than are those managers who define their own role in narrowly administrative terms. David Corliss (1992), Assistant to the City Manager in Lawrence and former employee of the League of Kansas Municipalities where he worked with numerous managers and mayors has reminded me,

"City managers, like other rational individuals, will include job survival as a factor in their decisions. My observation--limited to Kansas--is that some managers will hunker-down on the administrative side of the 'administrative-political' dichotomy. Not because they lack some of the values you note, nor because they fail to see the need for more political leadership in their community--but because it is safer for job survival to simply process the ministerial

needs of City Hall and let the values of representation, individual rights, and social equity find another champion."

It is unlikely that a cautious city manager who cannot understand and respect the elected official's perspective will be able to assist the elected official who wants to develop political competence. An understanding of the general perspective of the elected official is crucial, and the complex political environment in which elected officials are trying to make decisions and exercise leadership is getting more complicated. If the purpose of professional staff is to support the governing body, in the future it must do so taking this complex environment into consideration. Jay Wieland (1992), City Administrator in Hesston, Kansas, writes, "The movement of local elected officials to include a broader political base in their decision-making process will in my opinion continue to change the face of city management. I believe this change will be for the betterment of the city management profession because it will force managers to become more aware and sensitive to the wide spectrum of needs of their constituents." Richard Garofano (1992), City Administrator in Leawood, Kansas, describes the challenge in the following way:

In simple terms, the governing body will and must deal with questions of values, equity, rights, etc., in its deliberative process. Their constituents not only demand it but readily vocalize such expectations. If the professional ignores those elements and attempts to hide behind the simplistic issues of efficiency and "best" solutions, the governing body, in essence is shortchanged. They are deprived of the professional view on how competing and/or conflicting interests could be served or compromise solutions could be fashioned in a manner that can be executed by staff. Perhaps governing bodies are actually coming to the point of relying on the professional's sensitivity to these elements of the governmental process and finding comfort in having a support system which can aid them in their value-laden decision making process.

It seems to me that the statements by Wieland and Garofano challenge to the core the orthodox view of city management and a politics/administration dichotomy. They reflect the notion that elected officials and administrative staff are partners in the governance process even though the governing body is the senior partner; that managers must ground their authority in community values as well as in their legal relationship to the council;

and that efficiency alone no longer will suffice as a guide to effective administrative work (Nalbandian, 1990; 1991).

Moreover, they seem to be saying that an important aspect of staff's job is to help the city commission accomplish its primary task. As my experience grows as an elected official, that task becomes clearer to me. My primary task is to help build an inclusive sense of community; to help build the political obligation of citizens to the collective good; and to help build the capacity of Lawrence, Kansas to make collective decisions in the midst of political and demographic diversity. I realize that this is an ambitious and possibly presumptuous understanding of my task. But who else in a community should be accountable formally for showing progress in these areas? Further, I experience pursuit of these tasks in an environment of conflicting values where reason is infused with emotion. It seems to me that professional staff's challenge is to find ways to help the governing body flesh out the meaning of these tasks and be prepared to discern how they can be accomplished; to help clarify the values and the value consequences of issues; and to help diffuse the emotion in issues and raise the level of reasonable discourse. It is a mighty challenge, but it is less than the responsibility the governing body bears, and if staff wants to be seen as relevant to the council in accomplishing its primary task of community building, then staff must accept the

challenge and integrate that challenge into its view of professionalism and professional competence.

The challenge is great. By accepting it, I believe professionals acknowledge that focusing on the relationship between governing body and staff in policy development is largely passe. I believe that governing bodies expect staff to participate and often take the lead in policy development. The future of professionalism in local government will focus less on the relationship between staff and council in policy development, and more on staff's ability to help elected officials connect citizens to their city more broadly.

### **Conclusions**

I would like to conclude this paper with several suggestions for future research stemming from the differences in political and administrative thinking and the politician's environment as I have portrayed it.

- Does the symbolic content of political thinking require emphasis on ethnographic methods and phenomenological approaches for further study? I am convinced that understanding the next phase in the development of professionalism in local government requires insight into the world of the elected official from the elected official's point of view.

- Does the function and importance of anecdotes and stories differ for politicians and administrators? I would assert tentatively that while administrators communicate with stories

(Maynard-Moody and Kelly, 1993), they are much more important to politicians because elected officials communicate through an array of symbols conveying a variety of values essential to political competence and community building. Administrative competence is transmitted with a narrower range of values and communication can occur more formally with empirical data.

- Are city managers and other chief administrative officers who think more like politicians better able to provide staff support for their governing body as I suggest? If so, do they earn staff respect for this ability/skill or do they distance themselves from their technically trained subordinates whose professional identity often depends upon seeing themselves as different from politicians?

- Can professional staff assist councils in community development without jeopardizing their identity as managers grounded in the value of efficiency?

Professionally trained chief administrative officers and other senior administrative executives occupy a unique role in our political system. They operate at the intersection of political and administrative worlds, and by watching their actions and the way they talk about their work, we can better understand how democracy operates in political communities where administrative processes sometimes seem overwhelming. Despite the desire of these managers simply to do their job, they cannot escape the fact that their role places them on a very prominent stage and ensures continued examination of their roles, responsibilities and values as they continue to serve the needs of elected officials who are operating in an even more challenging environment.