

Managing Your Time as a Municipal Leader

by David Peter Stroh

The following is a preview of one of the topics to be covered during Leadership Training Institute seminars at the Congress of Cities in San Antonio, held November 10-14.

Many municipal leaders feel starved for time, even more so in the face of budget cuts and layoffs. Working under the assumption that longer hours lead to improved productivity, they often drive themselves and others to increase effectiveness then try to “squeeze in” good, quality time with loved ones. Staff are encouraged to run at a fast pace and be highly productive. At the same time, there is a chronic sense of individual and collective slippage, less than optimal work performance, and impending burnout.

The ability of leaders to manage the increase in both workload and burnout more effectively is essential because their behavior has significant impact on others. Recent studies confirm that under stress, people act more defensively, make poor decisions and liter-

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ally lose the “executive” function of their minds, according to Edward Hallowell’s “Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform,” which was in the January 2005 issue of the Harvard Business Review magazine.

This is especially costly for leaders because they set the tone for their organizations. Their moods affect how others think and behave, so that people around them also tend to react in confused, defensive and otherwise unproductive ways, according to “Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead With Emotional Intelligence,” by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee.

By contrast, in a 2002 Harvard Business Review article called “Beware the Busy

Manager” by Heiki Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal it says high-performing leaders exhibit abilities to create and sustain both high levels of energy and focus. They set clear direction, focus on non-urgent important tasks that improve long-term performance, build effective relationships, and execute efficiently. Meeting these executive responsibilities requires that they clarify their long-term and daily priorities as well as make wise tradeoffs, especially between what is urgent and important.

It also means minimizing time they spend firefighting, doing work others should have done, mismanaging e-mails and resolving the same problem over and over again. It entails taking time each day to engage

in such challenging yet essential managerial tasks as delegating or collaborating when it seems easier to do a task alone, holding difficult conversations, reflecting and planning, setting a clear and limited set of goals and holding firmly to these goals.

Managing your time as a leader also involves making realistic time estimates and ensuring time and space for personal renewal, making reliable agreements, handling interruptions productively, delegating effectively, tracking commitments and managing e-mails effectively and efficiently.

In order to adopt these strategies and improve their productivity in sustainable ways, leaders often need not only learn new tips, but also how to change deeply ingrained habits.

A proven seven-step process for changing habits involves clarifying what is at stake in making the change, envisioning how you want to allocate your time, identifying current reality and opportunities to bridge the gaps between it and your vision, getting support, learning new strategies, planning to

change one behavior at a time, anticipating obstacles to effectively implement the change, and learning from experience, according to the book “It’s Hard to Make a Difference When You Can’t Find Your Keys: The Seven-Step Path to Becoming Organized” by Marilyn Paul.

Municipal leaders faced with deep budget cuts and layoffs can learn to allocate their time, energy and attention in more productive ways. They can gain more control over their priorities, more time to meet managerial responsibilities, increased energy, and greater reliability while reducing stress and such time-consuming activities as crisis management.

Details: Stroh will lead Leadership Training Institute seminar L05, entitled “Managing Your Time as a Municipal Leader,” on Tuesday, November 10 from 9 a.m. to noon. For more information or to register for Leadership Training Institute seminars, visit www.nlc.org.

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