

# New Board/Council Members Need Nurturing



elected  
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serving on a  
city council or  
rural utility board.)

Utility and city managers share equal responsibility for the creation of good board members. This article will provide some insight into the development and nurturing of newly elected board members.

It's my opinion that some managers have become a bit complacent, and may have forgotten how important it is to successfully integrate new board members into an existing board or how to get the most out of the board. Board meetings are so much more than a chore that staff and others should have to endure once or twice a month!

Speaking of board meetings, I really am serious about "feeding" board members. I learned an important lesson from a very wise manager several years ago. His wife baked cookies for every board meeting and he always had a pot of coffee on. While this does not work for every type of district/council meeting, it is much more difficult for people to argue and fuss with one another when they are drinking and eating together! It's human nature and it instills a more collegial and friendly atmosphere. Also, most of these meetings take place at night; I am convinced that low blood sugar and a lack of caffeine has contributed to many a stalemate on board votes! I also observed a very savvy public finance advisor, who brought a box of gourmet

cookies to every meeting where he was appearing to answer the board's questions about multi-million dollar bond issues. Granted, he was a genius at explaining bond elections and complicated financial issues in easily understandable terms, but I never saw him fail to get a bond issue passed by a board either and he always got the repeat business too. And the cookies were great!

I have worked with many different types of boards and system/city managers. I have had the opportunity to observe managers interact with their boards and advise them accordingly. Managers and administrators have a delicate balance to maintain with the board. These are the folks who hired the manager, evaluate and set the manager's annual compensation, and can terminate the employment. These are also the part-time volunteer board members who often rely on the full-time paid employee(s) to manage the day-to-day business of the district/city, and then advise them on projects and the decisions they need to make. Board members need to be informed on key issues. It's not likely that can all take place in a meeting once or twice a month. So the role of the manager or administrator is really a combination of employee and boss; maintaining this delicate balance is tricky. Combine this with the fact that board composition is constantly changing with the addition of new board members and that this changes the "personality" of the board. While I am going to focus on how to handle new board members here, I plan on reviewing the do's and don't of board management in a future article.

In a previous article in *The Kansas Lifeline*, I described the responsibilities and obligations of utility/city, board/council members. The standard I set was a high one, but if someone goes to the trouble to run for office and he or she wins, then the work has just begun. Constituents deserve an educated, motivated elected official who not only shows up for the meetings but is educated on the issues he/she is asked to vote on. However, the burden for acting as a responsible board/council member does not just rest on the member alone! (For ease of reading I will just refer to board members, but the term includes any

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## Integrating new board members on your city/RWD team

Just when it seems the board members are playing nicely together – working as a team, educated about the issues – up comes the next round of elections. Having several new members completely change the dynamics. This is inevitable and the best way to handle it is to have a procedure in place. I'd like to describe key steps for integrating new board members.

**New Member Packet.** Every board member should receive a binder as soon as possible after the election and even before any swearing in ceremony – and definitely before the first board meeting! This binder should contain some basic information about the district/city and is basically homework for the new member. If new board members are treated like professionals and set a high standard for performance, there'll be a much better chance of them developing into a motivated part of your team. At a minimum, I recommend including the following:

- ◆ the last six months of minutes from board/council meetings
- ◆ a summary of the employees and their jobs
- ◆ a summary of the finances of the district/city or a copy of the last audit
- ◆ a reference list of the Web sites for the state laws that are relevant to the district/city
- ◆ a copy of the sunshine law pamphlet if one is available from the state attorney general's office or ethics commission or your technical assistance provider
- ◆ a copy of the current budget
- ◆ a list of all the meeting dates and times for the next year
- ◆ the names and contact information for the other board members and a list of the officers, if any and their job description ( president, vice-president, secretary, etc.)
- ◆ a sample meeting agenda

While other information may be included, this is all basic information that is vital to a new board member. The information may be sent electronically as well if that is more convenient and to save a tree. In my experience it is still better to provide the information in an indexed binder. Frankly, I like all board members to have a permanent binder with their name on it, and which contains copies of all the minutes, the agendas, budgets, etc. I usually give them their initial binder and just keep adding to it. This is extremely helpful at meetings. Is the new member going to read all of this? Probably not. But at least staff can review it with them and establish the fact that they need to become familiar with these documents in order to do their job properly. They should also receive this information before their initial briefing. In fact, district or city staff need to call them as soon as they are elected, get their email address and contact information and tell them that a new member packet is being provided. Set up the date for their briefing. Staff should take the initiative in reaching out to the new members. By doing so, staff sets the standard for a

professional, courteous relationship and letting board members know, in a subtle way, what is expected of them. This is especially important if the new member is someone staff may not get along with or is someone who is anticipated having problems with others! Let's face it, in small towns and rural areas there are those who are sometimes elected who are not easily assimilated into an organization, but that's no reason for everyone else to allow such persons to be disruptive to other board members and harm the organization.

**The Initial Briefing.** Even though staff members may be busy, a briefing of new board members can be incredibly useful. This is a chance to meet face to face and to review the documents in the new member packet. It allows staff to begin to establish a good working professional relationship with them and also to evaluate them. What type of board members will they be? The Know It All? The Critic? The Bully? The Fence-Sitter? (These are some of the common types of problem board members that I often observe and there are successful ways to deal with them; watch for my next article.) It's easy to also start to determine how they will impact the board as a whole. For example, if the Critic gets elected, expect the other board members to be a bit defensive. The Critic is the citizen who shows up at every meeting and either complains about a particular personal issue or just complains about the board in general. This person can be incredibly disruptive at meetings and hard to handle. While great at pointing out problems, and complaining about rate increases, etc., there's rarely a solution to be offered. And if that person has a solution, it rarely takes the whole picture into consideration.

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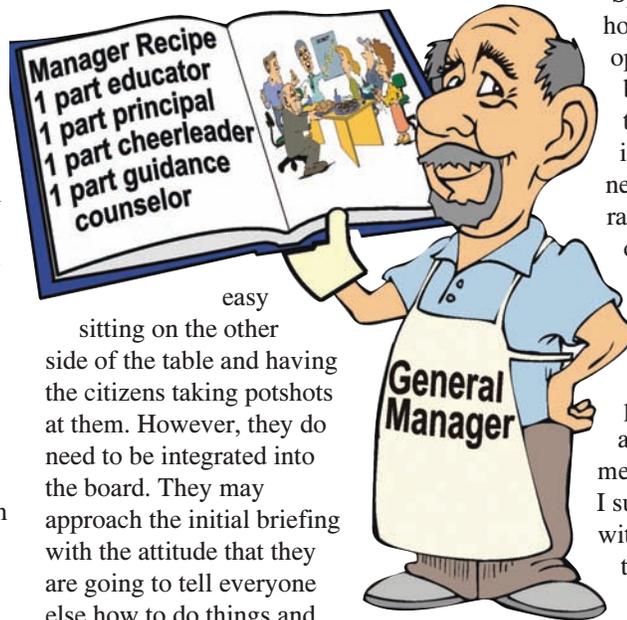
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## Dealing with critics

In small towns, the complainers often make it a point to run for office on their pet peeve platform. This is democracy in action, folks. Literally, city councils and rural utility district boards are democracy at the most local level. And this means that individuals with quirky, often misguided ideas can easily get elected. This is especially so in rural areas where board seats may remain empty due to apathy. Democracy can be a frustrating experience! Either way, I learned long ago to neutralize these people by encouraging them to run for a board seat. Yes, that's right – encourage them to run for a board position! In fact, do it publically, or have the board/council president do it. If it doesn't shut them up, they might actually get them on the board. It is much harder for a critic to criticize the board when they are on it! I have actually seen some of these folks become outstanding board members once they appreciate the larger system issues, i.e., working on an annual budget and realizing that increasing rates is the only way to cover costs. They realize that it isn't



easy sitting on the other side of the table and having the citizens taking potshots at them. However, they do need to be integrated into the board. They may approach the initial briefing with the attitude that they are going to tell everyone else how to do things and how things are going to change. My advice: remain patient and calm. The board members each only have one vote and the ongoing day-to-day business of the district/city will cool their ardor in time. Realistically, one person may be able to change the world, but I have never seen them single-handedly change an entire board, even when I wanted them to!

Speaking of change, however, this is an opportunity to influence new board members as well. If the board is lackluster that is not dealing with necessary issues, such as a rate review or changes to city ordinances, now is the chance to delicately influence the board member(s). Become part CSI investigator and part psychologist, but if there's a sense that the new board member could be an ally, then I suggest raising these issues within the context of the long-term plan for the district/city. Maybe others are in agreement and the issue can be raised at a future meeting.

Even helpful, positive new members will not understand the inner workings of the board/council and will need to become familiar with processes. New board members need time to settle in and get accustomed to the pace of board meetings. The initial briefing will provide a great sense of how they will fit into the board, what their strengths and weaknesses will be and where they will need help. I also recommend including a driving tour of the district or city facilities so that the new member(s) can see the scope of the infrastructure. Others might share their desire for a new water tower or point out problems with a pump station. It is okay to overwhelm new board members a bit with technical issues; this helps them appreciate that they need to decide policy and staff should be in charge of operations.

## Hold a board/council workshop

A board/council workshop should be a special training session at which no business is conducted and which is closed to the public. While this is not technically a closed meeting, but really a workshop, check with your attorney in order to make sure that proper notice is prepared. Perhaps call it a board

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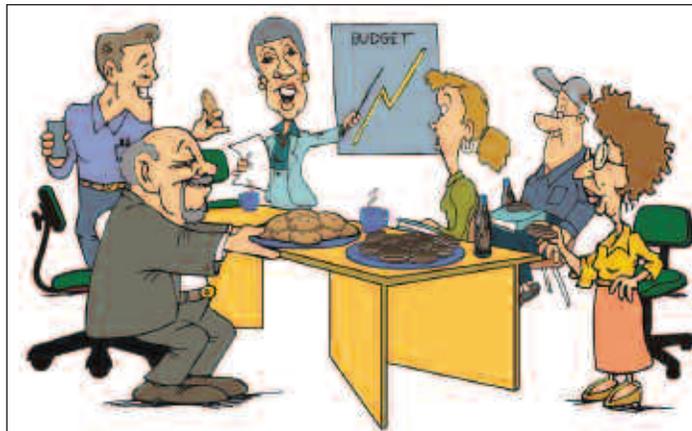
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retreat and hold it somewhere other than the regular meeting location. I recommend holding one of these annually, even if there are no new board members. Every board could use a refresher course on open/closed meeting issues, attendance policy, meeting procedures, tactics for handling contentious issues, etc. As general counsel, I usually prepare an update on new laws that

have been passed which may impact the district or city. I have also seen the accountant come in and make a short presentation on the last audit – again as a refresher. Board members are part-time volunteers and they just don't have that much time to stay current on all the issues. So staff members – help them!

This is also the time that I suggest that managers prepare their State of the District/City address. It is incredibly helpful for board members, old and new alike, to be reminded of the big picture. What is the financial status of the district or city? Is there a five-year plan? A ten-year plan? How many customers are there? What are the revenues? Are they trending up or down? Are there looming territorial issues? Are bonds coming due? Are there new federal/state regulations due to go into effect?

If the board members cannot spare the time for an all day event, at least plan for an evening or Saturday morning. Introduce the new members and encourage the existing board members to share their experiences and goals in a relaxed, more social setting. The board president might take the lead, depending on how the board operates. In a city, the mayor would probably like to step forward and "officiate". In a utility district, the board president might find it just as easy to let the staff do the work.



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Overall, managers really have no choice but to take the high road. Managers are employees, even though they wield tremendous power and influence over day-to-day operations. Take one part educator, one part principal, one part cheer leader and one part guidance counselor and use all those skills to integrate new board members. And yes, this is a lot like high school.

Even if it's only possible to hold a potluck with spouses and a brief discussion of some key issues, the workshop helps build a cohesive environment where hopefully, the board members will work cooperatively together. I am a big believer in demonstrating kindness. New board members are less likely to be disruptive if they are initially treated in a welcoming manner.

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