

Managing Local Government Is Tougher Than Usual What Is a

Manager to Do?

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Alienation, anger, and a lack of trust in local government are making it extremely challenging to manage our cities and towns and build relationships with residents. Unfortunately, some managers feel there is nothing they can do to reduce alienation, minimize anger and build trust so they just accept the status quo. Other managers have attempted to connect with residents in a variety of ways:

- Many managers try to improve services as a way to connect with residents, which has proven to have little impact.
- Some managers think the answer lies in more rigorous management systems, such as strategic plans or performance measures, but that is not the answer.
- A few managers opt for “transparency” by showing residents all the data, but that is only a small part of the solution.

Developing relationships with our residents is the only way to mitigate alienation, anger, and a lack of trust.

Local government has begun to turn to more effective citizen engagement as a way to build relationships and trust. Civic engagement will only be successful if combined with three other important and complimentary strategies: **Build Community; Enact a Partnership Model, and Treat Residents Like Citizens**. The relevance and importance of each of the three strategies are briefly described below prior to discussing engaging citizens.

BUILD COMMUNITY

If you don't build community, you will never be successful in your efforts to reduce alienation, minimize anger, and build trust.

What is community? Community is the feeling of:

- Belonging
- Inclusiveness
- Togetherness
- Pride in your neighborhood.

Community is knowing that your neighbors are there to help you and you are there to help your neighbors. It starts with people feeling connected to the place they live, to their neighbors and their neighborhood. Community is all about establishing and maintaining successful relationships.

People must know their neighbors to begin building community. Unfortunately, a Pew survey in 2010 showed that the majority of our residents don't know 50% of their neighbors by name! Unless local government helps correct this situation, we will never overcome alienation, anger, and mistrust toward local government.

Local government cannot build community alone. We must build a partnership with our residents. Community building starts at the neighborhood level and grows and expands from this grassroots effort. Government can play four distinct roles to help to build community: Consciousness Raising, Convener, Catalyst, and Facilitator.

Improving trust with our residents means first helping build relationships between neighbors and second, helping build relationships between our neighbors and local government. [Nextdoor.com](https://www.nextdoor.com) is an easy first step for local governments to help build community with minimal staff resources. Nextdoor.com is a free, online application that connects neighbors to each other and allows government to connect to neighbors and neighborhoods.

FIX THE OUTDATED LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT MODEL

Local government must change its modus operandi.

Old Model: We are operating under an old model, which is doomed. Most local governments operate under a "Bitch and Fix" model. Our residents complain and find fault and we are expected to fix their problems. If we continue this model, we endanger

the success of other efforts, such as being transparent, engaging residents, developing performance measures, etc.

The old model is based on outmoded and ineffective assumptions and beliefs, which drive our behavior and actions. Under the old model, we have operated under the faulty assumptions in which local government:

- Is responsible for the quality of life in a community
- Must solve people's problems
- Requires little of residents.

New Model: The alternative is a “Partnership” model. We must be honest and admit to our residents and ourselves that none of the big problems we face, including crime, drugs, affordable housing, child obesity, sustainability, failing schools, gangs and others, can be solved by local government alone. Complaining and anger are not answers to these tough problems. We must ask and expect our residents to help solve these problems.

The new model sets forth completely different assumptions to the one listed above. The “Partnership” model assumes local government:

- Cannot solve all problems alone and never could
- Is partially, but not completely, responsible for the quality of life in a neighborhood or city,
- Needs the intelligence and ideas of committed residents to be successful.

Below is a summary of the two models:

Bitch and Fix	Partnership
Resident as Customer	Resident as Citizen
City as "Decider"	Citizen Engagement
Service Orientation	Service + Community Building
Public as necessary Evil	Public as Partner

TREAT RESIDENTS LIKE CITIZENS, NOT CUSTOMERS

Local government has made a big mistake by treating our residents like *customers*. Instead, we need to treat them like *citizens*.

Customers: Yes, our residents are sometimes customers; however, when solving big problems, they need to act like citizens. Customers behave in set patterns when they are not satisfied: *they name, blame, complain and, find fault*. Customers think in terms of “I” and “me” and not the greater good of the community and they expect someone else to solve their problems. Complaining will never solve our big problems.

Citizens: On the other hand, citizens (anyone who works and lives in your community) feel a shared responsibility and accountability for the welfare of their community. Citizens understand they have a role to play to improve and strengthen their neighborhood and town. We need the creativity and intelligence of our citizens to help solve our collective problems. If engaged correctly, citizens will become a powerful ally and partner.

We cannot allow our residents to act solely like customers. If we want local government to be successful and reduce alienation, minimize anger and build trust, then we must change our expectations and assumptions regarding our residents.

ENGAGE CITIZENS

Civic (or Civil, Citizen, Public) engagement is the final key to building relationships and trust to solve our tough problems.

It is critical to understand what civic engagement is and is not. Civic engagement is not:

- Selling or convincing the public to accept or buy into your ideas
- It is not 3 minutes at the microphone or formal at public hearings
- The mayor or manager holding forth in front of a community meeting
- Does not, cannot and will never happen in a council, commissioner or board of supervisors meeting.

Civic engagement is:

- Staff asking the right series of questions
- Letting citizens discuss these questions among themselves in groups of 6-8 people
- Staff and elected officials listening, learning, and using the public input to develop recommendations.

Residents will learn to act and think differently if they experience a well-designed and facilitated engagement process.

SUMMARY

To break through the mistrust, alienation, and anger in local government, it is imperative for managers to:

1. Build community within neighborhoods and throughout the community
2. Move from a “Bitch and Fix” to a “Partnership” model
3. Treat and expect your residents to act like citizens, not customers,
4. Engage the creative wisdom and intelligence of your citizens to help solve the tough problems.

We must integrate these four strategies into a comprehensive effort if we hope to be successful. I am not suggesting this will easy! You will make mistakes, confront challenges, have some failures and, at times, feel insecure.

It will take years to accomplish but the rewards will be substantial. You will:

- Positively change the culture in your city, town or county
- Find that the almost impossible job you have will become easier and less stressful,
- Allow your staff to feel less stressed and more hopeful as they see citizens helping them solve problems.

Changing our attitudes towards our residents and partnering with our citizens makes political sense for your elected representatives.

My commitment to these important strategies is that I will provide free help to anyone willing to try. ***Go For It!***

RECOMMENDED READING

To learn more about building community and the roles that local government can play:

- *Community Building: How to Do It. Why It Matters*, IQ Report Vol. 41. No 2,
- *Community Building* by Peter Block, and,
- *The Abundant Community* by John McKnight and Peter Block.,

To learn more about civic engagement:

- *How Civic Engagement Transforms Community Relationships*: ICMA InFocus Vol.43 No. 4-2011.
- *Connected Communities*: Alliance for Innovation's White Paper.

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