

The President's Column

Leadership Lessons Learned

By Brad Martens, MCMA President, Shoreview City Manager

Being in a leadership role day after day is tough, but it can also be incredibly rewarding. One of the biggest challenges in day-in-day-out leadership is taking a step back to recognize that after some time in these roles, we do learn and ultimately become wiser. I had the opportunity to take that step back when I was asked to present my leadership lessons learned to the Roseville Area Optimists Club. I'll admit, I dreaded this a great deal and was confident they made a poor choice of speaker. However, after quite a bit of reflection, I did come up with some lessons learned that I thought may be worth sharing with you.

1. It's ok to follow when you don't know where to go. Who you choose to follow however, is who you become.

There have been many times in my life when I had no idea where I wanted to go. In those moments I followed others. Who I followed mattered as sometimes I got into trouble and other times I became a better person. I firmly believe that you are the average of the five people you spend most of your time with. These days I only follow those who I respect and admire. Looking back, while I certainly wasted some time with the wrong people, I was overall blessed to tag along with the good ones most of the time. It made me a better person during those times I was not sure what to do.

2. Give your best effort whenever you can, at whatever you are doing.

I've baled a lot of hay, cleaned a lot of toilets, sold a lot of shoes, and mowed a lot of lawns. I've also taken pride in all of those activities. For me, doing a good job no matter what I was doing always felt rewarding. Sometimes other people would even notice which felt even better. If you always do your best, even when you mess up, you can live without as many regrets.

3. Do what you say, say what you mean.

One of my mottos I borrowed from Brené Brown is "clear is kind, unclear is unkind." As a person who has a tendency to want to please everyone, this has been tough for me. While it is a little more difficult in the moment, being upfront and honest about what you are willing or able to do is good business for future you, and the relationship. I'd rather be let down, or let someone down a little upfront rather than a lot down the road. This builds trust, which is our most valuable currency, in my opinion.

4. Trust your instincts.

I'm probably not alone that the times I've screwed up the most were when I went against my instincts. In my first year as an administrator I was pushed by my elected officials to quickly approve a land use application for a business expansion, which I wasn't comfortable with and felt like I needed more information. It turned out that one of the two lots the project was expanding on was out of city limits in the township (whoopsie!). On the other

Appointments and Other Professional News

- **Casey Casella**, assistant city administrator, Savage, has been hired as assistant city manager, Hopkins.
- **Michael Sable**, assistant city manager, Bloomington, has been appointed city manager, Maplewood.
- **Matt Skaret**, city administrator, Jackson, has been appointed city administrator, Fairmont.

*Do you have a new appointment or other professional news to share?
Contact the secretariat at the information listed.*

MCMA Board Meeting Recap

By Madison Hagenau, MCMA Secretariat

The MCMA Board met on February 23 and March 22. Highlights of the meetings were:

- Debrief of the 2024 Winter Workshop
- Approval of the Fiscal Year 2025 budget
- Adoption of the updated Manager in Transition Guide
- Final review of the Annual Conference Program

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MCMA Newsletter

is published three times a year for the members of the Minnesota City/County Management Association by MCMA's Secretariat:

League of Minnesota Cities
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Your senior advisors are here to help!

side of this coin is when you know in your gut what is right to do even though it is hard. I've taken a chance on a few folks who on paper didn't quite look the best but I got the feeling that they had potential. I don't regret any of those hires.

5. Find a mentor or group of people who make you a better, stronger person; ask for help and advice often.

I'm blessed to have a strong network of amazing colleagues in this profession. They've helped me through all sorts of small and big challenges. Yet, I still often have this "I don't want to bother them" voice in my head when something challenging is going on. My biggest regret in this area is how long I take to ask for help from one of you. There has never been a time when the colleague I reached out to didn't drop everything to help me out.

6. Take a chance; go for something big.

Professionally, going after the jobs in both Corcoran and Shoreview were big for me, and there were times in both processes that I second guessed if I was ready for the challenge. In the Shoreview process, I focused on being my 100% authentic self and used our family mantra of "It will all work out." If I don't get the job, that means it wasn't the right one for me. There are many studies that show what we regret most at old age is the chances we didn't take. I'd like to have that list be as short as possible.

7. Find and live your values.

I had the incredible opportunity to participate in the James P. Shannon Leadership Institute through the Wilder Foundation in 2019. This program helped me to find a deeper version of myself and what mattered to me most. My values are love, honesty, emotional health, and continuous improvement. I try to live these values each and every day and I'm happier because of it.

8. Be authentic, find your own path.

For many of my adult years I identified myself predominantly by my job title. I tried to act and sound like an important city official. Through a couple of challenges in my life I learned that I needed to shift that thought to be me first. Today I identify as Brad, who happens to be a city manager. It's a lot more fun when you choose to be yourself. I'm sure I took longer than most to get to this place but I'm glad I did.

9. Vulnerability is a strength.

Over the last several years I've become more open about some of the challenges I've faced in my personal life (divorce, single parenting, remarriage, IVF failures, and most recently beginning the adoption process). As I share my story with those around me, I find that many of us are going through similar challenges, and we can be a support system for each other. We are truly blessed to be around an amazing group of caring peers and I'm incredibly thankful for their support.

10. My legacy will be the impact I have on the people around me.

I have my name on plaques and final plat approvals, which have helped to shape communities. I've inked agreements and conquered strategic goals, which have accomplished great things. At the end of the day, however, I will be known for how I've treated and cared for the people around me. My proudest professional achievements have been building and caring for the teams I work with. That, I believe, will be the longer lasting legacy when I leave this profession.

I strongly believe that these lessons have been the most important in shaping who I am today. I also believe that my best years are ahead, as are my most important lessons yet to learn. Thank you for the opportunity to serve as MCMA president and for allowing me to share my lessons with you. It's been an incredible honor. ○

- Contact Martens at bmartens@shoreviewmn.gov

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APMP Update

By Aurora Yager, APMP President, Wayzata Deputy City Manager

As we wrap up our annual APMP book club, I'm reflecting on the wisdom we've gleaned from Brené Brown's powerful book, "Dare to Lead." While I recommend reading the entire book, let's dive into a few quotes that encapsulate some of the meaningful discussions our APMP members have had:

- **"We need braver leaders and more courageous cultures."**

These words remind us that leadership is about fostering environments where authenticity and connection thrive, tough conversations happen, and people focus on accountability and learning over shaming and blaming.

- **"Vulnerability is not a weakness."**

Brene Brown's TED Talk on vulnerability is a must-watch. It challenges the misconception that vulnerability is a defect or problem to solve. Instead, it's the gateway to connection and growth.

- **"Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind."**

Clarity in communication is a superpower. When we express ourselves with transparency, we honor others, build trust, and see better results.

- **"No trust. No connection."**

Trust is the currency of all relationships. As public servants we cannot underestimate the importance of trust and its role internally in our organizations and externally in the community.

- **"Integrity is choosing courage over comfort."**

Our commitment to integrity shapes all our decisions. It causes us to focus on doing what's right, even when it's difficult or uncomfortable.

As my term as APMP president comes to an end, I wanted to thank the amazing APMP Board for their dedication and leadership over the last year. I'm so grateful that I was encouraged to join APMP when I first entered this profession. The passion and motivation our members have for leadership and public service is contagious! I'm excited to see what's next for APMP in the year ahead. ☐

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MCMA Internship Stipend Recipients

Every year the Education and Outreach Committee awards stipends for jurisdictions to provide a talented young person with real life experience working in local government management.

The Education and Outreach Committee of MCMA considers the following elements when selecting the recipients of the stipends: MCMA Membership Status, quality of the proposed work tasks and exposure to public administration and local government management and the organization's MCMA member, and program supervision and mentorship opportunities.

The 2024 stipends were awarded to the City of Marshall as well as the cities of Lauderdale and Falcon Heights for a shared intern program!

City Limits: “Good fences make good neighbors.”

By John Mulder, MCMA Past President, Hermantown City Administrator

I recently had an interaction with a resident of my city in a completely non-work related situation (at least for me). This individual was a health care professional providing care for my daughter during a recent hospital stay. Somehow, the issue of where we lived came up and we learned that we both lived in Hermantown, and he talked about his interaction with the City.

He told me that he had started raising chickens. He didn't realize that one of his chickens was a rooster. His neighbor complained to the City, and someone followed up and told him that like most cities, the City of Hermantown allows residents to have chickens but not roosters. Of course, the logic here was that neighbors don't really mind having chickens as neighbors, but they do not want to live next to a crowing male chicken acting as an alarm clock. (Insert your own joke here about crowing males.)

Not wanting to get rid of his chicken, he said he found this device that the rooster could wear — in a humane way — to keep it from crowing. I had never heard of such a device, and arguably, he was still in violation of the anti-male chicken ordinance, but if the rooster wasn't crowing then the neighbors were not complaining.

All that reminded me of the poem, “Mending Wall,” by Robert Frost and the famous line of “Good fences make good neighbors.” We have limits and fences around certain activities (like raising roosters) to help people be good neighbors.

In an era, where freedom is one of the highest values, the discussion of limits can be viewed very negatively. Any discussion about limits tend to make us a little uncomfortable. We all want our freedom; no one wants to think that there is a limit to their growth as humans. I have done a lot of reading recently about how we need to understand and accept our personal limits in some way. A long time ago, I had to give up my dreams about playing in the state high school basketball tournament or being recognized for my baseball talent. It was about understanding my physical limitations — I simply was never as good of an athlete as I had hoped to be. I will admit accepting those limits did not come without teenage emotional angst. But, ultimately, I tried my best and learned to appreciate the time and experience I had playing sports even with my limitations. Accepting those limits allowed me to learn and grow in other areas.

I have often thought that as a general rule, people don't like and will complain about zoning laws when it limits what they may want to do with their properties but will invoke the zoning code when it comes to trying to limit what their neighbor might want to do. Zoning limits are a good thing when it applies to someone else.

Some would say we should get rid of all the rules and ordinances in order to be truly free, but understanding those limits helps us to better understand ourselves and live peacefully with our neighbors.

In the poem, the writer and his neighbor come together each year to mend their stone fence because, “Good fences make good neighbors.” Isn't that what we are trying to do as local government leaders? Bring neighbors together to make good fences so we all can be good neighbors. After all, our city limits are exactly how we define our city or community. ◉

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Been There, Done That!

Unsolicited Advice from Your Senior Advisors

By Craig Dawson, MCMA Senior Advisor

One of your MCMA membership perks is better than an MPR or TPT tote bag. It supports the ICMA/MCMA partnership service of Senior Advisors — seasoned professionals who, as the title of this column indicates, have been there and done that, and then some. The MCMA Board has approved, and ICMA has appointed, five Senior Advisors for Minnesota, all retired city managers/administrators. Collectively, we have over 200 years of experience serving in many capacities (from internships to department heads to the big corner offices) in a variety of local governments across several states.

While all of us have moved on from our full-time careers, we are still very committed to our profession and all of you who serve in it. Our volunteer service as Senior Advisors is designed to share and reflect with you what we've learned along the way. All discussions are free and confidential.

We're friends, advisors, listeners to our colleagues. Senior Advisors help with personal and professional issues. As we are not consultants, we do not provide technical assistance or solve substantive problems, but we may offer advice about how to approach them.

A traditional focus of our activity is to help our colleagues who may be having issues working with their councils, and may be facing our professional occupational hazard of a shortened tenure as manager/administrator. This extends to helping prepare and endure becoming a member-in-transition (MIT). We are here, too, among other things, to:

- provide advice and perspective on ethics
- be advocates for the council-manager form of government
- offer advice and perspectives to city councils about functioning well (i.e., roles, responsibilities, and “staying in your lane”)
- help you on problems with council or staff members

Senior Advisors remain active learners about the profession and are aware of what's happening among our members in Minnesota. We attend conferences, regional meetings of members around the state, and take advantage of ICMA webinars (that are offered to us free of charge).

Every one of us has some interesting stories to share. Among mine:

- When asked to describe a typical day at work: Well, today I held a meeting on a multi-million-dollar interchange project, and later someone called asking for help to get her cat out of a storm sewer catch basin.
- Residents on an alley paving project were opposed to it, mostly for the special assessments they would have to pay. But one said new pavement wasn't needed because drivers then could speed down the alley. And this was on a dead-end alley!

Been There, Done That! continued on page 7

“While all of us have moved on from our full-time careers, we are still very committed to our profession and all of you who serve in it.”

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Continued from page 6

- One council member of a neighboring city showed up opposing my council's decision to give approval to a DNR shore fishing facility on a channel between bays that were the cities' boundaries. At our council meeting, she stated publicly, "I hope the council is not approving this so the city manager can pad his resume!"
- I was the staff point-person for a complex, intricate, and politically-sensitive project for five cities to build a single public safety facility. Insurance for a bond insurance is usually perfunctory, but this time no one was willing to provide any, and the electeds were getting gun-shy about proceeding. A learning experience in herding political cats to keep the project going ...

There was some significant turnover among the Senior Advisors last year, and we considered whether to move away from the traditional geographic assignment for outreach and availability. We decided to keep them, with some modifications so that each of us could focus on serving 45-50 members. (A map is on the MCMA website, in the Senior Advisor tab, along with our contact information.) As a practical matter, members will be contacting advisors they know or who may have similar career experiences they can relate to. That's just fine, so feel free to contact any of us. ☐

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ICMA Pittsburgh

By Peyton Mastera, First Vice President, Dilworth City Administrator

In June, registration will open for the 2024 ICMA Annual Conference in Pittsburgh. As a member of the conference planning team, I can assure you the educational content and networking opportunities are the best this profession can offer.

Instead of the traditional state association dinner, Minnesota is teaming up with our Iowa counterparts (IaCMA) to co-host a reception at the renowned Andy Warhol Museum, America's largest museum dedicated to a single artist. The event will provide expanded networking opportunities, guided group tours of the seven-floor museum, heavy hors d'oeuvres, and a keepsake. I visited the museum in January and believe it will provide a unique experience for our membership.

Be on the lookout for ICMA registration information as well as registration for the MCMA-IaCMA reception. If you have any additional questions about the conference, do not hesitate to contact me. ☐

– Contact Mastera at peyton.mastera@ci.dilworth.mn.us

WEBSITE UPDATE COMING SOON!

The MCMA website will be getting a much-needed refresh in the coming months! Work is already underway, and the updated site should be live this summer. Stay tuned!