

The President's Column

Take That Victory Lap

By Peyton Mastera, MCMA President, Dilworth City Administrator

In the early 1900s, the term “victory lap” became synonymous with the Indy 500, where victorious drivers would take a ceremonial lap around the track, allowing spectators to applaud their achievements. This tradition continues to this day in various forms across all sports.

However, celebrating achievements dates back much further than the Indy 500. For example, ancient Romans hosted elaborate parades, known as triumphus, to celebrate military conquests, culminating in a dedication to the gods. Other cultures have similarly marked moments of triumph throughout history. One image that often comes to mind is the historic celebration of U.S. soldiers returning home from World War II, with an endless sea of people in Times Square.

One of our greatest strengths as public managers is also one of our greatest weaknesses: our reluctance to celebrate our own successes.

We are trained to be humble. We are taught to say, “All credit goes to the managers and staff for making this possible,” even when, in reality, the success of a project or initiative wouldn't have happened without your hard work, leadership, and guidance. Our default response is often to shift the praise onto others, prioritizing team morale over acknowledging our own contributions. We do this to build organizational character and confidence, and for that, we should be applauded. But in doing so, we risk forgetting the importance of recognizing our own efforts.

I've always seen my difficulty in accepting praise as a weakness. In moments of success, I often focus not on the positive outcome, but on how I could have done better — for myself, my team, and the council I serve. But there is nothing wrong with taking a victory lap. Here's why:

1. Boosts Motivation and Morale

Celebrating your own success reinforces positive behavior and drives motivation. Positive reinforcement creates more positivity, and there's no better way to cultivate this than by acknowledging and rewarding your achievements. Recognizing your successes helps you stay motivated, especially during tough times, by reminding you of the rewards that come with hard work. Motivation is a powerful driver of innovation and productivity.

2. Increases Job Satisfaction

Earlier, I mentioned how we display humility by praising others, even when we played a key role in their success. We do this to add value to the employee experience and make them feel recognized and appreciated. The same principle applies to ourselves. While we may not always be in a position to publicly acknowledge our own achievements, sharing our successes with a spouse, partner, colleague, or friend can significantly boost our job satisfaction. It affirms our value and well-being, helping us stay engaged and motivated in our roles.

Appointments and Other Professional News

- **Sarah Cotton**, city administrator, Lino Lakes, has been appointed city administrator, Andover.
- **Neil Jensen**, city administrator, Cannon Falls, has retired.
- **Jon Radermacher** has been appointed city administrator, Cannon Falls.
- **Alex Smith**, assistant city administrator, Cambridge, has been appointed city administrator, Little Falls.

*Do you have a new appointment or other professional news to share?
Contact the secretariat at the information listed.*

MCMA Board Meeting Recap

By Madison Hagenau, MCMA Secretariat

The MCMA Board met on Oct. 11 and Dec. 6. Highlights of the meetings were:

- Approved ICMA Midwest Regional Nominating Agreement
- Reviewed MCMA membership levels
- Discussed plans for the 2025 MCMA Winter Workshop
- Discussed plans for the 2025 MCMA Annual Conference
- Approved sponsorship packages for the 2025 MCMA Annual Conference
- Approved 2025 Budget
- Discussed plans for upcoming strategic planning session

Reaching the MCMA secretariat

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Your senior advisors are here to help!

3. It Builds Camaraderie

Elected officials set policy, but it's our job to implement it. As a public manager, you are the tone-setter at City Hall. How you engage with your team and create a sense of camaraderie depends on the energy and dynamic you foster. By recognizing your own value and celebrating your accomplishments, you contribute to stronger team chemistry and morale. When you appreciate what you've achieved, it inspires your team to do the same.

4. Self-Reflection Leads to Growth

Taking the time to celebrate your successes encourages self-reflection. This is an essential tool for professional growth, as it helps you identify strengths, areas for improvement, and lessons learned from each accomplishment. By recognizing what went well, you can replicate those strategies in future projects, making you even more effective in your role.

5. Reinforces a Positive Organizational Image

Just as celebrating your own achievements strengthens your leadership, failing to acknowledge your successes can have the opposite effect. If you, as a manager, don't take the time to recognize your contributions, it can create a tone where others feel their efforts are undervalued as well. An organization is only as strong as its weakest link — don't be the weak link in recognizing success. It's not only important, but essential, in building a strong and cohesive organization.

Leading an organization is a balancing act. It requires recognizing the value of employees and giving them the praise they deserve, but effective managers also know the importance of job satisfaction and celebrating their own work. This profession is not for everyone. You are part of a small group entrusted with the responsibility to serve an elected body, employees, and the citizens in your community. It's crucial to celebrate not only your team's accomplishments but your own as well. So, take that victory lap. ◻

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SAVE THE DATE!

The 2025 Spring Annual
Conference will be held
at Madden's on Gull Lake
April 30–May 2, 2025!
Conference registration
will open in January!



Photo: The Minnesota Star Tribune

APMP – Fall Conference Recap

By Katie O'Connor, APMP President, Dakota County Senior Management Analyst

Thank you to everyone who attended and participated in Thrive 2024: Fostering Resilient Organizations and Employees, APMP's Annual Fall Conference that took place on Oct. 24. Some of the highlights included:

- 35+ professionals from different local government organizations attended, including eight students.
- 10+ speakers presented on a variety of topics:
 - *Professional development*: Charlene Stevens, MGT vice president; Liza Donabauer, DDA management consultant; Matt Podhradsky, Chaska city administrator; Dianne Miller, Eagan city administrator
 - *Inclusive and equitable organizations*: Hue Schlieu, New Brighton DEI coordinator; Arianna Lee, LMC DEI coordinator; Brittany Bartlett, Richfield equity coordinator; Antonio Montez, Roseville equity & inclusion manager
 - *Conversations on mental health and wellness*: Scott Marks, Minnetonka Patrol Sergeant; Kelly Froehle, Minnetonka senior social worker
 - *Succession planning*: Allison LeMay, Baker Tilly senior manager; Melinda Coleman, retired Maplewood city manager; Brad Martens, Shoreview city manager
 - *ICMA update*: Matt Fulton, ICMA Midwest regional director
- We had insightful small group discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion work.
- It was a great opportunity to network and connect with colleagues.

APMP will be hosting its annual book club starting in January, and all are welcome to join. Be on the lookout for more details about the book and discussion schedule.

Lastly, mark your calendars for our upcoming 2025 monthly membership meetings — Jan. 16, Feb. 20, March 20, April 17, and May 15. The board is working on finalizing topics, presenters, and tours.

As always, please reach out to me or the board for questions or additional information. 🗨️

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Been There, Done That!

Unsolicited Advice from Your Senior Advisors

Ace That Interview!

By Mark McNeill, Senior Advisor

Managers in Transition often reach out to the Minnesota Senior Advisors during their job searches to seek advice and guidance on how they can enhance and improve their chances of being selected for a desired position.

Our collective experience as Senior Advisors has prompted me to focus this column on how to do well in the job search and interview process. Regardless of whether or not you are currently seeking a new job, it's always good to remember the "do's" and "don'ts" when looking for that next job, especially when it comes to the all-important interview stage.

The ideas and tips included in this column may also help add value or help you in your role as an interviewer.

I spoke with former LMC Executive Director Dave Unmacht, who earlier in his career had been a headhunter for a well-known national placement company. He has conducted dozens of job searches and was happy to share his thoughts on how to successfully navigate the interview process.

Unmacht emphasized that there are several important steps in the search interview process:

Do Your Homework

The first step is to learn as much as you can about the city or county. Is this a good career move for you? How does this job fit into your long-term career plans? Would you—and your family—be happy here? Will the position meet your salary expectations? Do the issues and priorities listed in the position profile fit your skills and interests?

Be certain to check the online history of the organization. If the city council or county board meetings are televised, spend time watching past meetings. Check out the local newspaper and broadcast media—if applicable—and social media to understand what is going on in the community. Explore the website; learn as much as you can about the budget, structure, programs and services. Does the organization have frequent turnover in the position you are seeking? How well does the board or council get along with the staff, and what is their reputation?

If you are satisfied with the answers to these questions and others which you may have, the job may be a good fit for you.

Cover Letter and Resumé

Candidates often put too much emphasis in the importance of the cover letter. A three-paragraph cover letter is sufficient. The first paragraph should reflect on the community and why you are interested in working there. The second paragraph should show your connection to the community and why you would be a good fit. The final paragraph should summarize your qualifications, and how they may contact you for further information.

Proof your cover memo to make certain you are citing the correct information. If you have been applying for more than one job, cutting and pasting is an easy way to get multiple applications completed. However, inadvertently using the wrong city or county name in your correspondence is an easy disqualifier!

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The reality is the initial screener glances at your cover letter to get a sense of who you are and why you are interested in the job. Therefore, keep it brief, with no typos!

Likewise, the resumé should be effective and succinct. In almost every case, a maximum of two pages is all you need, but don't use an unreadable font size to keep the resumé length to two pages. Keep the font clear, consistent, and easy to read.

Resumés often include long lists of skills and achievements. A good rule of thumb is to list no more than three or four areas of expertise for each job, and don't repeat them—for example, if you were responsible for budget preparation in City A, you don't need to list again budget preparation in your other jobs. The reviewer will assume you still have those same skills. Most importantly, include distinct skills or achievements you accomplished in each of your roles that fit the requirements in the position profile, so the reviewer understands the depth and strength of your abilities and value in the areas important to the job you are seeking.

The main thing to remember is that your paperwork gets you in the door. Then, it's up to you to get welcomed in and invited to join the organization.

Written Answers

In the first round, candidates will likely receive several written questions seeking more specific information. When responding to the questions, keep in mind three themes: show that you have the necessary knowledge, experience, and application—as in, how I could make that happen in your community. Ensure the written responses are returned in a timely manner, and before submitting your answers have someone review your responses for grammatical accuracy.

Video Interview Round—These have largely replaced telephone screenings by the recruiter. It may be live like a Zoom call, or it may be done on your own schedule, with time parameters to respond after the questions are provided.

Regardless, be aware of projecting a professional image during the video interview. Dress appropriately, check for proper lighting, and eliminate background distractions.

Initial Round Interview

Depending on the size of the organization, this might be the first face to face interview that you have. It may be with department heads, individual members of the community, or a committee of the council or board. You may be taken on a tour of the city or county facilities by the hosts; hopefully you will already have done your homework and know more than enough about the organization. Be prepared to ask relevant questions.

Remember to consider everyone with whom you speak as being part of the interview. For example, the front desk receptionist may be a resource. If there is sufficient time, make small talk with that person and ask questions about the organization; creating a positive first impression with everyone you meet is important.

Your objective in this stage is not to win the job, but to move to the final round!

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Final Interview

This interview is likely going to be with the entire board or council. As you are being introduced, shake hands firmly, and greet each interviewer by their first name (an exception could be made for “Mr. Mayor” or “Madame Chair”).

Keep in mind that what often gets you the job is the personal connection you can make. Typically, each of the other candidates is equally well qualified and experienced. Your goal is to stand out and ensure that the councilors or board members know that you are someone whom they can trust, will enjoy working with, and want to give you the chance to lead the organization.

Show an interest in the community. If you saw that the local high school basketball team has advanced to the state tournament, let them know that. A personal connection goes a long way in helping you stand out from the other candidates.

Regarding the interview itself, you might be asked questions cold, or may have received the questions a few minutes in advance. Either way, you should be able to anticipate most of them. Interview questions are often predictable; sure, they vary sometimes, but many of them are routine and standard. If you have been let go elsewhere, be prepared for that question to come up. Have a reasonable response which doesn't blame or point fingers.

Practice and prepare for the questions that you anticipate will be asked. Unmacht highlighted that it is easy to tell when a candidate is “winging it” and when they are very organized and prepared.

Be a good time manager. If necessary, ask how much time is being allotted for the interview, and gauge your answers accordingly. A typical opening question is “Tell us about yourself, and why you want this job.” Limit your answer to a general opening question to two minutes; don't go on and on about information which was in your written material. Many candidates will lose the job by failing to make a favorable first impression (even at this stage of the interview).

If you have ties to the area, let the interviewers know that. Or, if you look at this job as a great opportunity for professional advancement, let them know that too. The important role you have is to emphasize how you fit what they are seeking in a candidate and how you can successfully lead and serve the organization and community.

Bring positive energy and life to the conversation. If you are typically softer spoken, be aware of that, and make an effort to project your voice. Make eye contact!

The typical closing question is, “Do you have any questions of us?” This is NOT the place to ask about salary, benefits, or the next steps. Research your interviewers in advance; this would be the time to ask one or two questions which are relevant to the city. (Example—you know that one interviewer is the council liaison to the regional airport authority. You could ask them about what impact the airport has on the city.)

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“A personal connection goes a long way in helping you stand out from the other candidates.”

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Be prepared with a strong closing statement. Thank them, let them know that you will be excited to work with them, and specifically ask them for the job!

Finally, be certain to send an e-mailed “thank you” to the interviewers as soon as you can and state your excitement and interest in the job. Hopefully, the recruiter, mayor, or board chair will soon contact you with good news.

It doesn't matter where you sit in the order of multiple candidates being interviewed — first, last, or in between. As long as you have a strong interview and make a favorable impression, they will remember you. It is often said that elected officials make decisions about jobs more on intuition and feel than data and analytics, so know the importance of emotion and personal connections throughout the process.

There are a lot of variables that go into an interview process; some you don't control and can't be predicted. But the art of a successful job search is making sure that you take ownership and control the parts of the process that you can impact and influence the most.

And good luck! ◻

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2025 Winter Workshop

By Noah Schuchman, Golden Valley City Manager, MCMA 2nd Vice President

On behalf of the Professional Development Committee, you are invited to join MCMA on Friday, Jan. 31, 2025, for the Winter Workshop.

Committee members have put together a program focused on how each of us can stay healthy and happy in our careers — our theme is “Going the Distance”.

The keynote — **“Be The Difference: Belonging in the Support We Need”** — will be presented by former NFL player Gaelin Elmore, who will share his personal story and lead us through a workshop session on going from surviving to thriving.

The afternoon's peer panel will be focused on MCMA members who have persevered through difficult situations. Finally, we will end the day with a networking exercise before adjourning for an optional social event at the end of the day.

This year's winter workshop will take place at CHS Field, and everyone is welcome to stay for happy hour following the conclusion of the workshop. ◻

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The Monday Morning Quarterback

By Matt Fulton, ICMA Midwest Regional Director

Note: As of Dec. 3, 2024, there are 104 members participating in ICMA's Managers in Transition program across the United States.

Hindsight is valuable when it helps you improve. It is a painful exercise to reflect on the various areas you might have focused on more before your elected body decided to “move in a different direction” and separate from you. Losing your community leadership position is a painful, humbling, and stressful experience, not only for yourself, but for your family as well. Even if you still have your job but are emotionally and professionally challenged because of the unsettled environment impacting your community and organization, wouldn't it be great to have the “Wisdom of The Crowd” and learn from leaders who have been separated from their communities and are now searching for their next professional opportunity? What might you do differently, or focus on more intentionally, to help you successfully lead your community?

This article intends to highlight **four areas of community leadership** you should consider prioritizing that originate from the collective wisdom of current managers in transition.

As ICMA Midwest Regional Director, I have the privilege of working closely with ICMA's Managers in Transition program (MIT). I am passionate about the program because I have gone through transition twice during my career. I facilitate monthly online meetings with managers interested in maintaining professional connections with colleagues going through the transition experience. It is a great support network that ICMA places a great deal of importance on.

A couple of months ago, our online discussion focused on a reflection on possible reasons members ended up in transition and what factors might have contributed to their departure. I was pretty amazed at how quickly a list of four priority targets emerged, particularly because they aligned so well with my own personal experiences.

I would like to share what came out of our “Monday Morning Quarterbacking” discussion so that all of you can do your own reflecting on how these areas are going in your community. There are so many factors that lead to letting someone go, but these priority areas are things you should be paying attention to.

1. An effective onboarding process for newly elected officials is crucial.

One election can change the direction of your community and your career. Most newly elected officials want to be effective members of the elected body. It's important to help them understand their new role and how the organization works. It is also a great opportunity to help set them up for success, including establishing a positive working relationship with you. Highlights of an effective onboarding program include:

- a. Clarify the new role of elected officials and how it fits into the organizational structure
- b. Support newly elected officials in understanding what to expect and how to operate as members of the elected body.
- c. Use this opportunity to build trust and develop a positive working relationship with your leadership staff. Help them get a feel for the culture of the organization.

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- d. Explain current priorities, strategic direction, and active projects to newly elected officials. A community tour with lead staff can be helpful.
- e. Share performance data with newly elected officials to help them understand your successes and challenges. Longitudinal data over several years is particularly beneficial for understanding performance trends.

2. Conduct annual strategic planning.

The most challenging times in my career were when the council couldn't come together on a directional plan for the community. This leads to making judgments on a fragmented mission that may not align with the majority of the elected body.

- a. Ensure the elected body meets at least once a year to discuss the community's future, agree on strategic goals, and plan long-term projects. This is a unique opportunity to set aside regular council work, align on goals, and build better relationships, including with staff.
- b. Work on developing a culture of proactive thinking and the value of planning for the future. Thinking strategically helps build a culture of thinking towards the future and how you are going to get there. If you aren't thinking proactively, you will be catching up all the time.
- c. Strategic planning provides the groundwork for budgeting. Successful communities have a strong alignment between having an approved plan and a commitment to budgeting the resources to accomplish it. This alignment is critical, and it is important to continuously tie together with your elected body, the organization, and community.
- d. Regularly keep your elected body aware of progress being made on strategic goals and priorities. Think about the most effective way to help keep your strategic goals in front of the elected body. I always provided a note in every staff report about how the item being considered tied into the strategic plan. It could be as simple as sharing regular updates on progress being made. The key is to consistently remind the elected body that the progress made over the years is directly tied to advancing THEIR goals.

3. Develop an effective engagement program with residents and community stakeholders.

If you do your job well, the public may not pay attention until something big happens. The reality in our world is that, at some point, something big will inevitably happen. Keeping community members engaged and aware of the value of services is critical for success. Building trust in decisions made on their behalf is at the core of building a strong community.

- a. Community engagement should be intentional and ongoing. It should be an organizational value, not just a project.
- b. Ensure inclusivity in engagement efforts. Engage with all segments and community groups.
- c. Be creative and transparent. Different demographic groups communicate differently, so explore new approaches and be willing to engage outside City Hall.

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4. Commit to collecting reliable performance data.

In today's climate of distrust, it's imperative to objectively detail your performance. Without data, it's difficult to support your community's claims.

- a. Maintaining a performance management program needs to be an organizational value, not a project. The best programs are those that have existed over time so that longitudinal performance data is able to be shared.
- b. Most communities default to capturing quantitative data that shows more of work output instead of work outcomes. Successful performance management programs include qualitative data that details resident perspectives on how well the community is accomplishing its goals.
- c. Be transparent, accountable, and share performance data with the community. Building community trust is such an important responsibility and sharing trusted performance data with the community is a great way to not only demonstrate your community's commitment to being accountable and transparent, but also to build confidence and trust with community members.

Leading your community is a daunting responsibility. When the elected body is aligned with a strategic direction they can commit to and trusts staff, the community is meaningfully engaged, and you have good data that substantiates your performance, there is nothing more exciting and fulfilling. Being a leader in local government is such an honorable opportunity and I suspect this is a primary driver for most of us working in this profession. It is complex and constantly changing, influenced by unpredictable factors such as social media, disruptive politics, shifts in the environment, economy, and culture, as well as national and international political debates and global events. The other reality in local government is that things take time to accomplish.

Take advantage of learning from the perspective of those who have been there and appreciate the things they could have focused on to help keep their communities moving forward. 🗨️

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