

## **Strategic Leadership and Decision Making for Elected Local Officials**

by Carl Neu

The ultimate measure of our success as elected officials is the degree to which we use our imaginations, creativity and political skills to increase the influence of the future over the present as the basis for our understanding and actions in realizing the fullest potential of our communities. Although most city governments and elected officials have dealt with the forces of change, challenge, complexity and opportunity amazingly well, these forces are confronting us at an ever-accelerating pace requiring a dramatic refinement of our leadership and decision-making perspectives and processes. Six points to consider:

1. The issues confronting us require "big picture - long range" (strategic) thinking.

The majority of issues affecting the future of our communities reflect profound changes in our society, the mindsets of our constituents, and the time and resource commitments required to affect positive changes and outcomes. Leadership is being able to make things happen that might not otherwise happen, but to do so in ways that fulfill what a community envisions its desired future to be. Without a comprehensive long-term perspective (vision), governance falls prey to reacting to immediate demands, confusing priorities, and myopic "to do" lists. Vision and strategic perspectives clarify the direction in which organizations want to move and provide the framework for priority setting, resource allocation, and sustaining commitment.

2. Our time, as elected officials, is precious and limited.

Most municipal elected officials serve as part-time "boards of directors" who must rely upon others to carry out their direction and implement their policies. The typical city council functions as a deliberative decision-making body less than 200 hours annually. It is important that precious hours be "quality time" focusing on outcomes desired and providing policy guidelines and resources to achieve those outcomes. Councils can fall easily into the traps of focusing their time and energy on constituency complaints and micro-managing if a strategic leadership perspective is not present.

3. The council-staff partnership functions best when it is vision driven and goal based. Goal setting and policy making - implementation reflect a continuum of thought and relationships bonding council and staff into a partnership of achievement translating visions into reality, actions into observable outcomes. The partnership works best when it focuses on shared vision, well-defined goals and priorities, and clear expectations about results to be produced.

4. Council provides leadership as a singular governing body that must speak with "one voice" - brilliantly.

Strategic leadership by a governing body comprised of several persons requires building relationships and decision-making processes that differ from how council members individually address and resolve issues. It's more than a matter of what individual council members think; it is about how they interact and share insights that yield a collective intelligence reflecting the will and capacity of the governing body to be a strategic leader capable of speaking with "one voice".

5. Strategic decision-making is a disciplined process combined with a desire to lead well.

Good intentions, high aspirations and a desire to lead well are translated into

productive leadership through disciplined and rational decision-making processes. Thinking and acting strategically starts with vision and follows a progression to defining critical issues essential to achieving that vision, setting goals and priorities, allocating resources, building performance coalitions, sustaining commitment, etc.

6. Citizens expect us to engage their passions - not just provide outstanding public services.

Leadership and good governance are not just the delivery of extraordinary customer and public service. Citizens take service excellence for granted as an expectation to be fulfilled through excellent management and technical systems. Leadership is engaging their passions, imagination, beliefs, and capacities toward tackling issues important to them. It is a dynamic process of awakening and expanding the best in people and inspiring them to transform visions into reality, hopes and intentions into action.

The caliber of leadership we provide as governing bodies is a preeminent factor in the success our communities experience and enjoy. The leadership must be strategic in its thinking and decision making, bold in its actions, and engaging in its ability to bring people together in a new sense of community that has a purpose defined in its vision for the future.

*Carl Neu is a Principal of Neu and Associates in Lakewood, Colorado. Neu will present a full-day Leadership Training Institute sponsored workshop, Strategic Leadership and Decision-Making for Elected Officials, on Friday, March 9th from 9:00 am - 5:00 pm during NLC's Congressional City Conference in Washington, D.C.*