

President's column

By Tim Houle, MCMA President, Administrator, Crow Wing County

I hate being taken for granted so I want to start my first column as the president of this august association by thanking all of you for allowing me to serve in this capacity this year—it is truly an honor and a privilege—something I will not take for granted.

Despite hating being taken for granted, I find that I get a lot of that in my life. I have teenagers in my home and, let me tell you, no one can take you for granted more than the proverbial little birds in the nest with the beaks chirping and pointing upward as you bring home the worms. Thankfully, and I want to state publicly (!!), my wife does not take me for granted, which (hint, hint to the females with partners out there) makes me want to do more things for her.

This notion of being taken for granted also shows up at work in the continuing denigration of public service, where it seems that beating up on government is a blood sport with the palliative effect on the population not unlike what the Colosseum Games in ancient Rome were designed to do. Tocqueville noted long ago that Americans have a healthy distrust of their government, also noting the degree to which every citizen had an opinion and was rarely reluctant to share it.

I found this definition of taking something for granted: “to expect something to be available all the time and forget that you are lucky to have it.” I know when I turn on the light switch, the light will come on—I don't think about it, it just is. I know when I pick up the phone, there will be a dial tone and I can dial whatever number I want and I'll be connected—I don't think about it, it just is. And when I flush the toilet, or it snows, or I turn on my tap, or there's a fire, or a loved one is critically injured, or my mother can't live independently anymore, I know that these things will be efficiently and effectively handled. I don't think about it, it just is.

The upside of the recognition that we are taken for granted is that, by its very definition, you represent something that people are lucky to have. We see glimpses during which

people will openly express their thankfulness for what we do—the outpouring after 9/11, a cop returning a lost kid to his mother's arms—but those are few and far between.

So why would we do something that is so frequently minimized? The answer for each of us, of course, lies somewhere inside of us and probably varies for each of us. For some maybe it was as simple as a steady paycheck and good benefits. The literature would tell us that more of us value things like altruism and service to others more than most.

Truly, I think the answer for me lies in why I would put up with the same from my teenagers: while I am frequently not top of mind to them, they know that when they need me, I will be there for them because that's how much I care. I have made it a hallmark of my professional career, standing in front of chambers of commerce, in front of county boards, and in front of employees to talk about the value of public service and the hard-working, dedicated group of professionals—including all of you—with whom I have had the privilege and honor to serve for two different counties spanning 20 years.

The fact is that we are like the dial tone on the phone or the electricity coursing through the wires of our house: we are taken for granted. But—like when the power goes out or the phone goes dead—if the roads don't get plowed, the tap turns dry, the toilet doesn't flush, the house burns down, the injured receive no help, or my mom becomes homeless, then, to be sure, we will be thought of, and not lightly. There is a gravitas to what we do that is so fundamental that I often refer to it as supplying the foundation for a civilized society.

I know by now that my teenagers will be who they are and that the public will be who they are. That doesn't stop me from trying to teach where honor and valor belong in those collective experiences. In fact, I think that's one of the reasons I put up with it in the first place. ○

New board member profile: Dianne Miller

Dianne Miller grew up in Burnsville, Minnesota, and received her bachelor's degree in public administration from St. Mary's University. She went on to earn her master's degree in public administration from the University of Kansas.

Dianne discovered her passion for public service and community engagement through experiences such as working with the Red Cross, interning with local communities, and wielding an ax to dig trenches for water pipes in Guatemala. Her formal career began in the City of Overland Park, Kansas, during graduate school. She then had the privilege of beginning her full-time local government career in the City of Eagan in 2001, where she continues to serve today as assistant city administrator.

Dianne is married to Justin, who is the city administrator of Mendota Heights. They recently celebrated their 10th wedding anniversary and are blessed with three spirited daughters: Karen (7), Julianne (5), and Elizabeth (1), along with Sherman, a neurotic but lovable Goldendoodle.

Away from the office, Dianne is a bit of a sports junkie and typically can be found on the sidelines of her kids' soccer games, cheering on the KU basketball team, or in the yoga studio. She is looking forward to her time on the MCMA Board and welcomes any and all suggestions from each of you. ◻

Minnesotan to serve on ICMA Credentialing Advisory Board

Jamie Verbrugge, city manager of Brooklyn Park, has been appointed by ICMA President Simon Farbrother to a three-year term on the Credentialing Advisory Board (CAB). As a member of the CAB, Jamie will be reviewing applications and annual professional development updates from members, as well as recommending future policies to guide the credentialing program. His term begins at the ICMA conference in Charlotte, North Carolina. ◻

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**Your Range Riders
are here to help!**

What I have learned so far

By Craig A. Waldron, former City Administrator, Oakdale

As I get ready to head into a new position at Hamline University as a full-time faculty member, I wanted to look back on what I have learned in public administration over the past decades that is particularly helpful to our profession. I have boiled it down to 11 basic perceptions that I hope you find to be insightful and useful.

1. **Public service is a calling.** I cannot conceive of anything I would rather do in life than public service. I still remember Kennedy's clarion call: "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." Each and every day we get the chance to make a positive difference in people's lives and in our communities. I am fortunate that I have very much enjoyed coming to work!
2. **Be ready for the swamp and ambiguity.** Public service is clearly not formula driven; the ground below us is forever shifting. One day, we are on solid ground and the next day, standing in the same place, we discover quicksand in the swamp. If you get comfortable with the ambiguity of the swamp, you will be successful in public service.
3. **Ethics and trust.** We must always be ethical and we must always tell the truth. Ethics is the very core foundation of public service. If we function in an ethical manner, it clearly enhances our professional capacity. A corollary of ethics is trust. In the swamp of public service there is no magic bullet; trust is as close as we can get. The public needs to trust us, our council needs to trust us, and our staff needs to trust us.
4. **Politics with a small "p."** There is no way to escape the day-to-day politics of our job. Believing you can be effective, yet not have an understanding of politics, will make for a very frustrating career. Politics pervade virtually every segment of our day-to-day work life. The trick is to understand politics and to exercise your own political savvy for the public good without being obvious about it.
5. **Turning 85—your legacy.** In recent research, 85-year-olds were interviewed about their lives and were asked what they would have "done differently." One of the most substantial elements noted was that they wished they would have left a more significant legacy. Well, my friends, choosing the calling of public service and making a difference in people's lives, day after day, will easily establish a proud legacy for you. It is interesting to observe a number of my Baby Boomer friends in the private sector starting to look back wondering if they really made a difference. Needless to say, my colleagues in public service will not have to worry about leaving a legacy.
6. **Learning from crucibles and failure.** We have to accept the fact that we are going to have difficult times and crucibles in our lives whether it be professional, family, health, etc. Our true test is getting back up off the ground after a crucible, learning from it, and moving forward in a positive, highly enlightened fashion. If we properly reflect, I am convinced of Nietzsche's statement, "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger." (Plus, if you don't fail at some point, you aren't really doing anything!)
7. **Look to your own heart.** We assume that since we're doing the public's work, everybody is going to be lined up at our door to pat us on the back for making their lives better. That's only going to happen in very rare circumstances. We in the profession need to look to our own hearts for reinforcement. Are we doing the right thing? Did we make a difference? Was that decision good for our community? You become your own reinforcement mechanism, not necessarily your elected officials or your local citizens.
8. **Defend public service.** This has been one of my concerns over the long term. We are constantly told that we should run government like a business and

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simply mimic every aspect of the private sector. Yes, I fully admit we can learn a lot from the private sector in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. However, in the public sector, we have much to be proud of, particularly where we are striving to make a difference in people's lives as opposed to simply looking at the world through profit-making lenses. At our level, public employees are more highly educated and represent a higher percentage of knowledge workers, while earning less than the private sector. I also find the discussion interesting on how we need to always duplicate the efforts of the private sector, and the private sector is far superior to the public sector. I wonder whether anyone has paid attention to the GM ignition crisis or Bank of America's \$4 billion accounting loss?!

9. **Stay in shape.** Maintaining our physical condition is extremely important. When one is young, conditioning is needed for stress management; when one is middle-aged, conditioning is needed to maintain energy levels; and when one is older, not only do you need to stay in shape for the required energy levels, you basically need to be in shape for health and survival purposes. Five years ago, when I had my little "brain drain" situation, I was very fortunate going into surgery that I didn't have a lot of other health issues, such as blood pressure, diabetes, etc., which, in turn, led to a reasonably quick recovery. And here I am, still alive and on the job five years post-surgery!

10. **Continue life-long learning: Maintain an open system.** I am a great believer that we need to keep reading and keep current even when we are done with formal schooling. I believe that the Salverda groups, Craig Rapp's True North, etc., are essential to keeping us well-informed and intellectually prepared. Also, I would encourage you to take a class from time to time (preferably at Hamline!). As has been pointed out by Drucker, some of the greatest breakthroughs in our field have come from outside of our respective discipline. Unfortunately, as one reaches my age, one starts to circle the wagons and essentially develop a closed system where we are no longer "open" to new ideas, thoughts, proposals, etc., that conflict with our world view. Don't go there! It is critical that we don't circle the wagons, and that we continue to maintain an open system in our lives.

11. **Don't burn bridges.** Minnesota is a small state and, over time, we all know each other and seem to be interrelated. Someone can make a remark in Fairmont and by the end of the day it surfaces in Grand Marais. It is important to maintain and enhance relationships as they will continually circulate in and out of our lives.

I continue to look forward to working with all of you through my new position at Hamline. I cannot tell you how honored I am to be associated with all of you in the public service profession. Please continue to do as Steve Jobs suggested and make that "dent in the universe." ◻

Farewell to a good friend

Paul Sparks, ICMA/MCMA Range Rider and former city manager, Albert Lea, passed away on June 3 following many, many years of living successfully with cancer. His positive spirit and optimism about life were evident right up to the end.

Paul served a very long and distinguished 27 years in Albert Lea from 1977 through 2004. Following he was the city's economic development coordinator for three additional years. Paul is a past president of MCMA (1990-1991) and past member of the Board of Trustees of the League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust. He was also one of the early Range Riders in our state, serving as a confidential listener and giver of sound professional advice to many of our members.

Paul's leadership of our profession will live on as a legacy and gift to local government management in Minnesota. ◻

Teacher's Achievement Award

By Mike Ericson, City Administrator, Landfall

On June 23, 2014, Goodhue County Commissioner Dan Rechtzigel was in attendance at the regularly scheduled Goodhue County Board meeting in Red Wing. Dan is a lifelong resident of Goodhue County, and also happens to be a social studies teacher at Kenyon-Wanamingo High School. Dan noticed a few of his fellow teachers and family members as they entered the county boardroom.

What Dan did not know was he had been nominated for the MCMA Teacher's Achievement Award by Goodhue County Administrator Scott Arneson, and Dan's colleagues and family were there to share in the excitement as the award was presented to him.

Dan teaches honors American government and takes great pride in bringing government into the classroom. He invites the Goodhue County Board to the Kenyon City Hall to conduct a live board meeting and he

has his students attend the meeting as part of their curriculum. Dan is an engaged and enthusiastic teacher, who strives to provide students with the opportunity to observe local governmental practices and procedures.

The MCMA Teacher's Achievement Award recognizes teachers who have an effective and engaging program that encourages students to participate in or learn about their local government. Dan's life-long devotion to teaching and public service record as a Goodhue county commissioner made him an easy choice, according to MCMA Education and Outreach Committee member Mark Nagel.

MCMA President Tim Houle, Crow Wing County Administrator, stated, "We are so fortunate to have teachers who care about sharing the knowledge of local government with our students and supporting the professional work of city and county administrators around the state of Minnesota." ◻

Appointments and other professional news

- **Chuck Ahl**, city manager, Maplewood, has retired.
- **Richard Almich**, city administrator, Le Sueur, has retired.
- **Mark Bernhardson**, city manager, Bloomington, has announced his retirement for the end of 2014.
- **Mike Funk**, city administrator, Minnetrista, is in transition.
- **Nick Haggemiller**, city administrator, Howard Lake, has been appointed city administrator, Northfield.
- **Steve Mielke**, city administrator, Lakeville, has been appointed director of physical development, Dakota County.
- **Ed Shukle**, city administrator, Jordan, is in transition.
- **Jenelle Teppen**, assistant city administrator, Inver Grove Heights, has been appointed city administrator, Le Sueur.
- **Craig Waldron**, city administrator, Oakdale, has been appointed to the public administration staff at Hamline University.

Reaching the MCMA Secretariat

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Memorandum from the edge

By Jon Hohenstein, Community Development Director, Eagan

I couldn't remember who was supposed to have said, "Moderation in all things, including moderation." So I looked it up and it turns out it was Oscar Wilde. He also said, "Anyone who lives within their means suffers from a lack of imagination." Some kiddo, that Oscar Wilde.

I also couldn't remember why I was trying to remember that either, but when you search online for moderation, you may run across temperance (one of the seven virtues) and its antonym gluttony (one of the seven deadly sins). In fact, you might find a list of the seven deadly sins and seven virtues, something like this:

- Gluttony-Temperance
- Greed-Charity
- Sloth-Diligence
- Wrath-Patience
- Envy-Kindness
- Pride-Humility
- Lust-Chastity

We live our lives along a continuum between each pair, hoping we are on the right side of the spectrum, but realistically, there is a gravitational pull to the left. For example, in my case, temperance is locked in a running gun battle with frosting. That is not unique to me though. My end-of-life directive states, "When my time comes, cover me in frosting and put me on the file cabinet in the back of our office. I'll be gone by the middle of the afternoon."

There is a fair amount to mine in that list, and I expect to come back to it in the future. For the time being, I will just note whenever I find myself getting prideful, life has a way of reminding me of all the reasons I have to be humble. But back to Oscar Wilde or, better yet, back to moderation.

I have read a number of diet books in recent years. To be fair, I have read some articles about a number of diet books, and I watched part of an infomercial for a product I decided not to buy. For the heck of it, though, I called the 800 number and asked why they thought it was easier to make four

easy payments than one, since doing something once is inherently easier than doing it four times. After a few minutes of what I considered to be playful banter during which the customer service representative tried to explain away the flaws in the logic and rationalize the concept, he suggested I was not a serious customer and was wasting his time. I agreed with his first point, but felt I had to have added so much fun and value to his day, I disagreed with the second. I believe what happened next went down on his log sheet as "call discoed by CSR."

So during the extensive research outlined above, I found a number of experts, faddists, and outright quacks made the same point that trying to follow a diet perfectly leads inevitably to failure. Try telling that to Jewish people who keep kosher. Oy, the trouble you'll cause!

For the rest of us, though, it's a reasonable point. I am an inveterate backslider and I may as well not bat in any one-strike-and-you're-out deal. I am reasonably certain the large majority of the population is in the same boat. But if you expect to slip now and then or even plan to have a treat on occasion, it likely will make it easier to moderate in the long run.

And I am all about pragmatism. Interestingly, pragmatism and idealism are not on the list above, probably because practitioners of each view their own approach as virtuous and the other as sinful. And while ideals are essential, the perfect is often the enemy of the good, and I have enough troubles without cooking up any new ones putting too sharp a point on the pencil. I'm also beginning to stack aphorisms on top of metaphors and pretty soon we'll be stuck with an enigma inside a conundrum, which is never a good thing.

So instead, let's end where we began, quoting Oscar Wilde, who said, "True friends stab you in the front." ◻

**Be sure to
check out
MCMA's
website:**

www.mncma.org