

President's column

When life throws you curve balls

By Shaunna Johnson, MCMA President, City Administrator, Waite Park

"Sometimes we let life guide us, and other times we take life by the horns. But one thing is for sure: no matter how organized we are, or how well we plan, we can always expect the unexpected." – Brandon Jenner

I have always been a bit of a perfectionist and an overachiever; growing up, I always strived to do things not only right, but perfectly. In college, I convinced myself that if I worked hard enough in my career, I could have the "perfect life" with the perfect husband, family, and home. I would have a great job and make more money than I would ever imagine needing. My life was going to be perfect, just how I imagined it. This is how life is supposed to be, right?

While life has treated me well over my almost 42 years, I certainly was naive in my thinking of how things were supposed to be. Being married for 20 years and having four boys has certainly been a true test of this perfect life scenario. No matter how much I try to be organized or prepared for every situation, life continues to throw me curve balls that I can never seem to anticipate or expect.

Sunday, April 4, 2016, is a great example. My husband and I were at our neighbor's talking about our home remodeling project, and our neighbor received a phone call that, by the look on her face, was not good. I knew that her son and my son were both together, so adrenaline and fear were starting to take over.

As I looked at her, I noticed two of my boys running over to the house with my cell phone. My heart sank and I knew something was wrong. It was my son Wyatt on the phone. As I grabbed the phone, I could tell in his voice that something terrible had happened. The first words he mumbled were, "Mom, I am okay!" Words every mother wants to hear until there is a BUT in that sentence. He continued on to say, "But, we were in a car accident and rolled Levi's

truck! I'm in the ambulance as I'm kind of cut up and I'm going to have to go in and get checked out!"

I was relieved that he and the others involved were OK. But as a mother, I wasn't going to accept that until I could see for myself that he was really OK. We all headed to the scene of the accident, a short trip that seemed like an eternity to reach. As we reached the scene, we saw the remains of Levi's Ford pickup. I then ran to the ambulance as it was hard for me to imagine that those boys could really be OK with the looks of what was left of that truck. The ambulance door opened, and my son and his friend were both inside with cuts bandaged up that needed a few stitches. The EMT told us that the boys would be OK and that he could release the boys to us as long as we got them checked out. We spent the remaining balance of the night in the ER and left there counting our blessings knowing that a few stitches to the eye and some staples in the head are manageable, considering how much worse it could have been.

The perfect life I thought I had planned for myself never prepared me for dealing with situations such as this. As your kids are growing up before your eyes, each stage of their life presents you with new challenges that you can never prepare yourself for, as do different stages of your own life. When things are going very well in your life, you tend to become complacent, and it sometimes can be even more overwhelming when something like this happens. For me and my husband, this is only one example of many that we have had raising four boys. Most of the scariest moments in our lives with our kids have been with our son

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Wyatt. He's the child with 9 lives and as a result, I am a mom who believes I will have a special place in heaven one day.

These unexpected life occurrences happen every day to every one of us, in both our personal and professional lives. While we are well-educated and trained in our profession, there are many things that we cannot control or anticipate. Careers in city management throw us curve balls. Sometimes we are prepared to deal with them; sometimes we are not.

The statistics from ICMA tell us that in 2012 the average tenure of city managers (administrators) was 7.3 years in one position, and the average longevity in the profession is 19.3 years. These numbers have increased over the years, but the fact remains that many of us throughout our careers will change jobs a couple of times if we choose to stay in the profession, which often means uprooting our families and starting over. Many of these moves can be career advancements and great opportunities, while others are the result of a very public and political separation between a city or county and the manager. They often are unexpected and come with little warning or anticipation.

How do we prepare ourselves for these types of curve balls? Our MCMA Board has focused our attention on this very issue. What can we do as an organization to prepare our members for these types of events? While this discussion will continue into our next year with our Membership and Recognition Committee, there are some things that we want to point out that we believe will be helpful to each of you.

Review your employment contract language. Many managers have employment contracts, but some of you may not. It is important to consider the terms of your employment agreement, whether it be in a specific contract or not. What types of benefits would you receive if your employment was terminated—do you know? When was the last time you looked at your contract? Have you compared your contract to others?

MCMA is looking at ways that we can share employment contracts among our members and other ways that we can begin this dialogue. We believe it would be useful for all of us, whether we are just starting out in the profession, mid-career, or nearing retirement. Managers at any level should

review these terms and understand how they could impact them. Often, it is easier to negotiate terms prior to your employment, but there are other opportunities throughout your employment where looking at these terms could be beneficial. Many of us are not always good about how we go about doing this, and the MCMA Board believes that our members can certainly help each other in this area if we create the venue to do so.

Review your resume and sharpen your interview skills. One of my graduate professors shared with me that he interviews for jobs on a regular basis. He shared that he has been offered all sorts of positions, from a JC Penny store manager position to a variety of others. He did not do this because he wanted the jobs, but to sharpen his interview skills and resume. While this has stuck with me, I have not personally applied and interviewed for jobs that I have not intended to accept if offered. Still, his point is very relevant to all of us. We need to be prepared and keep our resumes up to date and practice interviewing. We have great resources in all of our MCMA members where doing these types of things and reaching out to one another for assistance is possible.

Make separation agreements available to members. There are many examples of separation agreements among our members that can be helpful to any of us if we are ever in this situation. MCMA is looking at how we might be able to keep a library of these types of agreements for our members. The Membership and Recognition Committee has also met with our legal counsel to discuss this very topic. While each individual situation may be different, there are many examples of successful terms members have been able to negotiate. Having these things easily available to members will be helpful if the situation ever arises.

Reach out to Senior Advisors and other members. MCMA has added more Senior Advisors to be available to our members who may need assistance or advice. We encourage all members to reach out to them at any time. They are an asset to all of us and have a great deal of experience and expertise that can be valuable. Check out the MCMA website for their contact information and the areas that each of them serve.

In addition to reaching out to our Senior Advisors, it is important to reach out to other members of MCMA. Our organization's

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greatest asset is its members. Attending MCMA events or volunteering on a committee provide you with opportunities to network and get to know other managers across the state. Developing these relationships early on will provide you with great opportunities to strengthen your skills as you learn from others and can lean on them when needed.

Reaching out to others who may need your assistance is also important. We all face struggles or challenges throughout our career, and knowing that others have reached out to you to offer their support is both valuable and meaningful. Make that phone call to a member that you have heard is going through some challenges. It will make a difference to them.

Keep your eyes and ears open. Do you have any special projects within your community that you are looking for someone to complete? Is there a job in your community for which one of our colleagues may be a good fit? We have opportunities in our communities both internally and externally that we can share with our colleagues who are seeking employment opportunities. We just need to reach out to them and let them know they are available. Our secretariat officer, Kevin Frazell, is a great resource and maintains a list of our members who may be

looking for employment. He can help connect you with members.

As we all continue to live our lives, it is important to remember that life will throw us curve balls. Some we will be prepared to handle and others we will not. We need to do what we can to prepare for these situations. In the case of my son, I plan to invest in bubble wrap! In the case of my career, I plan to take my own advice and make sure that I am as prepared as I can be for some of these situations.

I choose not to live life in fear of what could happen, but rather live my life to its fullest accepting what curve balls will be thrown at me. While my perception of a perfect life has not turned out quite like I imagined, it has so far been full of blessings, challenges, and joy as I watch four boys grow up into young men, enjoy a career that I am passionate about, and have a husband by my side every step of the way. I remind myself every now and then of a quote from Laura D. Field: "Life is not about how many curve balls you encounter, but rather adjusting your perspective to effectively handle each curve in life."

It has been my pleasure to serve as your MCMA President this year. I am thankful for the opportunity, the connections with colleagues I have made, and being part of an organization that is committed to excellence in public service. ◻

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**Your
Senior
Advisors
are here
to help!**

Highlights from the Midwinter Regional Conference

By Brian Gramentz, MCMA First Vice President, New Ulm City Manager, and Steve Taylor, MCMA Secretary-Treasurer, Sherburne County Manager

The Wisconsin City/County Management Association & ICMA Midwinter Regional Conference took place March 2-4 with more than 200 attendees. Following is a summary of the interesting sessions presented.

- **Finding and Recruiting a Diverse Workforce.**

This session focused on why a diverse workforce is so important and the associated benefits. Discussion focused on how to recruit talent that complements the existing organization and the importance of your organization reflecting that of your community. The session was led by Pat Martel, ICMA president and city manager of Daly City, California, and Stan Davis, president of The Davis Group, who both believe that balanced organizations are better organizations.

- **Emerging Leader Session—Conversation with Bob O’Neill: Navigating the Next Big Thing.** Bob talked about a range of thought provoking issues. Some of his messages included:

- We as local government managers are always attempting to “narrow the gap between what is politically acceptable and administratively effective.” Great quote!
- O’Neill performed a study from November 2010 (birth of Tea Party era) to January 2013, which looked at all national local referendums, i.e., authorizing new revenue or new authority or any new major expenditure. This was obviously during a particularly difficult economic and political period. He found that 76 percent of the referendums passed because there is trust at the local community level, and people are willing to make the local community better.
- High performers—how do they look at the world? O’Neill said all the literature he has read indicates that local government settings should be the No. 1 place high performers would want to work because:
 1. Local government is where you can MAKE A DIFFERENCE.
 2. High performers want recognition, but not a plaque, from those who matter, like a mentor or a professional association.
 3. High performers value you when you invest in them from a training perspective or give them work outside of their job description.

- **Session on Effective Meetings.** This session was based on a book by Patrick Lencioni titled *Death by Meeting*. The presenter said only 15 percent of your time should be spent in meetings. And there should be four types of meetings: (1) daily check-in, (2) weekly tactical, (3) monthly strategic, and (4) quarterly off-site review.

The daily check-in is a schedule-oriented, administrative meeting that should last no more than five or 10 minutes. The purpose is simply to keep team members aligned and to provide a daily forum for activity updates and scheduling.

The weekly tactical meeting is what most people have come to know as staff meetings. These should be approximately an hour in length, give or take 20 minutes, and should focus on the discussion and resolution of issues that affect near-term objectives. Surprisingly, these work best if there is no pre-set agenda.

The monthly strategic meeting is the most interesting kind of meeting for leaders, and the most important indicator of a company’s strategic aptitude. It is the appropriate place for big topics, those that will have a long-term impact on the business.

The quarterly off-site review is an opportunity for team members to step away from the business, literally and figuratively, to reassess a variety of issues: the interpersonal performance of the team, the company’s strategy, etc.

- **Session on the ICMA Code of Ethics, specifically feedback on Tenet 3 and Guidelines.** There has been some discussion already, and likely more to come regarding whether it is still relevant, or what could be added or deleted to make it more in touch with the times. Given the number of questions the ICMA staff deal with regarding seeking employment, ICMA focused on that area. ICMA spent time debating what a bona fide employment offer was, and whether it makes a difference if it is written or verbal. How does an employment agreement fit into the timeline? ICMA will continue to work on updating the Code of Ethics in the near future. ◻

ICMA Annual Conference: September in Kansas City— give it a try!

The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) Annual Conference happens in Kansas City, Sept. 24-28. Registration will open in June. Especially if you've never attended an ICMA conference before, the nearby Midwestern location may make it the year you should go.

Airfares to Kansas City are reasonable, usually just a little over \$200 round trip. But with the convention center located literally two blocks off I-35, many may find the 7-8 hour drive from Minnesota an affordable travel option, especially if traveling with others.

As usual, MCMA will hold a Monday evening dinner at the conference. We'll be dining at Lidia's Italian restaurant located in Kansas City's Crossroads District. Lidia's is about a mile from the convention center and easily accessible on Kansas City's brand new streetcar. Registration for the dinner will be sent out later in the summer. Learn more about Lidia's at www.lidias-kc.com. ○

Reaching the MCMA Secretariat

For MCMA Secretariat services, contact:

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You can also contact Kate Brenna,
Administrative Assistant, at kbrenna@lmc.org.

Both Kevin and Kate can be reached at (651) 281-1200.

Board meeting recap

The MCMA Board of Directors met Jan. 28 in St. Cloud and April 1 in Elk River. Highlights of those meetings include:

- Appointed Mankato City Manager Pat Hentges to a vacancy on the Professional Development Committee.
- Reviewed the work of the Recognition and Membership Committee to improve MCMA support for our managers in transition.
- Reviewed and made decisions about the annual conference, including moving the annual business meeting to occur during the Thursday dinner.
- Adopted a fiscal year 2017 budget of \$167,000, which includes food costs at the annual conference and the revenues and expenses of APMP. The adopted budget also continues three local government internship stipends of \$3,500 each and two \$1,000 travel/hotel stipends for members who have never attended an ICMA annual conference to go to Kansas City in September. ○

Appointments and other professional news

- **Jim Elmquist**, county administrator, Dodge County, has been appointed city administrator, Crest Hill, Illinois.
- **Gordon Heitke**, city administrator, Baxter, is retiring in May.
- **Rick Juba**, city administrator, Oak Grove, has been appointed assistant city manager, White Bear Lake.
- **Kelcey Klemm**, city manager, Perham, has been appointed city administrator, Detroit Lakes.
- **Bill Lavin**, city manager, Granite Falls, has announced his retirement, effective Aug. 1.
- **Ben Martig**, city administrator, Marshall, has been appointed city administrator, Northfield.
- **Michael Redlinger**, city manager, Moorhead, is in transition.
- **Jessica Seibert**, Metropolitan State MPA student, has been appointed city administrator, Sandstone. ○

Memorandum from the edge

By Jon Hohenstein, Community Development Director, Eagan

If you have not heard about my retirement yet, you must not have been visited by a “little bird.” Apparently it is no longer possible to simply say, I heard you are retiring. Or, is it true you are retiring? It is necessary to attribute the news to some source and the one most often cited in recent months has been a small, gossip-mongering bird. Either that or it’s the way hipsters say they read a tweet. I’m not exactly current on social network stuff. The first few times I saw emojis, I thought someone had sneezed on my screen.

Some have asked why now, and I fight the urge to quote John “Brother Bluto” Blutarski by barking a boozy, “Why not?!” I am retiring because I have come down with a terminal condition. Lately, I’ve begun to realize that I am right about things almost all the time. This by itself is not fatal. A lot of people in our profession have it to some degree or other. In my case, the part of my brain that keeps me from saying I’m right is beginning to atrophy and, for local government managers, that will kill you every time.

The truth of the matter is that the stars have lined up so I can retire. The stars lined up for my wife, Cheryl, two years ago. At that time, she had a list of projects to do around the house and places she’d like to visit. She nearly has the project list done, and I like to travel, so it’s time we do that together.

A number of people have asked whether 2016 will mark my last MCMA spring conference. Are they nuts?! In my mind, the spring conference always has been like a class reunion anyway, an excuse to get away for a few days with friends to network and talk smart. Who says you have to quit coming when you graduate?

So this is not a goodbye, but instead a very honest, see you around. Nonetheless, it is a very good excuse to share a few things you may or may not want to keep in mind. They have been part of the background of my belief system, so for those who have read this column for the past 25 years, they are not bold new ideas. They are just packaged in a couple of stories for convenience. Here they are.

When I was in college, I was invited to spend the weekend with a friend and his family in New York. His grandfather thought it would be great fun to show the Minnesota farm kid around The City. He was an accomplished businessman who made his living/fortune in the garment district. He was at least 50 years older than we were, but when he took off down the street, we did our best to keep up.

We went uptown and downtown, east and west. He took us to the top of the World Trade Center for lunch and the view. That memory was my point of reference when the towers fell on 9/11.

What stuck out, though, was when we walked up Wall Street. He stopped in front of the New York Stock Exchange, stared at it for a minute, and then turned to me and said, “Kid, do you want to know the secret of being successful in business?” I’m 20 years old, being offered a lifetime’s worth of insight by someone who has clearly done very well in the biggest city in the world. Naturally, I said yes. He looked back and forth to be sure no one else was listening, leaned close and said, “Don’t deal with nincompoops.” With that, he turned and walked up the street to the next landmark he thought I needed to see.

Now he didn’t actually say “nincompoops.” He used a word for a part of the human anatomy ordinarily covered by pants, but I’m trying to share, not offend.

With that wisdom in my back pocket, what career did I choose? The most democratic business in the world, with the most unfiltered relationships you can find. You don’t get to pick and choose. Everyone is your customer, everyone is an investor, and the Board of Directors is selected by periodic elections from among citizens of a certain age that have \$25 to file to run. Now, to be clear, the vast majority of our customers, investors, and elected officials are fine, good, true, and intelligent people doing their best within our communities, but on those occasions when that is not the case, local government managers do not have the luxury of following Papa’s advice. You do your best and hope the challenging personalities are few.

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In a parallel vein, I have a favorite Christmas card. I've never actually sent it to anyone and you'll understand why in a moment. The front is a picture of three children in Victorian outfits. The caption reads, "He knows when you are sleeping, he knows when you're awake. He knows when you've been bad or good." And the inside of the card reads, "So try not to be a nincompoop!" Now it doesn't actually say "nincompoop." It uses a word for a part of the human anatomy ordinarily covered by pants.

A lot of people spend a lot of time theorizing and writing about how to be effective and successful. Over the years, we have been encouraged to self-actualize, search for excellence, adopt various numbers of habits of successful people, go from good to great, and so on. We are told to aim high and that's great, but if at the very basic level, everyone just started out trying not to be a nincompoop each day, every day, imagine the difference it would make.

It is not insignificant how these two stories fit together. If everybody works at not being a nincompoop, then everybody will get to deal with fewer nincompoops. It's mutually reinforcing, perhaps even synergistic.

And it is fitting at this time. After 25 years, this is the final Memorandum from the Edge. Since I am going to retire, it is time to retire the column as well. It's been a fun run and thank you to all of you who have enjoyed, or at least tolerated, the messages over that time. You have paid me an enormous compliment.

With that, the punctuation of Memorandum from the Edge is a simple request. When you get up each morning, look in the mirror and say, "If I do nothing else today, I will try not to be a nincompoop." That will make me very happy. ◻

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

www.mncma.org