

FINAL ESSAY

BETH FRAILEY KRISHTALKA
APRIL 2, 2007

EDWIN O. STENE
MASTER'S PROGRAM IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS
LAWRENCE, KANSAS

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It seems to happen most often on those evenings when the City Commission moves for extension after extension, pushing back the time for general public comment. Tonight was no exception. The elderly gentleman had been sitting next to me all evening, patiently waiting out the discussion of agenda items, with clipboard, his notes and the morning's Journal World newspaper article in hand. As the evening wore on he began to wear out. The room had all but emptied out when general public comment arrived. Though age had slowed his movements and stooped his posture, his words were strong when he finally reached the podium. Fixing our new city manager with a stern look, he held up the newspaper article and politely—but emphatically—took the Commission to task for its decision to raise the manager's salary after only a few months on the job. A brief discussion ensued, explanations were proffered and accepted, and the evening ended shortly after 11:00 with civil discourse still alive and well in the City of Lawrence, Kansas.

Lawrence City Commission Meeting
3/6/2007

Introduction

These close-of-business conversations between elected officials and those they serve capture the essence of local government: a place where decisions are made in a real-time, next-door venue. Whether it is a senior's concern about the pace of compensation increases or a pet lover's distress about over a beloved pit bull's incarceration in the animal shelter, or a homeless shelter advocate's plea for more funds, this part of the agenda always brings home to me the fact that local government matters. It matters because of the immediacy of the concerns, the visible impacts on quality of life issues, the short linkages between the funding sources tapped and funds deployed and the few degrees of separation between decision makers, professional staff, service providers and residents. Everything is on the table...and to at least one person, it usually matters, now.

When I started down the path of public management in 2005, my focus was on expanding my skills so that I could be an even stronger community advocate either in the nonprofit or governmental sphere, especially for children and youth. My past legal experience, years of volunteer activities and recent consulting business had provided me with a portfolio of skills and

experiences to draw upon in starting up local initiatives and advocating for increased community collaboration. Still, I recognized that public management credentials would make it easier for me to move to the next critical level of becoming a policy and funding decision maker instead of being the one always seeking funding under guidelines and goals established by others.

From the people to whom I spoke and the reputation preceding it, I knew I would be able to obtain the skills I sought were I to be accepted into the Edwin O. Stene Master's Program in Public Administration at the University of Kansas. What I did not expect was how dramatically my professional interests would shift over the past two years from a focus on nongovernmental organizations to management from the perspective of the city manager's office to more operational departments such as utilities and public works. Both through academics and internships, I have gained a greater appreciation of the human resource, operational, financial and community intricacies of providing front-line, essential, public services.

Taking a page from the Balanced Scorecard used by city staff to measure performance and progress towards City of Lawrence Commission goals, this essay views my experiences as a Master's of Public Administration (MPA) student and major changes in my public management perspective through four broad lenses: Employee Readiness and Growth, Financial Performance, Operational Performance and Customer Feedback. As Management Partners advised in its briefing to the Commission, "the value of a scorecard system comes from the continuous self-inquiry and in-depth analysis that is at the heart of all strategic planning and performance management systems" (http://www.lawrenceks.org/study_session_2006/09-14-06/09-14-06h/09-14-06_ssagenda_click_here.html).

This statement might well have been written by a Kansas University City Managers and Trainees (KUCIMAT) colleague, one of whom I interviewed from Management Partners as part

of an assignment while attending my first International City Managers Association convention in Minneapolis, Minnesota in September 2005. The advice certainly echoes the emphasis placed by the MPA Program faculty on self-knowledge and mastery of analytical tools. It is advice well taken and a guiding principle for this reflective essay about the impact of the MPA Program on my public administration and management experiences.

Employee Readiness and Growth

The strategic human resources model is a synthetic approach to the accomplishment of organizational goals based on recognition of the valuable assets represented by human capital, the purposeful deployment of those assets and a careful assessment of environmental factors external to the organization upon which goal achievement may ultimately depend.

Beth Frailey Krishtalka
PUAD 834, 9/19/2005

Strategic human resource management: a phrase about which volumes have been written, both by John Nalbandian and others. Each of the four words in this phrase is significant in its own right. Together, these words encapsulate complementary theories, practices, values and goals for ensuring that local government has the human assets needed to delivery excellent municipal services to its community.

This is no small charge, financially or managerially. Personnel costs are a large part of every budget, either directly or through outsourced services. Costs are allocated to recruitment of the best qualified applicants, competitive compensation packages, continuous improvement costs, intervention and oversight systems, risk management and/or organizational deployment. Staff decisions today establish financial commitments impacting the so-called “bottom line” now and over time. As an intern I poured over job position descriptions from comparable municipal systems as part of the annual market survey and pay plan activities. Other parts of the compensation package are no less important, as evidenced by the detailed analyses and communications I’ve provided this year as project lead on a not-yet-completed transfer of

employee benefit plan assets to a new provider as part of an administrative services commitment to improving retirement savings programs for employees. Participation in workplace investigations has given me insight into the “he said, she said, they said” complexities of interpersonal relationships in workplace settings.

Wise, strategic stewardship of high-dollar human assets is essential if local government is to fulfill a commonly stated mission of providing excellent city services enhancing the quality of community life. In furtherance of effective stewardship, a “know thyself” theme pervaded more than one of my MPA courses, along with a host of personal assessment analyses, including relationship awareness theory and the Strength Deployment Inventory® (SDI):

We had spent the past few weeks [in early September] comparing our individual scores on the...[SDI], which had started me thinking more about the myriad approaches to problem solving and leadership, each approach carrying with it different costs and benefits. It seemed to me that everyone in that classroom had leadership potential, whether or not they chose to advertise that fact or seek out that role at every opportunity....The underlying premise of SDI is a seemingly simple schema of colors and linked behavioral patterns: blue for more caring types, red for more dominant types and green for more analytical types. “More” was an important modifier for me in thinking about these SDI scores because everyone’s score was multi-hued.

Beth Frailey Krishtalka
PUAD 845, 12/12/2005

I easily recognized myself as the “green hub” SDI tagged me as being, given my private practice focus on complex, technical legal issues, my organizational and strategic skills in developing start-up initiatives, my ongoing commitment to community collaboration and my fascination with systems of all kinds. In hindsight, these SDI scores make my current professional interest with operational departments understandable, especially considering how rife these departments are with technically trained, mechanically adept, strategic, system-based thinkers. The range in staff educational and personal backgrounds and ongoing community interactions at all staff levels only adds to what a green hub like me prefers to view as interesting management challenges.

SDI and other inventories remind me that successful management occurs across all personality types. The intensive Internship Option track of the MPA Program provided multiple opportunities for me to use our small KUCIMAT07 class as a learning lab, particularly those kinder, gentler blues (most of whom are male, as it turns out). Leadership skills manifest themselves differently for them than for me, but those blue strategies were obviously just as successful as my own and maybe sometimes even more so, depending upon the situation. Out in practice as an intern, I continue to think about how the blues might respond as issues arise and borrow blue responses on an as needed basis, as other successful greens I talk with seem to do.

Financial Performance

“Regarding the upcoming election, and any elections in the foreseeable future: If there are any bonds, taxes, fees, levies or anything else that will cost us even one red cent more, I am voting a resounding NO.” Donald Taber, disgruntled citizen, Letter to the Editor, Lawrence Journal-World, 3/20/05

Justin Marlowe’s Lecture Notes
PUAD 837, 8/31/2005

Local government is an expensive proposition, with no deep pocket in sight. Multiple competing needs, unfunded mandates, diverse community sectors, a mix of attenuated funding streams, aging infrastructure, new development needs and the visible taxation of city residents through overlapping local jurisdictions involving the school district, the county and the city present ongoing challenges to successful fiscal coordination and preservation of fiscal capacity. New development provides new economic opportunities but also presents new funding needs if related costs are not recouped through the economic engines driving development. Moreover, in a global market economy, a Chinese sneeze can send shivers through the Kansas economy and become one of many factors impacting forecasted local revenues from sales, property and income taxes and user fees.

As a relatively recent transplant from the East Coast, the “lions and tigers and bears...oh my!” phrase memorialized by Kansas’ Dorothy had fresh meaning as I contemplated the public finance, budget and quantitative analysis course requirements of the MPA Program. Statistics in particular loomed dark and heavy on the horizon. Conceptually, I did not anticipate major challenges, having successfully tackled every technical corporate, securities and tax course my law school offered and later practiced in those areas, but those mathematical applications, formulas, equations and Excel spreadsheets made me shudder.

Two months shy of graduation, with almost two years worth of internships behind me, these three courses are turning out to be the gifts that keep on giving in terms of usable skills, analytical frameworks and applied knowledge. Having been one of those committed community volunteers who was always advocating for more resources and services, I now find myself with a fuller—though perhaps not rosier—picture of the challenges facing public managers and elected officials in developing budgets, formulating capital improvement programs, issuing debt and raising taxes while still planning for the future. Intergenerational equity has been a recurring theme in many of my courses, financial or otherwise. I recognize the need to factor these future and often hidden costs whenever possible into city-community discussions of current needs.

Following the money is certainly not the primary focus of local government and public service. Still, money drives government activity, as strategic presidential refusals to sign budget bills make clear. “Service” necessitates trained staff and, as budgets make clear, staff costs are significant. Infrastructure costs, though perhaps not as recurring, are also significant expenditures, with fiscal impact spilling over a structure’s usable life if not financed appropriately. Understanding the “who, what, where, when and why” of municipal finances is critical to effective public management. Barring such understanding, managers such as I may

lack the tools we need to be strategic advocates for needed municipal services, infrastructure and resources. Public management analysts talk about incremental change at the governmental level. No argument from me there...but from a financial perspective, community needs and revenues streams often rise and fall in pulses rather than incrementally depending upon, *e.g.*, a costly and newly mandated levee inspection in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a marked slowdown in the rate of property value appreciation or a national catastrophe impacting sales tax revenues.

Local government generates lots of data across all departments, data that more often than not seems to go unanalyzed due to the exigencies of staff activities in meeting more immediate public service needs. In looking over my past two years of internships I regret how few projects afforded me the opportunity to delve as deeply into municipal finance and work as closely with department data as I might have liked. As I consider my professional next step, I am staying attuned to opportunities for strengthening my financial knowledge, skills and abilities, particularly given their ready transferability to all aspects of public management.

Operational Performance

Longtime City Manager Mike Wildgen resigned Wednesday....When pressed, Highberger said concerns about the inability to provide adequate sewer service to growing parts of town and the need to rehabilitate major portions of the city's street network were prime factors in the decision to seek Wildgen's resignation....As city manager, Wildgen generally was regarded as the most powerful nonelected official in city government. He oversaw the city's \$126 million budget and had final authority on all personnel matters related to the city's 750-member work force.

Lawrence Journal World, 3/9/2006

Do all city managers and county administrators have exit strategies? Oh, probably. Certainly all the ones I've ever talked with or observed seem to have exit strategies of some sort in place. Top positions in public management seem to best suit those who are able to balance a passionate commitment to public service with a dispassionate appraisal of political realities. In addition to a thick skin and ability to withstand controversy, exit strategies seem to be necessary

components to the occupational hazards of public service. Does that fact sometimes give me pause as I stand on the threshold of entering a new public management career? Of course.

As public servants, we often find ourselves doing our jobs in high stakes situations, from saving lives to putting out fires to times when people might feel their livelihood or freedoms are adversely impacted by what we say or do. Some of us are more likely than others to be involved directly with the public, but all of us work in a public arena, and we are often out in the community doing our job. Depending on the form of local government, frequency of elections, citizen engagement, recent controversies and mix of personalities, today's policy decisions hold the potential of creating a legacy for innovative and forward-thinking solutions or generating a backlog of infrastructure needs, service delivery gaps and to-be-discovered problems.

Ensuring requisite staff expertise, resources and funding for optimal operational performance is an important responsibility of public managers. Operational performance, in turn, covers everything from the percent of completed rezoning applications to pavement condition index ratings to available parking spaces in the downtown business district to the average emergency response times to potable water. Big or small, mundane or life-threatening, it all matters and it all impacts the quality of life in local communities.

To this observer, the relationship between professional experts (city staff) and political decision makers (elected officials) plays out most dramatically in the arena of operational performance, particularly in terms of policy decisions regarding revenue streams and allocations and professional decisions regarding staff and operations. Successful, excellent city services often involve a seamless, mostly invisible delivery system, at least to the casual observer. City staff works hard and usually in the background to make sure systems are in place, up to date, functional and with adequate (if not redundant) capacity. When systems go awry, fingers start

pointing, questions get asked, hindsight solutions are offered, the most powerful nonelected official is held accountable and recall elections may be called.

Visits to public facilities in the Kansas communities of Chanute, Lawrence, Merriam, North Kansas City and Overland Park have helped me gain a greater appreciation for the technical skills, long-range planning and fiscal impacts of maintaining and anticipating infrastructure needs. Hanging on the back of a solid waste truck last summer as I worked with a crew to collect commercial and residential trash in downtown Lawrence and nearby neighborhoods and to dump in it at the Hamm Sanitary Landfill gave me a up close and personal appreciation of what it means to be providing front-line services to this college community.

Customer Feedback

Joe Delaney says, "it's a student ghetto, and if you don't like the noise, then don't live here." My neighborhood is NOT a student ghetto...the home-owners are families with pre-school children, retirees, and working people. [P]arents have started buying homes in the neighborhood...and then sticking their KU students into the homes, which then become party places. We've had tons of trash in our yards, drunk people shouting and fighting at all hours of the day and night...and a zillion other negative experiences that destroy our peace of mind and quality of life.... You can rest assured that I and my neighbors will call the police for every infraction of the Disorderly House Nuisance, and if "students"...don't like it, they are free to go to college somewhere else.

Posted by kkreiker, 2/21/2006, 6:32 AM
Jarboe, K., *Paying the price for nuisance noise.*
<http://dev.kansan.com/stories/2006/feb/16/noise>

For residents of college towns like Lawrence, students create their own version of Herman Hesse's "stream of life," as they pass through town in transition from being teenagers to becoming adults. Most are long gone before the transition is complete, leaving behind the detritus of their collegial lives and uneasy town-gown relationships. At the start of my Lawrence internship, I had the opportunity to sit in on the very first noise regulation hearing conducted by the Neighborhood Resources Department. Although my hearing involved a much older set of

neighbors, it became apparent early on that neighborliness was as far gone between them as in the above-quoted posting.

The mix of community collaboration, compromise, discord, antipathy and distrust provide a rich growing medium for the successful, responsive delivery of public services—or not. A wise government shares information and seeks citizen feedback through multiple venues, while still finding ways to move forward. As an intern over in Shawnee, I frequently wrote humorous little articles for the *Shawnee CityLine* gently nudging residents about community responsibilities.

At least as important is letting citizens know their volunteer input matters, a fact resoundingly brought home to me last week when I thanked someone for a detailed summary about early stormwater efforts in Lawrence, only to learn that I had just made her day. She informed me I was the first city staff member ever to respond in a positive manner to her efforts, and this from a property owner who had donated a large tract of land to the city in years past and was actively participating in at least one advisory committee. Whether her perceptions matched up with the facts is perhaps another matter, but as the MPA faculty warns, perception is as potent as facts when it comes to community matters. This citizen's comments brought home to me the need to maintain a continuous communication loop so that engaged citizens feel appreciated.

As Carol Gonzales, the city manager in Shawnee, Kansas, for whom I interned last year likes to say, it's the little things that matter. I agree. And so, as I go out into the world of public management, I plan to keep those little things in mind, those "thank yous" close at hand and those public service values front and center, whether analyzing the need for new infrastructure, listening to citizen advice, implementing continuous improvement strategies or holding the door wide open for a visitor to City Hall.