

# Suggestions for Successful Public Service

*53 ideas on how you  
can govern better*



# 53 Suggestions for Successful Public Service

**1 Learn all you can about your city**, its history, its operation, its financing. Do your homework. Know your city ordinances. Dust off your comprehensive plan.

**2 Devote sufficient time to your office** and to studying the present and future problems of your community.

**3 Don't burn yourself out** on the little things, but recognize that they are often important to the public. Save some energy – and time – for the important matters.



**4 Don't act as a committee of one**; governing a city requires a team effort – practically and legally.

**5 Don't let honest differences of opinion** within the governing body degenerate into personality conflicts.

**6 Remember that you represent all the people** of your community, not just neighbors and friends. Be wary of personal experiences coloring your public decisions.

**7 Take your budget preparation job seriously** for it determines what your city does or does not do for the coming year, and will influence what happens in future years as well.

**8 Establish policy statements.** Written policy statements let the public, and the city staff, know where they stand. They help the governing body govern, and writing them provides a process to develop consensus.

**9 Make decisions on the basis of public policy,** and be consistent. Treat similar situations similarly and avoid favoritism.

**10 Focus your attention on ways to prevent problems** rather than just trying to solve them as they occur. Filling potholes is one approach to governing – developing plans to prevent them is more important.

**11 Don't be misled by the strong demands of special interest groups** who want it done now, their way. Your job is to find the long-term public interest of the community as a whole, and you may be hearing from the wrong people.



**12 Don't be afraid of change.** Don't be content to just follow the routine of your predecessors. Charge your appointed officers and employees with being responsible for new ideas and better ways. Listen to what they have to say.

**13 Don't rush to judgment.** Few final actions have to be taken at the first meeting they are considered. Avoid crisis management.

**14 Don't give quick answers when you are not sure** of the real answer. It may be embarrassing to appear ignorant, but it can be more embarrassing, and damaging, to tell a person something that is wrong.

**15** As an individual, even if you are the mayor, **don't make promises you can't deliver!** Most decisions and actions require approval of the governing body, and this takes a majority vote.

**16** Remember that **you have legal authority as a governing body member** only when the governing body is in legal session.

**17 Don't spring surprises on your fellow governing body members or your city staff, especially at formal meetings.** If a matter is worth bringing up for discussion, it's worth being on the agenda. Surprises may get you some publicity, at the embarrassment of others, and tend to erode the team approach to governance.

**18 Conduct your official public meetings with some formality,** and follow rules of procedure. Have an agenda, and follow it. Most governing body members agree that formal meetings expedite the process, and tend to promote better decision making.



**19 Participate in official meetings with the dignity and decorum** fitting those who hold a position of public trust.

Personal dress and courteous behavior at meetings help create an environment for making sound public decisions.

**20 Don't be afraid to ask questions.** It is one of the ways we learn. But do your homework by studying agenda material before meetings.

**21 Vote yes or no on motions.** Don't cop out by abstaining, except when you have a conflict of interest. A pass does not relieve you of responsibility when some decision must be made.

**22** Once a majority decision of the governing body has been made, **respect that official position**, and defend it if needed, even if you personally disagree.

**23 Respect the letter and intent of the open meetings law.** But also keep private and confidential matters to yourself – don't gossip.

**24 Retain competent, key employees.** Pay them well, trust their professional judgment and recognize their authority and responsibilities.



**25 Don't bypass the system!** If you have a manager or other chief administrative officer, stick to policymaking and avoid personal involvement in the day-to-day operations of the city. If you do not have an administrative officer, make sure you have some management system that officers, employees, and the public understand.

**26 Don't let others bypass the system.** Insist that people such as equipment or service suppliers first work with your city staff. If direct contact with governing body members is necessary, it should be with the governing body as a whole, or a committee, and not on a one-on-one basis.

**27 Don't pass the buck** to the staff or employees when they are only following your policies or decisions.

**28 Don't always take no for an answer.** The right question may be "How can we do this?" instead of "May we do this?" Be positive!

**29 Learn to evaluate recommendations** and alternative courses of action. Ask your staff to provide options. Encourage imaginative solutions.

**30 Avoid taking short-term gains at the expense of long-term losses.** Be concerned with the long-term future of the city.

**31 Be friendly and deal effectively with the news media.** Make sure what you say is what you mean. Lack of good communication, with the media and the public, is one of the big problems of cities.

**32** Remember that what you say, privately and publicly, will often be news. **You live in a glass house.** Avoid over-publicizing minor problems.



**33** In determining the public interest, **balance personal rights and property interests**, the possible harm to a few versus the good of the many. Recognize that in some situations, everyone can't be a winner.

**34 Remember that cities are for people!** Be concerned with the total development – physical, economic and social – of your community.

**35 Don't act as if the city operates in a vacuum.** Cities must work within the intergovernmental system to be effective. Keep in contact and cooperate with your federal, state, county and school officials.

**36 Know your neighbors.** Get to know the officials of neighboring and similar size cities. Visit other cities, particularly those with a reputation of being well run.

**37 Keep your constituents informed,** and encourage citizen participation.



**38 Learn to listen – really listen – to your fellow governing body members and the public.**

Hear what they are trying to say, not just the words spoken.

**39 Expect and respect citizen complaints.** Make sure that your governing body members, and your city, have a way to effectively deal with them. Have a follow-up system.

**40 Be careful about rumors.** Check them out. Help squelch them when you know they are false.

**41 Appoint citizen advisory committees and task forces** when you need them, but be prepared to follow their advice if you use them.

**42 Take care in your appointments to boards and commissions.** Make sure they are willing and capable as well as representative of the whole community.

**43** Never allow conflicts of interest to arise between your public duties and your private interests. **Be sensitive to actions you take that might even give the appearance of impropriety.**

**44 Seek help.** Use manuals, guides and other technical assistance and information available from AWC and other agencies. Attend workshops and conferences put on for the benefit of you and your city.

**45 Pace yourself.** Limit the number of meetings you attend. Set some priorities, including the need to spend time with your family. Recognize that life – and the city – is dependent on a lot of things you have little control over.

**46 Be a leader, as well as part of the team** of elected and appointed officials who were selected to make your city an even better place to live.

**47 Establish some personal goals and objectives.** What do you want to help accomplish this year? Next year?

**48 Help develop some short-term and long-term goals** and objectives for your city and check your progress at least every six months.

**49 Help your city develop a vision of the future.** Plan going from the future to the present and listen to different community voices along the way.

**50 Focus on the future,** and try to leave your city better than that which you inherited as a city officer.



**51** At least once a year, **schedule a governing body discussion about how you are governing.** Review the processes and procedures. Sit back and ask, “How are we doing? How can we do things better?”

**52** **Be enthusiastic about your public service,** and the privilege you have, and let the public know it. But maintain your sense of humor. Don’t take yourself or the business of government so seriously that you don’t enjoy it. It should be fun as well as a rewarding experience.

**53** **Celebrate!** Always focusing on problems and issues may lead you and the public to believe that nothing positive ever happens. Good things do happen. Let the public share our successes.



# Approaches to Governing

Public officials have different styles or approaches to governing. It is vital that a governing body, and its members, spend at least some time on governing – leadership, providing direction, and making policy.

Once in a while sit back and think about “Where do I, an individual, spend most of my time?” “Where does my governing body spend most of its time?” “Where should we spend more of our time?”

## Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you often **propose**, or do you usually **dispose** of those matters brought before you?
- Do you **act**, or do you primarily **react**?
- Do you **plan ahead**, or do you spend most of your time **responding** to the immediate issues confronting you?
- Are you concerned about **tomorrow**, or mostly about **today**?
- Do you **initiate**, or do you mostly **review**?
- Are you more concerned with **preventing problems**, or in **solving problems** once they occur?
- Are you **responsive to change**, or more interested in **preserving the status quo**?
- Are you a **homemaker**, or a **housekeeper**? (There is a difference between the two.)
- Do you try to **exercise control**, or are you primarily **controlled by events** and the actions of others?
- Do you provide some **sense of direction** to your government, or do you **muddle through**?
- Do you **manage**, or are you **managed**?

- Are you part of **an organized team**, or **a collection of people**?
- Do you **lead**, or do you **follow**?
- Do you **set goals**, or do you specialize in **crisis management**?
- Do you **make policy**, or simply **accumulate policy** by individual actions?
- And finally, do you **govern**, or are you **governed**?

Use the table on the following page to summarize your answers. For each approach, write down the percentage of time you spend, totaling 100%. For example, you may spend 10% for propose, and 90% for dispose. Then do the same thing for your governing body as a whole on the table that follows.

Looking at the proportionate amount of time spent on each of the options can bring some misleading connotations. The quality of effort may be much more significant than quantity of time. A typical governing body may spend less than 10% of its time on the left hand side. Given the nature of public service at the local level, the great bulk of time must normally be spent on day-to-day concerns, commonly on the right hand side of the ledger.

In helping you more clearly see where you and your governing body spend most of your time, these tables may help you answer the question “**Where should we spend more time?**”

**Percentage of time spent by you:**

		%		%
1.	Propose		Dispose	
2.	Act		React	
3.	Plan Ahead		Respond	
4.	Tomorrow		Today	
5.	Initiate		Review	
6.	Prevent Problems		Solve Problems	
7.	Responsive to Change		Preserve Status Quo	
8.	Homemaker		Housekeeper	
9.	Control		Controlled	
10.	Direct		Muddle Through	
11.	Manage		Managed	
12.	Organized Team		Collection of People	
13.	Lead		Follow	
14.	Set Goals		Crisis Management	
15.	Make Policy		Accumulate Policy	
16.	Govern		Governed	

**Percentage of time spent by governing body:**

		%		%
1.	Propose		Dispose	
2.	Act		React	
3.	Plan Ahead		Respond	
4.	Tomorrow		Today	
5.	Initiate		Review	
6.	Prevent Problems		Solve Problems	
7.	Responsive to Change		Preserve Status Quo	
8.	Homemaker		Housekeeper	
9.	Control		Controlled	
10.	Direct		Muddle Through	
11.	Manage		Managed	
12.	Organized Team		Collection of People	
13.	Lead		Follow	
14.	Set Goals		Crisis Management	
15.	Make Policy		Accumulate Policy	
16.	Govern		Governed	



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