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Stepping In

How To Thrive During
Your First 100 Days As City Manager

This resource is provided for the members of the California City Management Foundation (CCMF) whose mission is to promote and encourage excellence in city management. For more information and to access to further resources, go to <http://www.cacitymanagers.org>.



Stepping In

How to Thrive During Your First 100 Days as City Manager.

There is value in being a new hire. You may have trouble remembering everyone's name in those first 100 days, but you also have something that will inevitably fade – a fresh eye.

Starting a new job, any new job, is considered one of life's biggest stress inducers. As city managers, we arrive at our new appointments (often uprooting families, selling old homes and buying new ones), immediately striving to satisfy three different groups of people: our elected officials, our staff, and our community. The first one hundred days as

city manager are challenging whether the city is thriving or facing specific challenges, whether it's small or large, and whether it's our first time or our eighth at the helm.

For managers about to step into a new role as city manager (and for those who may already be discovering how challenging those first few days can be), CCMF went out into the field to research how this intense transitional period can be made a little more manageable. We spoke with numerous city managers, each in the midst of their first one hundred days in their position. Some were quite comfortable in their new seats after only a few weeks. Others were facing challenges that would not be quickly resolved. For a few, it was their first time as city manager, still more had been down this road before, in other cities. Some shortened their commutes significantly by taking the new position. Others were in the midst of a difficult relocation.

No two stories were identical, but in every circumstance, there were pearls of wisdom that seemed to hold true, time and again. We've compiled their advice, along with the counsel of well-seasoned city managers from across the state, and to make sure nothing was left out, we've included (at the end of this article) a list titled *100 Things To Do In Your First 100 Days As City Manager*. May they serve you well.

Stepping Into The New Role

One of the biggest factors influencing a city manager's first one hundred days is whether or not he or she was an inside hire. When city manager Dominic Lazzaretto first stepped

into the position in La Palma, California, in 2002, he had been working for the city for four years. He was nervous about doing his job well, but was familiar with the city. Now, ten years later, in his new position as city manager of Arcadia, California, the opposite is true.

“The first 100 days (in La Palma) were certainly stressful, but in a different kind of way - it was more first-timer nerves and all of that. This time, I don’t have the ‘*can I do it?*’ nerves. I know I can do the job because I did it successfully for the past six years, but now I have different kinds of nerves – being in a new city with a new culture, a new city council, a new community, a new staff... I can’t say that everything I learned in (La Palma) translates to Arcadia, but it’s given me the confidence to know that I can handle the basics of the job.”

The best way to quell nerves, whether you’re an inside hire or not, is to start meeting with people. It is not unusual for a new city manager to take hundreds of meetings during their first few months on the job. In his book *The First 90 Days*, Harvard Business School Professor Michael Watkins suggests that new managers in any context ask everyone they meet the following question: “If you were me, what would you focus your attention on?” Listening is one of the most important skills a city manager can bring to a new position.

Laurie Lile, city manager of Monrovia, California, since April 30, 2012, is a big proponent of taking the time to listen. “Try to understand the concerns and the issues that the residents are faced with” Lile says, “and then also strive to understand the things that they are proud of, the things they really cherish.” It’s important not to come in with guns blazing, making changes before you fully understand your new community. Lile has attributed her smooth transition to Monrovia (from her previous position in Palmdale, California) to a willingness to admit that she doesn’t know everything. By listening closely to her councilmembers, her staff and her community, she has built a solid foundation on which to grow.

Build your personal support team.

Every city manager has someone in the industry that they turn to for help. “That’s one of the really wonderful things about this profession,” says Amy Brown, city manager of Campbell, California for just over one hundred days. During her first weeks on the job she was commuting fifty miles each way while trying to sell her home in the unforgiving San Francisco real estate market and buy a new home in Campbell. When she needed support, she turned to her fellow city managers. “This profession is filled with people who are, despite having their own incredibly demanding schedules, very generous with their time, support and advice.” Reach out to them, either personally, or through organizations such as CCMF. We all make time to support each other through the various challenges of our profession.

Ask the elected officials of your new city to give you a tour, before your first official day on the job. A day spent driving around the city, visiting favorite establishments and parks, can be more enlightening than a hundred meetings. And be flexible. If the city is promoting a new bike path, consider taking the tour on two wheels instead of four, or perhaps a new bus route could give you a good sense of the area. Have fun with it, and seize the opportunity to listen carefully to what the councilmembers have to say, about everything.

Embrace Critics

Try to avoid the phrase “in my old city.” Every city is unique and will operate in its own way. Likewise, try to hear the words “our former city manager used to...” as an opportunity. Critics generally have legitimate, informed concerns about the city you are inheriting. The process of changing minds is a slow one. The worst thing you can do is avoid your critics. Embrace them for their perspective, assure them that you will work with them toward a solution, and then do so. The only way to turn critics into allies is to show results, and that takes time.

Practice being a good listener, with both critics and supporters. This was the one piece of advice that every new city manager offered up. It’s good advice. As a newcomer, you can’t know what needs to be fixed until you learn about the priorities of the city. But what if the city you’re coming to is facing one challenge in particular that has pushed all other priorities down the line? What if your new city is in crisis?

Cities In Crisis

Taking over as city manager for a city in crisis can be daunting. Listening and learning are still vitally important, but you may not have months to wait before committing to action. In this case, take heart. The council would not have hired you if they didn't think you were up to the job. You have an assortment of special, applicable skills that will allow you to turn things around. The other asset you have is perspective. You will be better able than most to see where things went awry.

Take notes, and not just in your head. Buy a small note pad that you can carry around with you and whenever you realize how a situation could have been avoided months ago write it down. That way, once the city is back on it's feet and thriving you can be sure to make changes that will ensure it doesn't slip back down into whatever woes you worked so hard to rescue it from.

Put Your Own Mask On First.

There's a reason that airlines tell people traveling with small children to put their own oxygen masks on first, and then assist those who might need help. If you don't take care of yourself, you're no good to anyone. The personal challenges of stepping into a new role as city manager begin at home. You may have a longer commute, or you may be forced to plunge into a real estate market that is in itself quite stressful, and you may not be able to resolve housing issues (or grow accustomed to your new commute) before your

first day on the job. There are, however, certain things you can do to cut your future self some slack.

In addition to finding a new home, there are a number of new locations to scout out. If, before you pull into your parking spot on day one, you know where to find a grocery store, a sandwich shop, a dry-cleaners, and a good gym, you'll have that much less to worry about. Visiting these establishments is also a good opportunity to begin shaking hands and meeting the people who run the businesses in your community. Embrace it.

Get comfortable with the idea that you will be the center of attention for a while and be sure to discuss it with your family. You will likely (as an individual and a family) be invited to numerous events. Attend as many as you can, but also remember to make time for yourselves. A family night at home can go a long way toward rejuvenating you for future commitments. Establish what family business is appropriate for the public and make sure children know how to handle questions they don't want to answer.

Seek Inspiration

To keep sharp, embrace life-long learning. Subscribe to industry newsletters and attend conferences. If you happen to be in your first one hundred days, or are looking ahead to your first position as city manager, consider attending CCMF's New and Future City Manager conference. Amy Brown attended the 2010 conference, while still working as

deputy city administrator in San Francisco. Now thriving in her position as city manager in Campbell, she often refers back to the binder of information she acquired there.

Lastly, should you ever feel overwhelmed, keep in mind that there is value in being a new hire. You may have trouble remembering everyone’s name in those first 100 days, but you also have something that will inevitably fade – a fresh eye. “One of the things I found in Palmdale after being there for such a long time,” said Lile, “was that I discounted some solutions because I thought ‘*we tried that many years ago and it didn’t work*’ instead of really reexamining valid options.”

So congratulations, and good luck. It won’t always be easy, but the work we do is uniquely satisfying. Keep your chin up, and remember, we’re always here should you need us.

100 Things To Do In Your First 100 Days as City Manager

The following list was compiled from the input of CCMF members across a wide spectrum of experience. We hope it will spark ideas and inspire you to try new things.

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| 1. Go to a Rotary Meeting. | communication for routine events and emergencies. | 7. Develop a thorough understanding of the city’s true financial condition. |
| 2. Meet with the Chamber of Commerce president. | | 8. Review, digest and assess all the city’s financial policies. |
| 3. Set up one-on-one meetings with each elected official. | 5. Tour the city with the Mayor and/or Councilmembers. | |
| 4. With elected officials, agree on the best methods of | 6. Understand the budget inside and out. | |

9. Test council members to determine their level of knowledge of the city's financial condition.
10. Review the city website.
11. Ask your team what you should do in your first 100 days.
12. Read back issues (12 months worth) of the city newsletter.
13. Schedule a meeting with the school district superintendent.
14. Go to the local farmer's market.
15. Schedule an open house and invite members of the community to meet the new city manager.
16. Meet with every one of your employees (this may take longer than 100 days, but don't wait to get started).
 - ➡ 17. Ask employees what they would change if they were you.
 - ➡ 18. Be honest about what you feel you can achieve.
19. Place a bowl of candy on your desk and encourage passersby to enjoy.
20. Reach out to council members of adjacent cities for support and background information.
21. Walk downtown for lunch once a week.
 - ➡ 22. While walking downtown, stop into three business and introduce yourself.
23. Write an article introducing yourself for the city newsletter.
24. Closely read the city's general plan.
 - ➡ 25. Discuss the general plan in detail with the planning director.
26. Go to the New & Future City Managers Workshop.
27. Do a ride-along with the city's fire department.
28. Visit every city work site.
29. Attend and address meetings of all City Commissions.
30. Buy a small notepad and keep it with you at all times.
31. Collect take-out menus from dining establishments you visit.
 - ➡ 32. Note the names of the proprietors on the menus.
33. Ride a city bus.
34. Visit your local library.
35. Avoid the phrase "in my last position as city manager."
36. Tour an elementary school.
37. Buy a large box of thank you cards to keep within reach.
 - ➡ 38. Send thank you cards to the people you meet with.
39. Ask each department to list their strengths and areas for improvement.
40. Ask each department head to develop a work plan for the year ahead.
41. Choose a morning to ride along with your sanitation department.
42. Create a list of priorities to address in the first year.
 - ➡ 43. Share the list
 - ➡ 44. Get feedback, and
 - ➡ 45. Revise the list
46. Review the last five years of budgets, CAFRs, and audits to identify trends.
47. List any findings from audits.
48. Identify key indicators for dashboard.
49. Have coffee with someone you suspect doesn't like you and listen carefully.
50. Trust your gut, but avoid jumping to conclusions.
51. Review emergency procedures.
52. Learn where the nearest fire extinguisher and first aid kit are located.
53. Visit your city's water treatment plant.
54. Plan a vacation.
55. Meet with the reporters assigned to your city and, if possible, their editors, to establish an open line of communication.
56. Make your workspace ergonomic.
57. Conduct a Friday evening ride along with an officer or deputy.
58. Have lunch or coffee with your adjacent city manager.

59. Visit each department and introduce yourself.
60. Ask each council member to identify five people in the city who they see as opinion leaders.
- ➔ 61. Have coffee/meet with those opinion leaders.
62. Send a note to all employees letting them know who you are.
63. Schedule a few minutes of exercise every day, even if it's just a walk around the building after lunch.
64. Hold a council retreat to establish priority goals for the first 6, 12, and 18 months.
65. Ask for completed audits,
- ➔ 66. Read the audits
- ➔ 67. Ask if the audit recommendations made were implemented.
68. Host coffee and bagels in each city department at least once.
69. Understand the investment portfolio.
70. Schedule weekly time with your family.
71. Rearrange/decorate your office.
72. Get a briefing on the crime activity in your city.
73. Identify the local bloggers that monitor and opine on city activity.
74. Determine if your city is covered by Patch.com and identify the local editor/writer.
75. Review your current labor agreements with all negotiating units in the city and identify the timeline for those contracts.
76. Meet with your insurance pool representative (JPIA or similar) and identify any risks or history that you should be aware of.
77. Review the city's debt financing to identify maturity dates and interest rates.
78. If you have your own police department, review the last DOJ security audit.
79. Get a briefing on the computer and server infrastructure.
80. If new to the region, meet the local League of Cities Regional Manager.
81. Tie into the regional City Managers group and attend the meetings.
82. Identify if/how council meetings are broadcast and determine the placement of cameras so that you understand when and how you are on camera during council meetings.
83. Attend the local school district board meeting.
84. If you don't have your own water district, attend the meeting of the local water district.
85. Meet the chief of staff of the county supervisor that covers your city.
86. Meet the field representative for the local Congressman.
87. Identify the largest real estate holders in the city and meet with them or their representatives.
88. Clearly identify any major deferred maintenance on city infrastructure.
89. Determine who is responsible for sidewalk maintenance and tree trimming on streets.
90. Identify the major ethnic groups within the city and the leaders of those groups, and then meet with them.
91. Set up Google Alert emails for your name,
- ➔ 92. Then for the city name
- ➔ 93. Finally, for the names of your council members.
94. If you moved for your new position, change your voter registration information.
95. Identify the policy on city credit cards and who has them.
- ➔ 96. Ensure you are comfortable with the credit card policy and oversight.

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97. Meet with the city attorney to get a one-on-one briefing on all pending and active litigation.
 98. Meet your public works director to get an understanding of their views on recent history and issues.
 99. Ensure you have good cell phone coverage throughout city hall and town. If you are in a weak area, get guidance from your provider or change providers to one with a stronger local presence.
 100. Review a workforce study on expected retirements to determine where you are in the recruiting/replacement cycle with the team.

Suggestions Welcome

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To share your feedback on this resource:

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