

Running Head: CITY MANAGER TURNOVER: CAUSES AND POTENTIAL  
SOLUTIONS

RESEARCH PAPER,

City Manager Turnover: Causes and Potential Solutions

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## **City Manager Turnover: Causes and Potential Solutions**

### **Experience and observation**

Turnover of town and city managers can have lasting impact on communities for a variety of reasons, including cost, loss of confidence among staff, lack of faith in government in the community, and the emotional toll on hiring committees and publicly elected officials, most of who serve on a volunteer or very low-paid basis.

My first experience with hiring a top executive to run a city was in 2008, when I was newly elected to the city council of Rockland, Maine. I had absolutely no experience hiring anyone other than perhaps a teenager to mow my lawn, but I was enthusiastic, had the energy and determination of about twenty people, and knew how to convince large numbers of people to believe in my various causes. I believed I could do anything. With excitement and anticipation, I began my first real job on the council: hiring someone who was about to earn more than my house was worth each year. Arriving home after a meeting, I dumped a packet containing forty resumes on my kitchen table, got a cup of tea, and ripped open the seal. Within ten minutes, I knew I was in trouble. I had absolutely no idea how to differentiate between the individuals behind the resumes. I didn't know how to tell what the resumes were telling me that the applicants could do or what their qualifications were. In short, every resume seemed exactly the same. No one stood out. This, I began to realize, was going to be very different than distinguishing between political candidates. How would I ever know who to get behind?

In ten years, my hometown of Rockland, Maine has gone through three city managers. But that's nothing compared to Silverton, Colorado: seven managers in ten

years, and the last manager managed to get into such hot water with the fire department that they refused to shoot off the fireworks at the community Fourth of July festivities!

In these ten years, I have learned what a city manager does, and I've also realized that it's a job I would absolutely love, because a city manager does everything that makes people's lives better without the hassle of running for political office, and the pay is a whole lot better. But, given that I have always carried some of the blame of Rockland's various city manager failings, I decided to spend some time researching failed city manager hiring processes, and I soon realized that Rockland isn't alone. Many communities are facing the same issues that we faced, and yet we didn't know that we weren't unique. As a result, I decided to find out some of the reasons this hiring process isn't working for communities, and how the process could be made better. I have been speaking to a variety of town and city managers, publicly elected officials, and professional consultants who are paid to hire city managers, as well as community members, to gain a perspective of how these stakeholders feel about the process, and what they feel could be different. I am researching documents from professional organizations for public administrators, and hope to talk to representatives from the International City Manager's Association, (ICMA) Maine Municipal Association, and the Colorado City and County Management Association (CCMA). This process is proving to be a lot more involved than I thought it would be, and it has taken me a few weeks of thinking about how to proceed with the project.

### **Types of management of towns and cities**

There are two types of municipal governance: either a council-manager form, in which a professional manager is hired (or in some cases, fired) by the city council (City of Rockland Charter, 1983), or a mayor-council arrangement, in which an elected mayor serves in the capacity of a manager. One city in Maine that functions in this manner is Portland, where Ethan Strimling is currently mayor. An interesting aspect of the mayoral-council system is that one does not necessarily have to hold a management degree. For example, Mr. Strimling's master's degree is in Education (Mayor Strimling - Brief Bio, n.d.). However, he has spent most of his life in public service, and worked for a community non-profit for much of his professional career before being elected to lead Portland.

Most advertisements for city or town managers for places that function with a professional manager specify that the manager should have some kind of public administration degree, and at least five years in a management capacity. On the International City/County Management Association website job board (ICMA Job Posts, 2017), even the tiny town of South Fork, Colorado is hopeful that they will snag someone who has a master's degree in some form of management, and who has progressively moved up in the ranks of town management over the past five years. This is in contrast to a town or city that elects its leader in the form of a mayor, and the town at large could be considered to serve as the HR department, considering that it is through the ballot box that the mayor is either hired or fired, and the mayor's continuing contact with the community and public problem solving ability is the best job insurance.

Therefore, why do towns and cities advertise for professional managers when someone just as capable with experience and foresight could perhaps be found? Why do towns and cities have such a hard time retaining professional managers?

According to Greg Schulte, retiring town manager in Pagosa Springs, Colorado, (Schulte, 2017), there are better-paying jobs out there for people who have invested the time and energy into becoming a manager, that don't involve political turmoil, job threats based on political agendas, or excessive evening meetings. A person who pursues the job of town manager must be willing to derive personal satisfaction for a job well done and consider that satisfaction as part of the compensation package. Mr. Schulte says that it's also very important for a good manager to remain without discernible opinions so that the community doesn't perceive that the manager is biased in any way toward one particular group. For example, he does not attend a church in the community or any political functions, lest anyone consider him to be of one particular religion or political party. This is in direct contrast to Mr. Strimling, who was a Democratic Maine Senator for six years, and has clearly and proudly served on many Democratic campaigns, as well as on many committees addressing left-leaning issues.

### **How Are HR Issues Handled?**

Given that it can be difficult to find a professional manager that the majority of townspeople like, outside of electing a mayor, many towns turn to using professional consultants to gather resumes, conduct background checks, check references, and engage in the types of Human Resources functions that a smaller town may not have the ability to perform in-house. Two such consultants are Don Gagnon and Dick Metivier, who work through the law firm of Eaton-Peabody, in Augusta, Maine. According to Dick

Metivier, the best way to find a good manager that everyone will work well with, and like, is for the city council or the hiring committee to do a lot of preparation before advertising for the job to be sure that everyone knows who they want. For example, if a town has HR issues pending, finding someone with HR experience is more important than someone with grant writing experience. If the town has many public works projects in full swing, it's important to try to find someone with knowledge of project management (Metivier, 2017). I worked with Don and Dick when I was on the Rockland City Council in order to hire two city managers, as the first one we did hire, my very first experience on city council, resigned after two years. Her letter of resignation stated that she had previously intended to sell her home a couple hours' commute from Rockland, and move permanently to our community, but in the course of two years, her husband had decided that he did not want to move to Rockland, and she had decided she didn't want to leave her custom-built home. However, there had been a good deal of internal friction between this manager and some members of city staff. The manager had tried to come to the council with these issues, as the council essentially functioned as the Human Resources department. None of us had any HR training, and those of us who did want to pursue a more professional resolution of her issues were overwhelmed by the political majority who did not want to address the issue. As a result, in my view the city manager did not have her issues resolved in a satisfactory manner.

What followed was that this particular city manager, while a very good collaborative worker with deep connections on many useful boards and commissions throughout the state, was viewed by staff and the public as not tough enough to do the job. I did not agree with this assessment. But, two years later, there we were again with

Don and Dick, the end result being that the council hired “a tough manager,” a former marine, thinking that a military man would provide the necessary strength and discipline to straighten out the somewhat disparate ranks of city staff. I did not agree with this assessment, but in the end voted with my colleagues because this particular candidate did appear to know how municipal infrastructure worked, whereas some of the managers we’d interviewed did not seem to have a depth of knowledge concerning large, publicly-funded projects. Rockland was in the midst of a sewer project that involved the entire Main Street being dug up and completely impassible, with the summer tourist season looming ahead.

This choice of manager similarly did not bode well for the city. He did, indeed, have a very authoritarian style of management, which immediately rubbed most city staff the wrong way. He locked down all city staff communication with council, insisting that the council should, per charter, only communicate with him and any inquiries for staff should go through him. This policy made simple matters such as emailing the code enforcement officer to ask a question on behalf of a citizen a very tedious matter. The manager then embarked on a routine inspection of all staff computers at random to ensure that no communication was going on without his knowledge. To make matters worse, he had an altercation with the Community Development Director that turned into a gender-based harassment charge resulting in the director resigning abruptly and gaining a settlement of four month’s salary and remaining benefits for the year, and a gag order in place so none of us ever knew what really happened (Betts, 2012). Not long after this event, the city manager also resigned abruptly (Betts, 2013).

What followed was a community outcry about the way in which city managers were being recruited. The people of the town turned out in droves at council meetings demanding that the city council not hire “headhunters” such as Dick Metivier and Don Gagnon again, and that individuals from within the community be tapped to find the next city manager. One of the citizens leading this charge was Louise McClellan Ruf, who eventually was elected to the city council and then appointed mayor by the other councilors, which is largely a figurative office in Rockland, as the city has a professional manager, but the position does give influence. The council elected to hire outside recruiting help in the end, but this time in the form of Dacri and Associates, rather than consultants from Eaton-Peabody.

There were differences between the ways that the two firms pursued recruiting. The consultants from Eaton-Peabody, Don and Dick, employed a more traditional means of finding candidates. They placed an advertisement on the ICMA and the Maine Municipal Association websites, advertised in a few newspapers, and then waited for candidates to send their resumes, the number of which increasingly decreased with each new scandal or resignation. They then sorted through the resumes and picked out about ten or twenty that they thought the council should see. The council picked through those, and then conducted interviews with the help of Don and Dick.

Rick Dacri, on the other hand, was a much more aggressive recruiter. He told the council, on which I still sat for a short few months more, that his plan was to actively seek out talent, even if the potential candidate was currently employed by another municipality and not submitting his or her resume. He said that he would simply call people and work on enticing them to apply. According to Councilor Eric Hebert, working

with Rick Dacri would bring a broader spectrum of candidates to the search because Dacri and Associates recruits for corporate firms, not just non-profits or towns. Councilor Hebert felt that perhaps a larger pool of managers might apply as a result (Pritchett, 2014). However, the end result of this search, which cost the city \$17,000 in consulting fees paid to Dacri (Betts, 2016), resulted in the hiring of James Chaousis, former town manager of Boothbay, Maine: who was soon discovered to have engaged in paying for his personal oil bill and family cell phone plans with the town of Boothbay's money (Pearson, 2015). And who turfed out this revelation? Not the headhunter paid \$17,000, but a private citizen. This information was not known publicly at the time of the council's deciding to follow Dacri's lead and hire Chaousis, but investigations were beginning, and there had been other personnel incidents while Chaousis was employed by Boothbay, which much to the council's chagrin, citizens began to discover with simple Google searches and phone calls without having to pay a consulting firm tens of thousands of dollars. Chaousis resigned in thirteen months after a drama-filled stint with the city of Rockland (Lawson, 2016).

Once again, the populace of Rockland demanded that the city council employ another means of finding a city manager than hiring a head hunter. In response, the council formed a search committee comprised of a variety of members of the community: an artist, a former councilor and insurance agent, a sitting councilor and carpenter, a small engine and appliance repairman, the fire chief, a city employee from the finance department, and a volunteer member of the Personnel Board who is also a writer. The city council asked that this committee submit two names for their consideration. For some reason still unbeknownst to anyone, the committee submitted only one name: a

retired military man, (remember the pendulum swing from weak manager to strong) which created a public uproar. A member of the press leaked the candidate's resume, and began calling former employees to ask pointed questions: which incredibly, former employers were answering. (Leon, 2017). Fortunately, this saga seems to have come to an end, through the Human Resources practice of succession planning, somewhat accidentally, and internal promotion. Finance Director Tom Luttrell, who had served several times as interim city manager during the various moments of resignations and upheavals, was asked to apply for the position (he had not initially) and was hired on July 19, 2017 (Aquisito, 2017).

Succession planning is the process of making sure that qualified candidates are in place and ready to assume next-level-up positions in the event of vacancies. According to Mondy (2015), nothing can be more important to the success of an organization than developing and ensuring that a qualified person is available and ready to lead. One never knows when a manager may either have a health condition or a pressing family matter, or resign. Retirement can be planned for, but unplanned vacancies can cause upheaval and as outlined in the situation with Rockland, Maine, expensive recruiting costs that do not necessarily net a long-term manager.

Rockland is not the only city with managerial woes. Three other towns in Maine are engaged in the epic struggle to find a leader (Oxford Hills Sun-Journal, 2017) In Colorado, the town of Silverton has gone through 7 managers in 10 years. An interim manager, Michelle Hamilton, is running the town of 500 year-round residents and many more vacationers, and no advertisement for a full-time permanent manager seems to be in evidence on any of the usual job boards. In Brighton, manager Manuel Esquibel took a

hefty severance package after a council investigation of how he ran several municipal projects and his relationship with a former Brighton Economic Development Director turned up some serious ethical and financial concerns (Aguilar, 2017). In Littleton, manager Michael Perry was fired last year in the wake of an investigation of how the police department had handled events leading up to a tragic murder-suicide (Aguilar, 2016). In Basalt, a simple lack of a quorum postponed the conclusion of a “seemingly endless” search for a manager in June (Fayhee, 2017). In Texas, town councils face the same predicament (Maresh, 2016). One might conclude that in every state in our great nation, the search for a city or town manager is being played out on numerous town and county boards, with varying degrees of drama and woe.

Therefore, two questions beg to be raised: what causes this issue, and what can be done about it? As Greg Schulte, outgoing manager of Pagosa Springs says (2017), one of the most important factors in hiring a manager that will stick around a community is to find someone that everyone feels is part of the community, accessible, impartial, and open to all views and opinions. Looking at the choices for manager in Rockland, the managers who have not hung in for the long haul are the ones who have been recruited from outside communities who do not know the dynamics of a small town in which everyone knows everyone else. Additionally, small towns may have even more difficulty finding a manager, because the compensation packages are not as competitive as those in larger towns (Laberge, 2005).

If Mr. Schulte’s other points about why talented managers don’t go into civic duty are taken into consideration, such as the preponderance of long evening meetings, the lack of job stability based on political agendas, and the relatively low pay as compared to

other management positions in the business sector, it very well may be that Rockland ended up with managers that either were in the business for the love of the work, or perhaps had come from other communities after a negative experience, and applied in Rockland because Rockland's increasing desperation to find someone meant that a chance could still be had at a top executive position. At the beginning of the Rockland manager search in 2009, 60 resumes were submitted for the job. During the search in 2016, only 20 resumes were submitted.

Therefore, it would seem that internal recruitment or succession planning would be a very good choice for a small town or city, in order to save money in recruiting costs, and also to have good people ready to go in the event of an opening. However, in contrast to this seemingly affordable and simple solution, by law, resumes from outside the organization do need to be solicited because if a candidate can demonstrate that a job was filled simply by word of mouth, this could be viewed by the law as a discriminatory practice biased toward currently employed workers, or if the hiring results in a gender, race, sexual orientation, or age bias (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2017). It very well could be, too, that a town might be accused of being an "old boy network" if internal candidates are chosen over other candidates who have as many valid qualifications. Fortunately in the case with Rockland, the community is so relieved to be done with searching for a manager that no one appears to be at all disgruntled and everyone seems satisfied that the best choice of a qualified candidate was made.

Another suggestion to find someone who fits in well and has experience dealing with municipal issues might be to leave job descriptions more open-ended. I think of my previous example of Mayor Strimling, who has spent his professional career in education

and non-profit and political campaign management. He does not possess an MBA or the requisite five years progressive experience in municipal management that the town of South Fork, Colorado: Population, 365 in 2016, down from 604 in 2010 (South Fork Visitor Information, 2017) seems to want in their next manager.

Another helpful suggestion might be to use publications put out by your state's town and city management association. In the case of Colorado, the Colorado City and County Management Association has a very good handbook called "How to Hire a Local Government Administrator" (Hughes, Dority, & Unfug, 2013). It may seem like a somewhat condescending suggestion to read a set of instructions; however, in reading through this booklet I soon discovered that there were many good suggestions that my board did not follow in the hiring process. For example, many boards have knee-jerk reactions to hiring, once a manager departs. I have heard it said at meetings that "we don't want someone like him again." This kind of thinking is what caused the pendulum swing from a collaborative, consensus-style manager to an authoritarian, dictatorial manager. Rather, a better plan would have been to have a plan: as the CCCMA booklet states, it is important to sit down as a group and decide on a strategic plan with goals before deciding on what kind of manager the organization could use (Hughes, Dority, & Unfug, 2013, Chapter 2). For example, if your town or city has a lot of public infrastructure projects coming up and you do not have a city engineer on staff, you will need a manager who is capable of interfacing with contractors hired to do engineering work and who understands the nature of the work in more depth than if there were professional staff at the city. Or, if your town requires someone who really understands grant-writing, because you do not have a very strong Community Development

Department, these needs should be outlined in your search criteria. Do you have personnel issues in your staff, but no HR department? Then you will need a manager with strong HR skills and the ability to demonstrate a clear ability with interpersonal problem-solving. If your town is rural, you probably want someone with rural experience. If your town cannot afford a staffer for every type of problem, then you'd better look at someone who is a generalist, knowing something about everything from handing out dog licenses to building a budget.

Once your search committee decides on the criteria for the manager and the needs of the community, it's time to decide on whether to hire an outside firm to help, and if so, how much help to hire, whether to have the whole process handled by the firm, or just parts and pieces in collaboration with the search committee. This will depend on your internal resources as a community and how much experience your search committee has with hiring a top executive. One aspect that my search committee did not do a good job with, at all, is outlined in the CCCMA handbook. We did hire outside firms, but we did not investigate these firm's success rates. We also did not ask for a guarantee of return services should our finalist not last beyond one or two years (Hughes, Dority, & Unfug, 2013, Chapter 2, p. 5). We also really could have used a much better system of evaluation and review, once our finalist was hired and in place. We didn't document issues as outlined in Mondy (2015), nor did we document goals achievement or improvement potential. We did evaluate our managers on a periodic basis, but the evaluation forms were generally based on a score of 1-5 on very broad topics, and any low ratings were hard to justify because they were not documented, and therefore always caused discord with the manager. For example, if the council gave a "2" score on community

engagement, what did that mean? In what instances did the manager not engage the community, considering she attended absolutely every meeting possible, walked on Main Street at lunch, etc? Was it that someone just didn't like her, or how can that score be documented factually? These are the pitfalls that can occur.

As far as determining past experience, the University of Wisconsin Extension Program lays out one possible path. For example, experience of 5 to 7 years in a similar governmental position is a common requirement, and career progression could be viewed in this way: an Assistant City Manager in a city of 20,000 is probably ready to be a City Manager in a city of 8,000 to 10,000 residents. Similarly, an assistant manager moving from an urban community of a larger population to a smaller community could be a good fit (Probst, 2016).

I don't necessarily agree with this thinking, though I do believe it's a good guideline. The problem as I see it is that it puts people into a box. It may very well be that an assistant manager has specialized experience in one area that a city really needs, but that individual may not meet the criteria of years of experience or size of community. It's important to look at candidates as individuals. Returning to my example of South Fork, Colorado, five years of progressive town management is an unrealistic expectation for a town of a population under 1,000 looking for someone to manage it. A better plan might be to advertise for someone with a lot of creative and general experience in a variety of business or community endeavors.

Another important aspect is the screening process for candidates. Often in the manager search process in Rockland, citizens found information about a candidate on Google that should have previously been discovered by the firm hired to do background

checks. It's important to know how your firm is doing background checks, if they are potentially discriminatory, and if they are turning up the right information before your public gets out there and starts making phone calls, which can be more than unsettling to both the town and to the candidate, as well as potentially put the town at risk for lawsuit (Evertsen, 2015). Evertsen also suggests watching out for candidates who have worked in many cities or towns. I would add that it might be a good idea to watch out for candidates who seem to be applying absolutely everywhere, though care is needed here to not discriminate. If someone is putting in resumes all over the country, then they may not have the passion and sense of place needed to truly love your community.

**It doesn't have to be as hard as we make it, but it is.**

Given that town and city management is generally accomplished by elected boards, situations can quickly become personal or political due to lack of training of well-meaning residents who want to serve their community. It's important to make sure that councils and boards get training on HR practices if they are about to be functioning as the HR department. Many municipal organizations offer such trainings for a low cost to towns and cities, such as the Maine Municipal Association's various offerings throughout the year (MMA, 2017). Municipal associations can also put towns in contact with consultants who can provide a specialized workshop specifically tailored to a board's educational needs.

It's important for councils and boards to put together goal rubrics and strategic plans concerning their towns in order to know who to look for in terms of expertise when hiring a manager. Cities and towns should employ the same kinds of organizational strategic plans and resources that are used in the world of business, such as organizational

charts, and the analysis of what kinds of HR resources are needed in order to create a successful management structure. If a manager is hired that presents an HR issue, or if a manager has an HR issue with a member of staff, it's important for the board to know what their role is, and how to play a part in solving the problem in the parameters of whatever the city incorporating documents may say about the role of the board. For example, in Rockland, the manager is the HR department, period, for all the employees. The council cannot, according to charter, interfere with personnel matters to do with city staff except those decisions that involve the manager, the clerk, and the attorney (City of Rockland Charter, 1983).

Boards should also carefully consider the involvement of the community in the process, as much as allowable by law, in order to head off at the pass any Googling and exposes of candidates presented at council meetings. Careful consideration should be made to hold public meetings in which the community can give feedback on what they'd like to see done in the community- perhaps not so much personal aspects of the manager they would like to see, but rather, the style of manager they'd like. Lastly, it's very important to make sure that the new manager is a part of the community and someone who does not polarize residents by taking one particular stand or another on social or political agendas.

If professional help is to be employed, it is also important for the board to interface with the community in order to make sure that the community is not resentful about the expense, and understands the scope of the work involved and the reason for the expense. It's important for the board to have measurable criteria in place to make sure that any hired consultants are executing according to goals and plans, and that there are

guarantees should the work not be up to par or the finalist not retained successfully for a specific period of time agreed on by the board and the consultants.

Lastly, any board working together to find a new manager needs to work together well, first. Trainings should be considered if members of the board do not work well together, or do not mesh on projected goals, and in some instances, outside moderators may be needed.

Hopefully, with any luck and a lot of hard work and training, a good manager will be found who stays in a community a long time. Rockland perhaps has finally found that person, through a very long and circuitous process. In order for towns to improve their Human Resources process, it is important for hiring committees and town or city councils to obtain HR training, to make sure they know what kind of manager they need, and that they know who they are hiring before making the decision. Outside headhunters or consultants can be hired, but ultimately the board that must work with the manager should gain the skill and the knowledge to understand what their job is. As the manager will ultimately be the HR department in most towns, with the council as the oversight committee of the manager, this kind of HR experience on a council is crucial, whether it be some combination of the councilors obtaining training, or a consultant working with the council, and close management of public involvement and perception of the process, or some of all of the above options.

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