

Executive Leadership in Local Government

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INTRODUCTION

Executive leadership is a complex topic in local government because of uncertainty about the scope of this type of leadership and variation in the officials to which it is assigned. This is especially true in the United States, where different forms of government are used in local governments. In simplest form, the topic encompasses the leadership provided by persons in the highest positions in the governmental structure who have responsibility for discerning the preferences of citizens and mobilizing popular support for policies, for developing proposals for what government will do, and for directing the work of the government. The citizen dimension might be considered beyond the scope of a type of leadership that is associated with activity within the governmental and organizational structure. Connection with the citizenry is, however, essential to democratic governance and creates the foundation for the internal executive functions.

Handling some or all the executive responsibilities falls to mayors (and their equivalents in counties) in all governments and in many governments to appointed chief administrators as well. Although it is natural to associate executive leadership with one person who has responsibilities that range from the electoral to the managerial aspects of leadership, in local government, executive leadership broadly defined is commonly shared more or less widely. In view of this division of leadership functions, the discussion is presented in three sections that deal with mayors who are elected executives, non-executive mayors, and appointed executives. For simplicity, and in recognition that the preponderance of the literature on leadership in local government has focused on cities, terms from city as opposed to county or other types of government are used to refer to the officials.

The division of responsibility depends largely on the form of government and, within mayor-council cities, on whether there is a chief administrator present in the governmental structure.^a Connecting with citizens

and mobilizing popular support for proposals is the responsibility of the mayor in all forms of government. Policy leadership (i.e., determining the purpose and policies of the government) is the responsibility of the mayor with approval of council in mayor-council cities, the mayor with advice of chief administrative officer (CAO) and approval of council in mayor-council-CAO cities, and the mayor, council, and city manager in council-manager cities. Finally, administrative leadership or directing the administrative apparatus and work of the staff is handled by the mayor, mayor and CAO, or the city manager, depending on the form of government.

Most cities have one executive and one mayor, but the two offices are not necessarily combined.^[1] Cities that use the mayor-council form of government vest all or some executive powers in the elected mayor, who is the political head of city government, the driving force in setting policy, and in charge of the administrative organization. The executive mayor with full powers ultimately has authority of hiring and supervising staff, formulating and (after approval by the council) expending the budget, and directing the organization, subject to the limitations set by the city charter. If the city has a chief administrator, some administrative functions are delegated to this official. In council-manager cities, the city manager—an executive appointed by the city council—makes a major contribution to policy making and exercises administrative powers. Managers have extensive contact with citizens, are somewhat attentive to popular preferences, and have subtle influence on public opinion. Still, city managers do not get directly involved in mobilizing public opinion or shaping public support, unless instructed by the council to do so (e.g., seeking to secure votes in a bond referendum approved by the council). Council-manager cities also have a mayor who is the political head of the government and presides over the city council, but usually has no powers other than those available to other members of the council.

ELECTED EXECUTIVE MAYORS

The mayor-council form of government is based on separation of powers with authority divided between

^aLargely excluded from the discussion are weak-mayor council forms in which executive functions are spread across a number of offices and boards in city government and small-town mayor-council governments in which executive functions are shared and there is sharing of tasks between elected officials who do a lot of the work of city government and part-time staff.

the executive and the legislature. The strong mayor-council version of this form has separation of powers between a mayor with extensive powers and integrated administrative control over staff, and the elected legislative body. The lines of authority for all or most departments of city government lead to the mayor's office.

In contrast, the council is confined to a more limited role in strong mayor-council cities. Even in policy making, the council is heavily dependent on the mayor for proposals and information, and it can be checked by the mayor's veto power. The mayor also occupies a favorable position for mobilizing public opinion in support of proposals. The council, however, must approve policies and can override vetoes, so there is the potential for the council to overrule the mayor if there is a large (i.e., veto-proof) like-minded majority on the council in opposition to the mayor, or for deadlock between the executive and legislature if a narrow majority opposes the mayor.

The checks and balances in mayor-council cities affect how officials relate to each other and the freedom of mayoral action. Because the purpose of offsetting powers is to permit one set of officials to hold the other in check, it is common for conflict to arise in the relationship between the mayor and the council (see Ref.^[2]). The conflict may concern policy preferences and priorities, administrative performance, and the extent of independent executive authority assigned to the mayor. Separation of powers can allow the departments of city government to play the mayor and council off against each other and develop their own base of constituency support that produces greater autonomy vis-à-vis the mayor.^[3] Strong mayors have the potential to blend the dimensions of leadership. They can tap organizational resources and mobilize public support to advance their political agenda. The executive can face the challenges of overcoming council resistance or opposition and recalcitrance from city departments, but may be able to use threats or inducements to win support.

In the political science literature, the ideal mayor in mayor-council cities is an innovator (also called an entrepreneur) who provides creative solutions to problems and pyramids resources to increase the ability to build coalitions and gain leverage over other actors.^[4,5] This mayor is effective at both initiation and implementation of policies and programs. Leadership is fashioned from a combination of formal and informal resources. The former are part of the governmental structure and official policies of city government. The latter are derived from personal characteristics or the political process. Formal resources available to mayors remain fairly constant over time, but each incumbent differs in their ability to make the best use of these resources. Still, some important

informal resources, for example, support from a political party, have been declining over time.

The terms "strong" and "weak" mayor refer to the level of authority assigned to the mayor, but there is no "pure" strong or weak mayor form. Strong and weak mayors are arrayed along a continuum. The key formal powers, which may be assigned to the executive or divided among a number of officials, are appointment of department heads, developing the budget, directing the administrative departments, and veto of council actions. The mayor's authority varies widely. Beyond the organizational leadership resources that are derived from appointment of department heads, control of other appointments can augment the mayor's leverage, and patronage appointments can reinforce party organizational cohesion and support. Most mayors, however, do not directly control large numbers of city government jobs. Civil service protection of most positions limits the jobs a mayor can dispense. Court cases since the 1980s have limited the ability of elected officials to remove, promote, or transfer staff for partisan reasons, unless employees are directly involved in providing advice on policy strategies, as opposed to policy implementation.^[6]

A 1991 survey conducted by the International City Management Association measures the variation in mayoral authority within the mayor-council form of government.^[7] In cities over 100,000 in population, two-thirds of the mayors develop the budget, and approximately 90% appoint department heads and have veto power. In cities under 50,000, the likelihood that the mayor possesses these powers decreases with declining population. Mayor-council governments of most moderately large to large cities generally correspond to the strong mayor-council form, whereas medium-size mayor-council cities are divided between strong and weak mayoralties. Small cities with the mayor-council form approximate the weak mayor-council form of government.

The formal resources of the mayor's office provide only part of the explanation of effective mayoral leadership. Even in mayor-council cities, informal resources are extremely important. Mayors such as the first Richard Daley in Chicago^[8] and Richard Lee in New Haven^[9] were noted for their ability to convert a formally weak position into one of strength. Support from a political party or community elites, strong popular backing, and a host of private backers indebted for jobs, favors, contracts, and recognition can give mayors the added political clout that can be helpful in dealings with the council and their own administration to get ideas accepted and acted upon.

Several trends in American politics have reduced these informal resources of the mayors and made it more difficult for mayors to use their influence.

First, the declining strength of political parties and the increasing independence of voting behavior by citizens remove a force that mayors could use to bind together office holders and secure support for the mayor's program. Second, there has been a splintering and thinning of power elites resulting from the breakup of large corporations, takeover of local firms by national and international concerns, increased competition and downsizing, and the move of companies to the suburbs. Third, the proliferation of interest groups and the political organization of neighborhoods have increased the range and diversity of organizations operating in local politics. Fourth, council members are more diverse in their characteristics, more activist in their orientation, and less likely to accept the leadership of the mayor out of deference to the mayor's power or common party loyalty. All these changes in city politics make it more difficult for the mayor to lead effectively. The new openness of the local electoral process and the individualism of persons elected to office diffuse the concentration of power needed for governing the city.^[10]

The mayor's performance is also affected by individual characteristics—experience; personal or occupational financial and staff support; personal attributes, such as charisma, reputation, wisdom, and commitment to the job (time, resources, energy expended); and effectiveness in dealing with the media. These factors determine how well and how fully the mayor fills the position, and how creatively the mayor exploits both formal and informal resources. The charismatic or adroit weak mayor may be able to win substantial support from the community and wring more advantage from limited powers than others have done. Ferman argued that “effective political skills” are the critical factor for strong mayoral leadership.^[11]

Effective leadership by the mayor is critical in the mayor–council city. Without it, the offsetting powers of the mayor and council can produce policy stalemate and administrative departments can resist change. The performance of mayors can be judged by their effectiveness on two dimensions: initiating policies, and getting policies implemented. The various types of mayors can be classified using this approach. If the mayor is a *caretaker* with no goals, the city will drift and be reactive when problems occur. If the mayor is a *reformer* or policy initiator but poor at getting things done or a *broker* who can arrange compromise but has a weak policy agenda, city government will lack a key element of leadership. This form functions best when the mayor is an *innovator* who can help to provide a clear direction for city government and ensure that city departments are focused on accomplishing the goals of elected officials.

Non-Executive Mayors in Council–Manager Cities

The council–manager form is based on the unitary model of organizing government. The council ultimately possesses all governmental authority, and executive authority is assigned to the city manager. There is no separation of powers or checks and balances in the system, although the form provides for specialization of roles. The council and mayor occupy the overtly political roles in government, set policy, and select the city manager who is continuously accountable to the council. The manager provides policy advice and recommendations to the council, and directs the administrative apparatus. Within this broad division of functions, there is considerable sharing, which this form of government promotes. The city manager also provides policy leadership in helping to frame the agenda of concerns that the council considers, and has latitude in the way that policy goals are converted into programs and services. The council, in contrast, has the potential to oversee the administrative performance of the city through appraisal of how the manager is doing specifically (and whether the manager will continue in office) and its ability to secure information about the performance of administrative staff in general.

The mayor is typically the presiding officer of the council and has no formal powers different from those of other council members, except for the veto power in 13% of council–manager cities. Mayors, directly elected in 62% of these cities,^[12] can be an important source of policy guidance and coordination of participants, although they rarely exercise any administrative authority. Thus, mayors in council–manager cities are not executives. They have close interaction, however, with the appointed executive and potentially affect the city manager's performance and influence.^[13] It is useful, therefore, to examine the roles of this kind of mayor as an official who helps to bridge the relationship between the appointed executive and the council.

The ideal mayor in council–manager cities is a facilitator who promotes positive interaction and a high level of communication among officials in city government and with the public, and who also provides guidance in goal setting and policy making.^[14] This type of leadership is well suited to the conditions of the council–manager city in which cooperative relationships among officials are common and the city manager provides support to the elected officials to whom the manager is accountable. Effective leadership by this kind of mayor improves the working relationships among officials, makes the form of government function more smoothly, and increases the involvement of elected officials in setting policy.

Typically, the mayor in the council–manager city is formally the presiding officer and serves as ceremonial head of the government. In addition, mayors may provide coordination and communication that helps to link the representative leadership of the council and the executive leadership of the manager. Finally, mayors may provide policy leadership and guide the work of the council. These roles are mutually reinforcing and are filled concurrently.

Facilitative leadership does not depend on a superior power position. There are resources available in the council–manager form and within the incumbent as a person to develop leadership in the areas of coordination and policy guidance. The strategic location occupied by the mayor in the center of communication channels to the council, the city manager and staff, and the public provides the foundation for effective leadership. Mayors with a clear conception of the job who use personal resources skillfully are more likely to be able to take advantage of this resource.

There is variation in the nature and scope of leadership, depending on how well the roles that make up the office are filled. Those who do not fill even the traditional roles (e.g., being an ineffective presiding officer who allows the council to flounder in meetings) could be called a *caretaker*, whereas those who fill these roles well but attend to no other are *symbolic heads*. Both the *coordinator* and *director* create an atmosphere that promotes cohesion and communication among officials and strengthens the capacity of the council to identify problems and make decisions. The coordinators, however, are not strongly associated with a policy agenda of their own, even though they contribute to fashioning and acting on an agenda as part of the council. The directors are associated with a distinctive policy agenda, although this agenda incorporates to a greater or lesser extent the views of other officials. The coordinators are effective at developing a sense of cohesion and purpose in their cities and at strengthening the policy-making process. They are not themselves, however, active policy initiators. They are more process oriented than policy oriented. The director-type mayors create an agenda in the sense that they take the initiative to put it together and their own ideas are central to it. Other officials and the public recognize this contribution and view the director mayor as a policy initiator.

In sum, although these mayors lack formal powers over other officials, they occupy a strategic location in the communication channels with the council, the manager, and the public. The moderately effective mayor goes beyond ceremonial leadership to provide effective coordination and communication and, thus, affect how the manager as executive is connected and interacts with the city council. The director-type, highly effective mayor also helps to develop a common

set of goals with wide council support that provide a framework within which the manager as executive can operate.

CITY MANAGERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

The city manager is the executive officer with extensive authority for directing staff, formulating and (after approval by council) expending the budget, and controlling operations. The manager is appointed by the council without approval by voters and serves at the pleasure of the council without term. The manager is typically the only staff member hired by the council (in some cities, the city attorney and/or clerk are selected by the council as well); all other employees are hired under the authority of the manager. The norm of the system is for elected officials to respect the insulation of staff from “political” interference.

The structure of council–manager government promotes cooperative relationships among officials. Because the ultimate control over city government lies with the council, there is less likelihood of power struggles between the council and the manager. The council and the manager do not compete for the same “rewards” from public service. Elected officials seek public support and reelection, whereas managers are concerned about how the council assesses their work and their standing and respect in their profession in order to have the option for advancement by moving to another city. Furthermore, city managers have a professional commitment to helping the council accomplish its goals; if they do not, they can be replaced. To be sure, tensions can emerge among elected officials or between them and the staff. The important difference from mayor–council governments is that, with no separation of powers, officials do not have to deal with structural factors that lead to conflict, and positive relationships are common. The approach to leadership taken by the city manager in the council–manager form can be different than that of executive mayors operating in a separation-of-powers setting.

The city manager as executive in council–manager cities is extensively involved in the policy formation aspect of executive leadership and responsible for directing the administrative organization. They are also community leaders. To an extent not found at other levels or in other forms of government, city managers along with other local government-appointed executives, such as school superintendents and directors of public authorities, are both general policy leaders and organizational directors. City managers do not report to an elected executive or go through political appointees in developing policy recommendations for elected officials; they report on performance directly to the governing board. Because of their

close working association with the residents of the communities they serve, they have a special obligation to value community leadership, as well as to preserve and protect the democratic quality of the political process as a whole. Unlike the elected executive, city managers are accountable to the entire governing board and are expected to provide leadership from a professional perspective. This does not mean that the city manager is not involved in politics, but rather that this involvement should be guided by professional considerations and standards.

City managers are potentially involved in a wide range of activities. City managers have commonly been shown to be active contributors to policy formulation, and they are responsible for directing the administrative organization.^[15] In addition, they advise the elected officials on a range of topics. Analysis of the extent to which top administrators are policy innovators, advisers to elected officials, and administrators has revealed consistency and variation.^[16] Most city managers (85%) are active as policy innovators. One-half combine this role with emphasis on administrative functions, and one in eight combine it with high involvement in advising elected officials. Over 20% are highly active across the board. The minority (about one in six) who are not active in policy innovation are not very involved in the other roles either. Thus, appointed executives tend to be actively and more or less broadly engaged in the governmental process.

City council members generally give city managers high ratings on their performance. In the national survey of council members in cities over 25,000 in population mentioned earlier, over 80% of the respondents agreed that the council and city manager have a good working relationship and that the manager does a good or very good job of accomplishing the goals established by the council.^[17] Over 70% feel that the manager is doing at least a good job in providing the council with sufficient alternatives for making policy decisions and sufficient information to assess the effectiveness of programs and services. Furthermore, 83% gave a high rating to the manager for improving efficiency, and 87% gave this rating for maintaining high standards of personal conduct for self and for staff.

In over one-half of the mayor-council cities over 2500 in population, there is a CAO^b or city administrator. The scope of the position and the duties depend on what responsibilities are assigned in the charter or by the officials who appoint the CAO. These usually include authority over implementation of programs,

day-to-day administrative concerns, and budget formulation, as well as playing an advisory role in developing other policy recommendations. It has been common to assume that the CAO is appointed by the mayor, derives their influence from the mayor, and operates within the orbit of the mayor.^[18] In a 2001 survey, in cities with a population of 2500 or more, 44% of the CAOs are appointed by the mayor with the approval of the city council, and another 39% are chosen by the city council.^b In only 16% of the cities is the CAO appointed by the mayor alone, although direct mayoral appointment is found in approximately two-fifths of the cities over 100,000 in population. When appointed by the mayor, the CAO serves at their "pleasure" and turnover is high, especially when a new mayor comes into office. When appointed or approved by the council, the CAO is similar in characteristics to the city manager.

Chief administrative officers are also supposed to bring management expertise to city government and can manifest the same characteristics as city managers. In general, however, the CAO is more likely to be recruited from within the city in which they serve and selected by the mayor for reasons other than professional qualifications, although the CAO may have extensive training as well as experience.^[19] City managers are somewhat more likely to be "careerists" who have served in other cities and aspire to move to "better" positions elsewhere. In a 1997 survey of city administrators, approximately one-fourth of the top administrators in both major forms of government are recruited from within the city, although the percentage of CAOs recruited from the city in which they serve increases with greater city population. If recruited from another local government, city managers are more likely than city administrators to have served as the chief administrator or as the assistant manager (51% vs. 36%) in their previous post. However, 17% of CAOs come from the private sector compared with 8% of the city managers.^[20]

When appointed by the mayor, the CAO is the agent of the mayor and has power proportionate to their responsibility to the mayor. The CAO is valued as the mayor's most active troubleshooter. The scope of the position and the duties depend on what the mayor assigns. The CAO's status is ambiguous because mayors have difficulty giving the CAO sufficient power to bring professionalism to the administration of city government, and CAOs have difficulty winning the confidence of the mayor. Often, mayors and department heads bypass the CAO in their dealings with each other. Thus, the CAO's subordination to the mayor compromises their policy and executive leadership. However, when the CAO is appointed or approved by the council, which is more common in smaller cities, this official follows the lead

^bCalculations by authors of data from *Form of Government Survey 2001*; International City/County Management Association, Washington, DC.

of the entire council. These CAOs are similar to city managers in their values and orientation. Still, CAOs tend to stay in their position a shorter time than city managers. In the 1997 survey of city managers and CAOs, the average number of years in the current positions is 6.9 years for city managers and 6.5 years for CAOs. In cities over 50,000, the tenure drops to 6.4 for council-manager cities and 4.3 years for mayor-council cities. In comparison to managers, CAOs are not as upwardly or geographically mobile.

CONCLUSION

City managers are executives and city administrators are partial executives who bring a wide range of professional considerations to the discussion of city government policies and practices. By raising professional considerations in policy discussions, city managers help to ensure a balanced approach to policy decisions.^c By acting out of commitment to strategic goal setting, ethical standards, and sound management, city managers also promote proactive policy making, as well as fairness and efficiency in the delivery of services and the use of organizational resources. These contributions can be combined with those of the mayor as elected executive or the mayor as shaper of the context for the appointed administrator to create a blend of political and professional leadership in the executive functions in local government.

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^cFor example, should a new recreation center go into a neighborhood in which residents have organized to pressure officials to select their area or into a neighborhood where the need is the greatest?