



P.O. Box 846 • Santa Fe, New Mexico 87504-0846
Tel. (505) 982-5573 • (800)-432-2036
Fax (505) 984-1392
www.nmml.org

52 TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC SERVICE: SOME IDEAS ON HOW TO GOVERN BETTER

by E.A. Mosher, former Executive Director
League of Kansas Municipalities

1. Learn all you can about your city, its history, its operations, its financing. Do your homework. Know your city ordinances. Dust off your comprehensive plan.
2. Devote sufficient time to your office and to studying the present and future problems of your community.
3. Don't burn yourself out on the little things, while recognizing that they are often important to the public. Save some energy - and time - for the important matters.
4. Don't act as a committee of one; governing a city requires a team effort - practically and legally.
5. Don't let honest difference of opinion degenerate into personality conflicts.
6. Remember that you represent all the people of your community, not just neighbors and friends. Be wary of personal experiences coloring your public decisions.
7. Take your budget preparation job seriously, for it determines what your city does or does not do for the coming year, and will influence what happens in future years as well.
8. Establish policy statements. Written policy statements let the public, and the city staff, know where they stand. They help the governing body govern, and writing them provides a process to develop consensus.
9. Make decisions on the basis of public policy, and be consistent. Treat similar situations similarly, and avoid favoritism.
10. Focus your attention on ways to prevent problems, rather than trying to solve them as they occur. Filling potholes is one approach; developing plans to prevent them is another.
11. Don't be misled by the strong demands of special interest groups who want it done now, their way. Your job is to find the long-term public interest of the community as a whole, and you may be hearing from the wrong people.
12. Don't rush to judgment. Few final actions have to be taken at the first meeting they are considered. Avoid "crisis management."
13. Don't be afraid to change. Don't be content to just follow the routine of your predecessors. Charge your appointed officers and employees with being responsible for new ideas and better ways. Listen to what they have to say.
14. Don't give quick answers when you are not sure of the real answer. It may be embarrassing to appear ignorant, but it can be more embarrassing and damaging, to tell a person something that is wrong.
15. As an individual, even if you are the mayor, do not make promises you cannot deliver! Most decisions and actions require approval of the governing body, and this takes a majority vote.
16. Remember that you have legal authority as a governing body member only when the governing body is in legal session.
17. Don't spring surprises on your fellow governing body members or your city staff, especially at formal meetings. If a matter is worth bringing up for discussion, it is worth being on the agenda. Surprises may get you some publicity, at the embarrassment of others, and tend to erode the "team" approach to governance.
18. Participate in official meetings with the dignity and decorum fitting those who hold a public trust. Personal dress and courteous behavior at meetings help create an environment for making sound public decisions.
19. Conduct your official public meetings with some formality, and follow rules of procedure. Have an agenda, and follow it. Most governing body members agree that formal meetings expedite the process and tend to promote better decision making.
20. Don't be afraid to ask questions. It is one of the ways we learn.
21. Vote yes or no on motions. Do not cop out by abstaining, except when you have a conflict of interest. A pass does not relieve you of responsibility when some decision must be made.
22. Once a majority decision of the governing body has been made, respect that official position, and defend it if needed, even if you personally disagreed.
23. Respect the letter and intent of the open meetings law. But also keep private and confidential matters to yourself - do not gossip.

24. Retain competent, key employees, pay them well, trust their professional judgment and recognize their authority and responsibilities.

25. Don't bypass the system! If you have a manager or other chief administrative officer, stick to policy-making and avoid personal involvement in the day-to-day operations of the city. If you do not have an administrative officer, make sure you have some management system that officers, employees, and the public understand.

26. Don't let others bypass your system - insist that people such as equipment service suppliers first work with your city staff. If direct contact with governing body members is necessary, this should be with the governing body as a whole or a committee and not on a one-on-one basis.

27. Don't pass the buck to the staff or employees when they are only following your policies or decisions.

28. Don't always take no for an answer. The right question may be "How can we do this?" instead of "May we do this?" Be positive!

29. Learn to evaluate recommendations and alternative courses of action. Request your staff to provide options. Encourage imaginative solutions.

30. Avoid taking short-term gains at the expense of long-term losses. Be concerned with the long-term future of the city.

31. In determining the public interest, balance personal rights and property interests, the possible harm to a few versus the good of the many. Recognize that in some situations, everyone cannot be a winner.

32. Be concerned with the total development - physical, economic, and social - of your community.

33. Don't act as if the city operates in a vacuum. Cities must work within the intergovernmental system to be effective. Keep in contact and cooperate with your federal, state, county and school officials.

34. Get to know the officials of neighboring and similar size cities. Visit other cities, particularly those with a reputation of being well run.

35. Learn to listen - really listen - to your fellow governing body members and the public. Hear what they are trying to say, not just the words spoken.

36. Keep your constituents informed, and encourage citizen participation.

37. Be friendly and deal effectively with the news media. Make sure what you say is what you mean. Lack of good communication is one of the big problems of cities.

38. Remember that what you say, privately and publicly, will often be news. You live in a glass house. Avoid over-publicizing minor problems.

39. Expect, and respect, citizen complaints. Make sure that your governing body members, and your city, have a way to effectively deal with them. Have a follow-up system.

40. Be careful about rumors. Check them out. Help squelch them when you know they are false.

41. Appoint citizen advisory committees when you need them, but be prepared to follow their advice if you use them.

42. Take care in your appointments to boards and commissions. Make sure they are capable as well as representative of the whole community.

43. Use manuals, guides and other technical assistance and information available from the League and other agencies. Attend workshops and conferences put on for your benefit.

44. Pace yourself. Limit the number of meetings you attend. Set some priorities, including the need to spend time with your family. Recognize that life - and the city - is dependent on a lot of things you have little control over.

45. Establish some personal goals and objectives. What do you want to accomplish this year? Next year?

46. Help develop some short-term and long-term goals and objectives for your city, and check your progress at least every six months.

47. Similarly, help your city develop a vision of the future. Plan from the future to the present - no vision, no plan. One of the important purposes of a governing body is to establish a vision for the future.

48. Focus on the future, and try to leave your city better than that which you inherited as a city officer.

49. At least once a year, schedule a governing body discussion about how you are governing. Review the processes and procedures. Sit back and ask "How are we doing? How can we do things better?"

50. Be enthusiastic about your public service, and the privilege you have, and let the public know it. But maintain your sense of humor. Don't take yourself or the business of government so seriously that you don't enjoy it. It should be a fun as well as rewarding experience.

51. Be a leader, as well as part of the team of elected and appointed officials who were selected to make your city an even better place to live.

52. Celebrate! Good things do happen. Let the public share your successes. Always focusing on problems and issues may leave you, the governing body, and the public, to believe that nothing positive ever happens.

*Reprinted from Kansas Government Journal
April, 1990*