



The Perils of Hiring a Manager



Writing the prior Manager Special on hiring “a local” without a search, I was surprised at the amount of Manager turnover in the NWCCOG region. I’m halfway through my 9th year in this role supporting local governments; only Klint in Snowmass, Jon in Pitkin, the Ryans in Silverthorne and Basalt, as well as Michelle in Blue River have been at their posts longer than I’ve been at NWCCOG, that’s 5 of 22, and three of those were hired shortly before I began. Just about every community we serve has had a “stumble” with an executive hire that didn’t stay more than a year or so because of fit, family or other reasons. In this case I’m just talking about

City or Town Managers, but the same could be said about police chiefs.

I contend that a community that has a strong, stable manager-council relationship that spans 7 or more years earns huge dividends in forward progress, reflected in organizational culture, staff retention, success in achieving elusive multi-year efforts, and a variety of other difficult to quantify benefits. Some point after seven, or as many as 15 years both a manager and a community could use some fresh eyes, a change in accountability structures and an opportunity to be truly enthused. I am very interested in manager tenure and ways to measure its’ effect in classes I am currently taking. If you have thoughts, I’d like to hear them.

One benefit of longevity is that the transition from one manager to the next can absorb most of a year; during which time forward progress can turn into roll backwards. It can be much longer than a year from some point when things start to sour between a manager and council until the point that the next manager has earned the trust of staff, navigated new relationships, figured out the balance between what they think they are there to do and what needs to be done, and to be frank, is only then able to achieve more than just completing the same priorities that the prior manager established and would have completed a year or more before. In many cases, a community is not actually “ahead” for 3 years or more. Councils have a difficult job hiring a manager. The risks of “failure” are high.

Moderate Difficulty: finding someone with Manager skills who can do the job and wants the job.

High Difficulty: finding a Manager who is a good fit.

Extraordinary difficulty: doing both in a smaller community.

Councils or boards soon discover that to attract TM talent from outside the region (let alone outside the state) that is a “good fit” professional manager who then settles in and stays for the long run can be perilous: ask [Glenwood Springs](#) (7 months), [Vail](#) (17 months), [Grand County](#) (21 months and [20 months](#)), [Eagle](#) County (23 months) and [Summit Counties](#) (11 months) in recent years. None of those boards hired in those situations thinking that person will not last two years.

A few have wildly succeeded by hiring someone from out of state who stuck around—great examples locally include [Winter Park](#), Aspen (Sara Ott), Frisco, Granby, and Dillon. It can be done. Those organizations have a bit more inertia than the places where I’ve assisted so far. By this, I mean that the staff can keep the train on the rails, running on time, and hauling freight while a transition occurs. This is not always a reality in smaller places. It is not unusual for a small staff to be quite paralyzed when their manager has been let go suddenly. Parachuting in to effectively manage a small town can be a hazardous endeavor for both the jumper and the landing place.

Why not just groom an employee to succeed a town manager? Certainly, it is done. Breckenridge is excellent at this with two police chiefs becoming assistants and then Town Managers in time. Most small places struggle to grow their own future Town Manager. There often just isn’t enough challenge in these places for a mentor to share, and other staff are often fit for their niche duties, not for the part that involves a board. Some NWCCOG communities have indeed found very solid managers from within - compliments to Grand County (Ed Moyer), Avon (Eric Heil), Fraser (Michael Brack), Minturn (Michelle Metteer who worked there since 2009 and just accepted a job at Ouray). Those places found talent within the building. Especially in our counties with towns in multiple proximity, being less remote has the benefit that there is known talent already nearby. Successful examples include the Towns of Gypsum (Jeremy Rietmann), Red Cliff (Administrator Melissa Matthews). I’ll stretch here a bit and add Routt County (Jay Harrington – from Carbondale). Perhaps the most successful neighborhood hire was Jeff Schroll who Eagle County hired away from Gypsum. A couple of those places looked within **after** being burned by a hire from afar who exited quickly—Glenwood Springs, Fraser, and Summit County. With a couple of exceptions (Grand County), each of those *then endeavored* through extensive search processes to vet talent in their own attic. It was such a wise decision when Grand County (finally) promoted Ed Moyer, Assistant County Manager, who had acted as interim numerous times to not bother with a search that time around. I feel strongly that if a board is convinced, they have found their person within, that it is bad form to do a perfunctory search just to say you had a search. Candidates who have been through that once tend to ask if there is an inside candidate.

Grand Lake is hardly the only small town in the region where a TM left a job under murky or outright questionable circumstances. While I have served in this NWCCOG role, without going into detail, I would include in that category Kremmling, Walden, Avon, Glenwood Springs, Fraser, Dillon, Eagle, Hot Sulphur Springs, Granby and a couple counties for at least one of their transitions. In such situations who could blame a board for looking around the room, wondering who among us can do this work, and do we need to go looking? In Colorado’s “city manager system” where elected officials are often paid a token amount for their evenings of public service, they see a Manager across the table who is making six figures. No wonder mayors who become familiar through regular board meetings believe they can do the TM job. Note that none of the examples above hired prior board members.

There is no mythical “clean slate” in this business. With national average manager tenure being from [5 to 7 years](#) some places get “Maytag-ed” in pernicious 2-to-3 year-and-out cycles. You know who you are. Rare anymore are the days when a longtime manager retires after positioning a town for a smooth succession - so high praise to Breckenridge and Routt County recently and Steamboat Springs currently.

The 48hr exiting TM post also has a blurb with a link to the Grand Lake 81 days story- a lighthouse beacon glowing across the waters for managers to beware. Often someone close to the organization who already has trust is a wise choice.

Grand Lakes question of hiring an unconventional Manager from within the community is becoming a somewhat common situation; perhaps increasingly so as a generation of TMs retire concurrently with many up-and-coming leaders choosing to demure from the TM hot seat. For quality of life, it is more comfortable to be beside the wood stove than to sit on it. To my memory, only Glenwood Springs and Grand County skipped out on a search before appointing from within. Should such candidates just be appointed? Ott, who was Assistant City Manager, then appointed interim upon Barwick’s exit won “after a nationwide search that attracted 64 applicants.” That is one way to quiet critics. Don’t municipalities need to go through a competitive process? Legally, the answer is “no.” For optics, that is another matter.

Bottom line, board members and managers must regularly and deliberately seek to communicate honestly and respectfully between each other to resolve internal conflicts. Navigating such situations is part of the work. My hypothesis: factors indicating successful governance show beneficial increases when a town manager’s tenure extends from 4 to 10 years, while those same factors show decreases that are increasingly deleterious as tenures are 3 years or shorter. There are fewer and fewer town managers out there these days. My advice: find a way to make it work. Your community depends on it.

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