

POLITICS AND ADMINISTRATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT¹

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INTRODUCTION

Local government provides a rich laboratory to examine one of the most fundamental questions in the study and practice of public administration. Mosher (1) posed that question in a compelling way: How can administrative staff possessing expertise and discretion that insure significant influence over public policy formulation and administration be held accountable to the peoples' will when they are not elected?

Council-manager local government has provided the perfect setting for me to examine this question, and the position of the city manager has been the focus of my studies since the late 1980s. An elected governing body appoints a city manager, the chief administrative officer, who then serves at its pleasure. But, the governing body is placed in a vulnerable position. Even though its members have appointed the city manager, the manager exercises significant discretion and influence that stems, on the one hand, from legal authority (for example, to hire and fire city staff that reports to the manager) and, on the other, from access to the expertise of the staff that reports to him/her. City managers develop weekly agendas for council meetings, bring issues to the council that its members would be unaware of otherwise, prepare an annual budget and make policy recommendations, and they authorize the reports from staff to council. Somehow, with all

¹An occasional paragraph that appears here has been published elsewhere. I have provided references to those sources in the bibliography, but I have not quoted myself in this article.

this discretion, they maintain legitimacy and earn the confidence of their governing bodies and citizens. They act politically, but they risk their job and reputation if they become politically aligned. For me, the city manager's position itself embodies the relationship between politics and administration. Act in political ways, but remain politically neutral! For over 25 years I have worked to understand how they accomplish this.

I have approached this intellectual challenge by looking at the responsibilities, roles and values of city managers. My understanding has come primarily from in-depth interviews that I have conducted on numerous occasions with managers as part of several research projects. In addition, I served for eight years as a local elected official in a council-manager government. The council elected me their mayor in two of those years—one in each of my four-year terms. So, first hand, as a participant-observer I worked with city staff and the city manager. Finally, I have consulted and served as a trainer to local governments, elected officials, and associations of professional staff regularly over the years.

I will describe the contemporary responsibilities, roles, and values of the city manager and then summarize a previously published case study illustrating the conflict between a city manager's desire to remain politically neutral when the governing body expected him to be a political advocate. It was impossible to separate policy from politics in this case. At the end, I will provide charts that capture the differences between elected officials and administrative staff. I will describe the role of the city manager as a translator of political

and administrative logic with significant responsibilities to align the forces of politics and administration.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Emerging from my own (2, 3) and the research of others (4) are two responsibilities—community building and modernizing the organization—that city managers increasingly find themselves immersed in. These extend the traditional responsibilities of providing policy guidance to a governing body and serving as chief administrative officer.

Community building and modernizing the organization constitute a compelling yet understated set of responsibilities. With everything else that they do, city managers will be judged by council and citizens for their contributions to the way government helps to build and maintain a sense of community and internally by how well the organization modernizes and how these changes are reflected in added value to citizens.

While it is impossible to precisely define the responsibilities, in a nutshell community building includes a variety of ways that citizens can connect to governing institutions beyond participating in the traditional public hearing. The goal is to utilize the resources that citizens possess to increase their ownership, pride, and obligation to the collective good. An example of this trend would be the involvement of citizens in community-wide strategic planning processes. At some level, the emphasis on community building challenges the concept of representative democracy. It acknowledges the value of

transparent government and citizens' desire to directly influence governing processes including the access to administrative processes as citizens have come to understand the professional staff's influence on public policy decisions.

Eric Anderson, the city manager of Des Moines, helps describe this responsibility when he says:

We have a strong responsibility to make sure that we provide not only information to our governing bodies, but to support the processes of governance that support the representative nature of the city council. I'm not talking about getting involved in electoral politics, but in things like public hearings, discussion, and deliberation; training people in the organization to anticipate and foster participation; and building structures of participation that will be seen as legitimate. I don't think we have done a very good job on the governance side of our responsibilities. (5)

Modernizing the organization results primarily from technological advances in ways of gathering, organizing, processing, and providing information. On the one hand, the explosion of information leads to increasing emphasis on specialization. On the other hand, the problems that come to government increasingly cross specializations. Part of the challenge, then, is attempting to align hierarchy and teams. Furthermore, influenced by their treatment as customers in the private sector, citizens have come to expect rapid, customized responses to their problems. This expectation leads to more decentralized

decisions regarding service delivery and challenges the administrative hierarchy to demonstrate the value it adds to service delivery and the operations of a diverse set of departments. Thus, while the city manager is the head of the organization, he/she is more like an orchestra conductor at the mercy of the players rather than a military officer whose rank commands response.

Here is what Gene Denton, former CAO in Johnson County, Kansas, says:

The structure of government has flattened. We have retrained most of our workers to be more self-reliant and departments to be interdependent. Creativity and innovation have replaced the more sterile values of efficiency and economy. Leadership has leaped ahead of management. Coaches have replaced supervisors. Connectedness, communication, and cooperation have outclassed competition. Quality is more valued than speed. The respected leader is one who is more concerned about how workers are progressing and what they *should be*, rather than what they *should do*. (6)

ROLES

The formidable challenge in fulfilling these responsibilities is that they are occurring simultaneously. While city governments are attempting to become more accessible to citizens to promote community building, the professions are becoming more specialized

and the city government is unintentionally becoming less accessible. There are simultaneous forces working to make the government more democratic and more esoteric.

City managers find themselves flush in the middle of these forces as councils expect them to provide more liaison between council and staff, and staff expects them to translate staff work for the council. Increasingly, the city manager's role has become that of a facilitator and alliance builder, promoting and nurturing partnerships that involve city responsibilities both within the city government as well as between it and other organizations, associations, and groups.

These expectations go beyond the manager's traditional roles; they do not supplant them. But it is imperative to recognize that the world of command and control has passed because contemporary responsibilities demand decentralized, team decision structures. Clearly, the city manager has tremendous influence on the council and subordinate administrative staff. But that influence is modulated, on the one hand, by the understanding that only the council can legitimately address the most important issues the city faces. On the other hand, internally, the modern local government is so diverse in the services it provides and in the expertise necessary to provide the services that the manager sometimes is no more than an observer of the staff's work and a liaison for the staff to the council.

Surveying city managers, Hinton and Kerrigan (7) identified the most important managerial skills as:

- Situational analysis—“sizing up” the community political milieu, organization, and staff

- Assessing community needs

- Handling interpersonal relations

- Bargaining, negotiating and other consensus-seeking techniques

When reflecting on the new roles for city managers, Norm King, former President of the International City/County Management Association says, “I think the most important responsibility of any manager is to manage the values of the organization and to instill a sense of responsibility in employees for them.” (8)

Empirically and anecdotally, we find support for the assertion that the manager’s role is evolving into one of facilitator and alliance builder. Important in this realization is that the role is not isolated to the cities relationship with community entities. It is equally relevant when thinking about the internal dynamics of the administrative city.

VALUES

These responsibilities and roles are filtered through a set of enduring democratic values:

- Efficiency

- Representation

- Social equity

- Individual Rights

Essentially, these are the four values that constitute political responsiveness. I learned as an elected official that responsiveness could be used to justify any position; knowing one's predispositions towards each of the four values will assist in understanding how a person gives meaning to the term "responsive." Don Klingner and I (9, 10) have used these values since the early 1980s to help create a framework for understanding public policy and administrative decisions. The values stem from the fundamentals of the democratic social contract as Joseph Tussman (11) has described it.

In our view, *efficiency* is not only connected to the prudent use of resources. It also connects to professionalism and rational, analytical thinking. It underpins the value of master plans, consultant reports, and the expertise that increasingly drives public policy. It incorporates the decision rule: "the greatest good, for the greatest number, over the

long run.” Examples of this value in the work of local government officials might include the following.

- Staff says to the council, “At your request, we now have available a comprehensive parks and recreation master plan, and for your consideration we would like to develop a five year capital improvements budget to implement it.”
- A budget shortfall leads the chief administrative officer to consider layoffs. One of the alternatives presented to council is to make any layoffs based on job performance of the employees.

Representation as a value is based on the understanding that elected officials represent citizens in the absence of direct democracy. It is what leads citizens to think that their elected officials will listen to them and elected officials to go out of their way to communicate with citizens. Debates over how council members will be elected—by district or at-large or in some combination—are focused on how citizens will be represented. Common examples would include:

- Homeowners say, “We have a petition signed by 20 residents on our block requesting a stop sign at 4th and Elm.”

- A group of citizens who supported you in your last election remind you, “You pledged to hold the line on taxes and now you are talking about raising taxes. That’s not what we elected you for.”

The value of *social equity* underpins many moral arguments that council members hear. It is based fundamentally on the belief that there shall be no second-class citizens and that services shall be provided fairly. Council members realize very quickly in their terms that citizens frequently judge what is fair by lumping themselves into some group and then comparing their situation to that of another group. Examples would include:

- A representative of the neighborhood association argues that the city wants to build an addition to its motor pool on the east side of town because that’s where the poor people live. The representative says, “You wouldn’t think of putting it on the west side of town.”
- The city council, elected at-large, wants a report from the city manager on the distribution of funds for infrastructure repair. There is some concern in town that more money is going to new development compared to the older parts of town.

The last value is *individual rights*. It generally focuses on property rights or civil rights. Individual rights are protected in law, and as such they can trump the other values. The emphasis on due process in government work that goes beyond the judiciary reflects the

way this value has penetrated the thinking of government officials. It is designed to prevent capricious and arbitrary government action. An example includes:

- A new road is being built and an environmental group argues that to preserve green space the city ought to require a significantly greater setback than it presently does. The landowners along the route indicate their displeasure saying, “If the people want my land for green space, they should buy it.”

I confronted each of these examples, or similar ones, during my years on the city council.

I learned that the power of advocacy whether voiced by council members, the professional staff, or citizens lies with an ability to voice arguments in terms of these values even if the values themselves are not named.

Several observations grow from familiarity with these four values. First, each is crucial to building and maintaining a sense of community—whether in traditional terms or in terms of an organizational community internal to the city government. Second, and perhaps most important to professional staff’s understanding of the elected officials’ world is the realization that efficiency is but one of four values. Without that understanding, staff is constantly frustrated because council is looking for options that trade off the four values while staff may already have decided on what is best. Third, when they come together in public policy discussions, two or more of these values often conflict. In fact, of course, politics exists because there is no analytical way to resolve conflicts in values—ultimately it depends upon what a person believes. In terms of the four values, it depends

upon how the person weighs them. Last, because there is no way to weight these values a priori, there are no right answers to questions that involve them. Again, this is a realization that often separates the worlds of the elected official and staff. To the traffic engineer, geometric improvement of an intersection will grow out of the need for traffic safety. That will be the engineer's focus as he/she analyzes the problem and comes up with a solution that will provide the greatest good to the most people over the long run. But once the council members are told that the improvement requires taking an historic property that is the identifying feature of a neighborhood, "politics" will enter the picture. The engineer may lament that the "council may cave in to political pressure and fail to do the right thing." The council may observe that the engineer is insensitive to politics and simply does not understand that if the city wants this neighborhood to continue to have faith in its city government, and therefore the decisions that the government makes, it cannot dismiss the neighborhood's concern.

The chart below summarizes the responsibilities, values, and roles of the contemporary city management professional.

(Insert Table 1 Here)

CASE STUDY (12)

In the spring of 1997, the International Speedway Corporation (ISC), headquartered in Daytona to Beach, Florida, was searching for a site in the Kansas City area where it could construct a National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) track. ISC is the

major player in NASCAR racing; its interests include ownership of several tracks that host motor racing.

Plans called for a \$250 million facility in the metropolitan Kansas City area that eventually could accommodate 150,000 people. The project would develop some 1,000 acres, more than the combined area encompassed by Arrowhead Stadium (Kansas City Chiefs football) *and* Royals Stadium (Kansas City Royals baseball) and would require easy access from interstate highways. ISC would partially fund the project and expect the chosen city and state to finance the rest.

Dennis Hays, the CAO of the recently merged Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas, was consumed by implementation issues. The last thing he had in his mind was a racetrack fantasy. But gradually the idea began to jell, and Hays recalls, “I got to the mayor, and I remember saying, ‘Mayor, do we want this? Do we throw everything we have after it?’ She was facing a September election, and she couldn’t know how this would affect her chances to become mayor of the consolidated government. But she looked at me, and she said resolutely, ‘Yes, we are going for it.’” (13)

A clear majority of the council sided with the mayor. And then from the standpoint of learning about politics and administration, a key event occurred. Working on ICS’s timetable, Hays was required to by pass council and make decisions he never would have imagined a CAO could make without public hearings and council approval. He called a meeting at his house on a Sunday. He called the mayor and said, “I need you at my house

tomorrow!” (14) For another manager in another context, calling a meeting like this might not have seemed out of character, but clearly it was for Hays. He did what he felt was necessary, inviting his misgivings about the role he was embarking upon as a policy leader, as a cheerleader and advocate of a project he simultaneously was being asked to evaluate as a professional public administrator.

Time pressure kept Hays in front and in the limelight. At meetings where the mayor and the state’s Lieutenant Governor were present, he was the spokesperson. Only he knew the answers to the questions, and everyone deferred to him—even when he didn’t know the answers.

I interviewed Hays, the mayor, and others involved in the project, attempting to understand how a CAO could become aligned politically, administrative suicide, and still survive with plaudits and credibility. The answer, I concluded was two fold. On the one hand, Dennis Hays embodies the role of the politically neutral public administrator who would be expected to advocate for the public interest. In no way could one know Hays and think he would take a position motivated to advance his own career or standing. In one of the best stories I have heard about a city manager, the mayor described Hays as their “Mr. Rogers.” He even admitted to coming to work in a cardigan sweater from time to time. There was no one you would trust more with your children (your city)!

At the same time he was being thrust into the forefront, he was questioning his role. He was supposed to be political neutral, a person who stood in the background, who directed

from the rear. He had become the opposite. He agonized about the proper role of the CAO. His professional training provided more caution than guidance. But ultimately, if unwittingly, he found his grounding in the four values I described earlier. In his dealings, his public appearances, his inner thoughts, he respected the values of efficiency, representation, social equity, and individual rights. His actions and words respected those values, and he embodied them for the citizens and elected officials he worked with throughout the project.

Dennis Hays embarked on a community-building role through an economic development project. Securing NASCAR racing in Wyandotte County, Kansas, gave hope to a community that was once a manufacturing thoroughbred. It was suffering from the transition to a service economy. In fact, the story that sold the effort was, “It is our last chance!”

Hays’ role as leader was not one of command and control. He pulled everything together. He worked in partnership with the mayor. She handled the council, and he handled the finances. They were an unparalleled team. Her political savvy and grace deferred to his expertise. He displayed his expertise with deference to his political leaders. He was the leader, but only because he was an effective facilitator. Partnerships with the economic development community were easy to forge because the mayor, the council, and the CAO were on the same page.

With all this, what I learned most profoundly from Dennis Hays was that the enduring values of efficiency, representation, social equity, and individual rights provide the broadest base of legitimacy for a governing role, whether political or administrative. To the extent that Hays' behavior was seen as respecting these values, his claim of acting in the public's interest was more likely to be accepted, and it was.

TOOLS TO VIEW POLITICS AND ADMINISTRATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

To convey a practical, concrete understanding of the relationship of politics and administration in local government I employ three tools. The first is the concept of the psychological contract. The second is a chart that I developed that illustrates the logic of politics and administration. A third is a depiction of the gap between politics and administration.

The Psychological Contract

Any relationship can be viewed in terms of a psychological contract. It consists of four elements:

Party A has expectations of party B

Party A is willing to obligate itself in certain ways to party B in order to gain party B's compliance with party A's expectations

Party B has expectations of party A

Party B is willing to obligate itself in certain ways to party A in order to gain party A's compliance with party B's expectations

In order for a relationship to work effectively, the obligations that one party is willing to undertake must correspond to the expectations of the other.

For years, I have been asking elected officials and local government professionals to list the expectations and obligations they would find in a model relationship between a governing body and the administrative staff. What surprises me is that no matter who makes the list, it is basically the same. The elements of the model relationship are commonly understood.

Insert Table 2 Here

Because the model relationship is so well understood, when the partnership between governing body and staff is less than effective, it is due to factors other than the lack of knowledge of what the relationship should be. I have not systematically explored reasons why the relationship fails. But, I do know that incumbent elected officials when compared to the newly elected are more likely to respect staff, know the proper

relationship between elected members and staff, and to understand the value of governing body members working as a team. (15)

While the concept of the psychological contract can lead to practical exercises between governing body members and staff that can clarify actual expectations and obligations, there is another tool, a chart, that I have developed over the years to help understand the relationship between politics and administration.

Constellations of Political and Administrative Logic

I am often asked what is the proper role of elected officials and staff in council-manager government. While the terms of the model psychological contract can provide guidance, what I have learned over the years is that politics and administration is as much about the ways that people think about their work as it is they way they behave. There are constellations of political and administrative logic, when one thinks of a prototypical politician and a technically trained staff member like an engineer.

Insert Table 3 Here

I am not going to go into the details of the chart; I have done that elsewhere. (16) Since published, however, I have learned more. If I were to pick one element that would distinguish the world of politics and administration, it would be the “conversation.” I remember one time as a council member hearing from a constituent who was concerned

that the city was spending more money on the west side of town than the east side. I asked the manager how I should respond to this “story.” The next week on our desks, each council member had a report that spelled out what the city had spent on infrastructure on the east and west sides of town. Since then, I have developed the story-report logic more inclusively. The logic and emotion associated with passion, dreams, and stories are very different than those connected with data, plans/goals/ and reports. These truly are different worlds, masked because we use the same words to communicate.

The Gap between Politics and Administration

John Arnold, the former CAO of Topeka, Kansas, passed to me a nugget of his knowledge a few years ago. It explained for me the frequently heard criticisms that council members are less capable today than their predecessors. From that conversation and my own experiences as an elected official and consultant, I concluded that not only had the contemporary diversity among councils made governing more challenging, the professionals on staff had become more competent. Given these two forces, the elected officials are not getting worse; it just seems that way in large measure because the staffs are getting more proficient.

I do not think that their proficiency has to do with who is working now for government compared to their predecessors. It has to do with the education and tools available to them. The simplest example I can give to make this point has to do with revenue

projections. Our revenue projection techniques today are far more powerful than they were a generation ago. The staffs are better educated, but the tools are better as well.

The assertion is revealed in a real life contemporary example as well. In an article describing the war with Iraq, the reporters observed “While the skill of the U.S. military and a technological revolution have made it easier to win wars, building democracy, reshaping a political culture and creating new mind-sets are as complex as they ever were. (17) **need new #17 reference here (Newsweek, April 21, 2003)**

In addition, and perhaps most importantly, we have ways of conveying systematically the education and tools that staffs possess from one generation to another. One generation can build upon the learning and experience of earlier generations because it is conveyed in books, in courses, in internships, apprenticeships, in mentorships and role models as one progresses in their careers. The same cannot be said of elected officials who often time begin their term in office with virtually no prior experience directly relevant to the work of governing. Their single biggest challenge is that they are working with the value conflicts discussed above on incredibly challenging problems without the benefit of hierarchy to help them resolve differences.

Insert Table 4 Here

Looking at the psychological contract and the two charts, one observation becomes very clear—the role of the city manager truly is facilitative. When the terms of the

psychological contract are misaligned, it is the responsibility of the CAO to initiate a conversation about alignment. When council and staff seem to be talking passed each other, it is the CAO's job to translate. And, when staff seems to be getting ahead of the council, it is the manager's job to provide a bridge.

CONCLUSIONS

The position of city manager is unique in that it stands at the nexus of politics and administration. On the one hand, the city manager bridges the worlds of the elected official and technically trained staff. But on the other hand, as seen in the case study, the manager embodies the relationship and in the embodiment must struggle with a sense of professional identity.

As city and county managers live their lives, they daily engage the classic question of what should be the proper relationship between politics and administration. It is not an abstract question for them; it is real, and as they gradually challenge themselves to answer the question, they find themselves growing, not only professionally but, I suspect, personally as well.

ENDNOTES

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(17) **add reference here**

Table 1

Summary of Responsibilities, Roles and Values

Responsibilities	Roles	Values
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community building• Modernizing the organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Facilitate• Build partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Efficiency• Representation• Social equity• Individual rights

Table 2

The Model Relationship Between Council and Staff

What the governing body expects from the staff	What the staff expects from the governing body
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No surprises • Communicate in lay terms • Be conscious of community values and sensitive to them • Make sound recommendations (reliable, professional, factual, unemotional) • Demonstrate commitment to the organization and the community • Understand the value of citizen trust of our local government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad policy direction as opposed to involvement in day-to-day decisions • Respectful consideration for professional judgment and the staff personally • Trust that staff's motives are oriented towards the public good • Provide freedom and resources to carry out our mission • Speak as a body
Obligations of the governing body to the staff. What will the governing body contribute to the staff?	Obligations of the staff to the governing body. What will the staff contribute to the governing body?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Back up the staff • Trust staff's recommendations • Respect staff expertise, training, and knowledge • Provide latitude in carrying out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do our job skillfully and with integrity • Provide the best professional recommendations • Encourage community input

<p>goals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Educate the community• Communicate our priorities as a body	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maintain a professional demeanor• Demonstrate our commitment to the city and community• Identify policy issues and take them to the governing body• Be responsive to governing body needs and requests• Provide best practices and benchmark with high quality peer institutions• Provide a range of options and explain consequences of policy recommendations• Educate the council
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Table 3

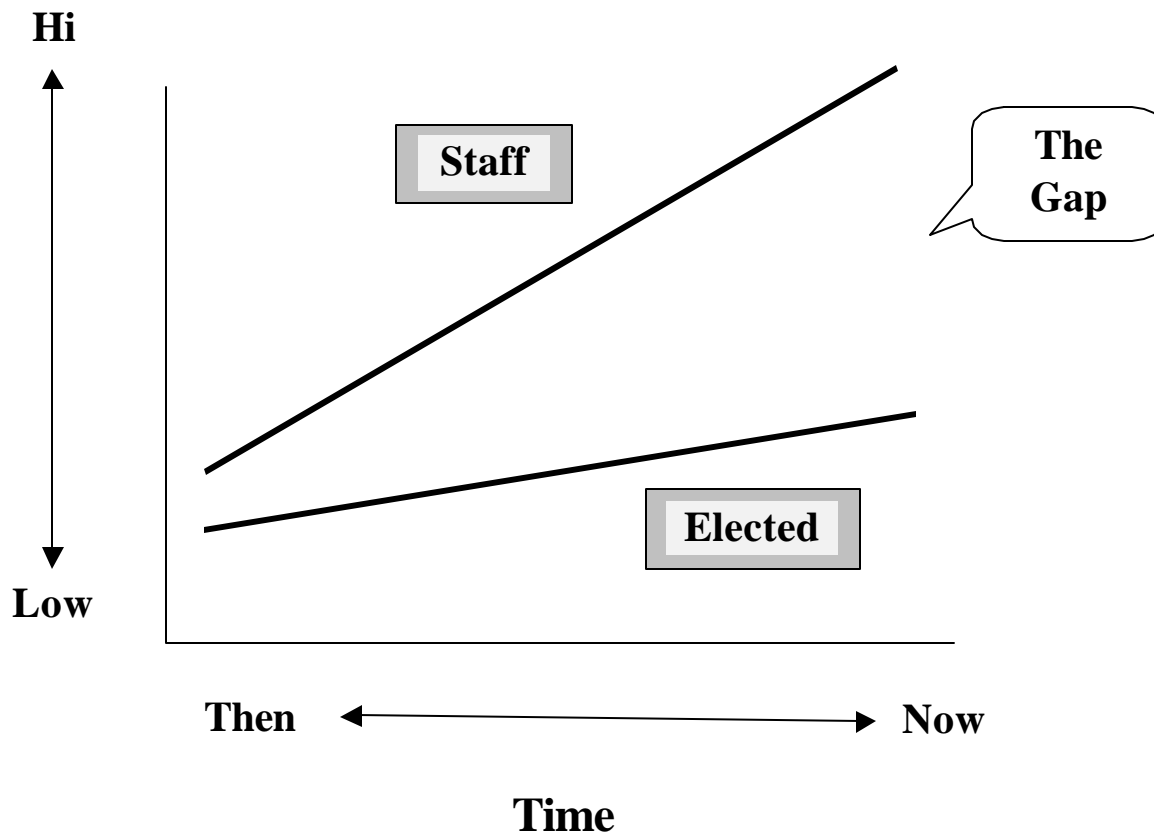
Characteristics of Politics and Administration

Characteristics	Politics		Administration
Activity	Game/Problem Solving		Problem Solving
Players	Representatives		Experts
Conversation	“What do you hear?” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passion • Dreams • Stories 	← CAO, Senior Staff, and Elected Official →	“What do you know?” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data • Plans/goals • Reports
Pieces	Intangible: Interests and symbols		Tangible: Information, money, people, equipment
Currency	Power (stories)		Knowledge (deeds)
Dynamics	Conflict, compromise, and change		Predictability, cooperation, and continuity

Table 4

Gap between Professional and Political Learning*

Learning



*Credit to John Arnold, CAO, Topeka, KS