

What's Your Management System?

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Every organization has a management system. It's usually implicit and the result of years of evolution, impacted along the way by the preferences of multiple leaders. It is rarely explicit in local government.

Here's a test: poll your top managers and ask them to describe your city's (or county's, or township's) management sys-



tem. Chances are you'll get back a mish-mash that reflects, accurately, the lack of a clearly defined system for planning and managing work, and for communicating about progress or issues.

Why should you care? After all, you're the manager and you know what you need to do your job. But could your organization do it better?

There's a reason that America's best-run companies have well-defined management systems. The leaders of these companies have thought through what it takes to be effective (the elements of the management system), and have refined those techniques in an integrated way over the years. Importantly, they put energy and resources into teaching new managers "The _____ Way of Doing Business." Procter and Gamble, IBM, and other companies that Jim Collins cites in his books about "great" organizations are examples.

The management systems of well-run organizations are fully integrated. Each business process or technique fits in a planned way into the whole, making it seamlessly serve the interests of the overall organization. I cringe when I watch a manager come home from the latest ICMA conference with a new technique and foist it on an organization without regard for how it fits. You can't teach your management system if you can't describe it. And if you're not teaching your management system to new managers, you're tolerating a fair amount of dysfunction, not to mention human dissatisfaction.

So do your folks a favor. Spend some energy with your senior managers to describe your management system. In doing so you'll address issues such as the way major processes interrelate: strategic and business planning, organizational performance measurement, individual performance evaluations, budgeting, the Council agenda process and other key systems. You will also have to articulate your pattern of meetings to communicate about the work of the government, since your communication processes are the life's blood of any management system.

As the CEO or CAO, only you can cause this to be done --- and if it isn't done, well, your organization will continue with its suboptimal performance. This isn't rocket science, by the way, and should not be intimidating. If your system isn't explicit you are like most local governments. You can fill the gap comfortably in a month or two requiring no more than 10 hours of time from you and your senior managers. It will be the best investment of senior management time you will make this year!