

# Today's Local Government Management Model

It's broken, so let's fix it



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I am of the opinion that if you have tried something for one or two decades and it is not working, then you should try something else. I am not referring to the council-manager, strong mayor, or other forms of local government, but rather the way that managers do their work regardless of the form of government.

My hypothesis is that the local government model is not working, and managers need to change that model.

This hypothesis is based on my 24 years of experience as a city manager and my continuing work with local government as a trainer and consultant over the past eight years. Being removed from the day-to-day stress of managing a city provided me the time to reflect and learn from my experiences.

The objective of this article is to describe the existing model and propose a different, more effective one.

## **EXISTING MODEL: “BITCH AND FIX”**

Unfortunately, most managers operate under the “bitch and fix” model. Residents get to gripe, and the local government manager believes the issue must be fixed.

A local government and its residents become caught in this model, even though neither likes it. Although they don’t particularly like the model, each group gets enough out of it to prevent changing it.

As local government officials, managers don’t want to lose control over solving problems. They think they have the right answers and accept the belief that they must fix everything.

Residents are not willing to accept their share of the responsibility and accountability for the quality of life of their neighborhoods. As a result, their behavior is to complain about issues.

Managers and residents are in this dance together. They must change the music and the steps since they can’t change their partners. I believe it is the responsibility of local government to initiate this change.

Let’s break the existing model down into three components: assumptions, processes, and attitudes. Then, let’s compare it to the new model: partnerships.

**Assumptions under the existing model:** Managers tend to make these assumptions about who does what:

### **Local government:**

- Is responsible for the quality of life in a community.
- Must solve people’s problems.
- Requires little of residents.

### **Elected officials:**

- Are elected to fix all problems.

### **Residents:**

- Act and feel like they should be treated as customers.

### **Local government managers:**

- Make all the above happen.

**Decision-making process under the existing model:** Nearly all decisions affecting residents are made by staff and elected officials. Managers talk about engaging residents; however, residents are most often approached with the end decision in mind and the locality tries to convince them to accept it.

Local government has a defined mindset about how decisions need to be made:

- **Staff:** They have the expertise and data to solve all problems.
- **Elected officials:** They were elected to make all decisions and be the “decider.”

- **Residents:** They don't have the expertise, time, or persistence to solve problems. If we involve the public, then we can't control them. The same people attend meetings, which often turns into chaos.

**Attitudes under the existing model:** I've found that managers have a negative view of the public. When I conduct civic engagement training for managers and elected officials, I ask participants to shout out the first adjective that pops into their head when they hear the word "public."

Overwhelmingly, managers consistently describe the public with negative adjectives about 80 percent of the time, and elected officials describe the public with negative adjectives 70 percent of the time.

Some of the common negative adjectives I hear about the public are: uninformed, not interested, entitled, rude, NIMBY (Not-In-My-Back-Yard) driven, and blames others. There are plenty of studies that show that the public also has negative images of government employees.

This deep-seated negative attitude about the public directly and adversely impacts the way managers engage the public, solve problems, and make decisions.

Conclusion: The existing model described here does not work well. Community and management problems today are more wicked and complex so managers must consider alternatives. They have less revenue and fewer resources with the same high level of expectation from residents, but the model has not changed.

When communities were resource rich, managers could compensate for a broken model. They cannot afford to do that anymore.

## **NEW MODEL: PARTNERSHIP WITH RESIDENTS**

The difficult challenges that local governments face will only be solved in partnership with residents acting like citizens.<sup>1</sup> Residents must assist government to develop solutions to such problems as crime, gangs, drugs, failing schools, and homelessness.

Managers need to partner with residents in both identifying alternatives and in implementing solutions. Without active involvement by residents, the problems will never be solved solely by government.

This model does not mean to imply that managers expect residents to help government pave streets, trim trees, or hire employees.

**Different assumptions under the new model:** Managers need to make these different assumptions:

### **Local government:**

- Can't solve all problems alone and never could.
- Are partially—but not completely—responsible for the quality of life.

### **Elected officials:**

- Set priorities and allocate resources for the most pressing issues.

### **Residents:**

- Need to act more as citizens and less like customers.
- Must take shared responsibility for the quality of life in their neighborhoods.

### **Local government managers:**

- Facilitate cooperative problem solving rather than always solving problems themselves.

**Different decision-making process under the new model:** If managers are going to form an effective partnership with residents, they must build strong and successful relationships. Relationship building happens in two ways.

First, neighbors must build relationships with each other. Second, local government must develop strong relationships with neighborhoods.

Managers must openly and effectively engage residents. This does not and cannot happen at council or commission meetings. So what are the new roles and mindsets of the various parties in the new decision-making process?

- **Staff:** Doesn't have all the expertise or correct answers. Combining staff's expertise with citizen's expertise will yield better decisions.
- **Elected officials:** For the really challenging problems, establish a collaborative problem-solving process that involves a partnership with residents, within the legislative body's broad policies, limits, and boundaries.
- **Residents:** Take responsibility to cooperatively work with staff to solve problems.
- **Local government managers:** Facilitate problem solving. Do not always solve the problem yourself.

**Different attitudes under the new model:** Studies have proven that we can't permanently change a long-term behavior without first changing our attitude. Quitting smoking or losing weight, for example, does not happen without first changing the attitude we have around those issues.

Managers need to develop a more positive attitude of the public. They also need to understand that our residents:

- Have skills and expertise.
- Are smarter than we give them credit for.
- Will become involved and develop creative solutions if engaged correctly.
- Can become a valuable partner, not an enemy.

### **HOW WILL WE CHANGE TO THE NEW MODEL?**

Change will not be easy. Managers need to change their attitudes, roles, and assumptions, and they must learn new leadership skills.

**Partnership model:** The partnership model has positive outcomes and benefits for residents and local government leaders alike:

- Provides a positive outlet for the energy and talents of the public to help solve problems.
- Rids local government of ways of thinking and behaving that are ineffective.
- Reduces the stress and anxiety of professional managers and elected officials by developing a cooperative problem-solving process.
- Makes residents positive stewards of their own neighborhoods.
- Unleashes enormous potential for local government.
- Builds and strengthens the community.

Local government leaders must learn the leadership skills of civic engagement and community building.

**Residents as citizens, not customers:** Customers tend to behave in similar ways. They name, blame, complain, and find fault. They also think in terms of "I" or "me," and feel entitled and demand that someone else solve their problems. Customers don't make good partners because they don't feel it is their responsibility to help government solve tough problems. As a result, it is difficult to engage them.

Think of yourself in a store when you have not received the help you needed. We often name, blame, complain, and find fault. We do not think about the concerns of other customers, and we demand someone solve our problem.

Citizens act quite differently. They want to solve problems. Citizens understand that they are partially responsible and accountable for the safety and quality of life of their neighborhoods. Citizens make good partners and are much easier to engage.

We must treat our residents as citizens and expect them to share responsibility for the quality of their neighborhood. Even though residents are sometimes customers, they are primarily residents with a shared responsibility to help government solve tough problems.

**Civic engagement leadership skills:** Civic engagement is the skill of designing and facilitating an effective civic engagement process. Civic engagement requires asking quality questions of citizens and engaging them in an open and productive discussion while local government listens and learns. It is another key tool in the leadership toolbox.

Civic engagement is not about having more meetings. It is not about getting more people to attend unsuccessful meetings. Civic engagement cannot and will not happen at regular council or commission meetings. It happens outside those meetings, and, if done correctly, makes those meetings more effective.

Civic engagement is not something a local government needs to do on most issues. It is most useful when applied to problems:

- Fraught with strong values or emotions.
- Needing community support.
- Having more than one right answer.

Local government cannot perform successful civic engagement if managers continue to hold that 80 percent negative image of the public. Civic engagement can take place using such various forums as traditional meetings, online discussions, a “marketplace of ideas,” and design charrettes.

There are several online applications that can be helpful, including Peak Democracy, MindMixer, and UserVoice. Personally, I have found Peak Democracy the best online platform for civil discussion.

**Community building leadership skills:** Local government’s most important infrastructure is the community. The potential that resides in our community is huge. Without a strong partnership and involvement of citizens, local government will never solve the tough problems of gangs, drugs, crime, failing schools, homelessness, lack of affordable housing, and child obesity.

Based on my city manager experience in Redwood City, California, community building must start at the neighborhood level. While I was manager, a national study by Pew Research Center in June 2010 showed that a majority of the city’s residents didn’t know 50 percent of their neighbors.

Neighbors must get to know their neighbors. When residents know their neighbors, they become more informed and involved. When they are more informed and involved, they become more committed to their specific neighborhood.

When they are more committed, they take pride in their neighborhood. As residents take pride in their neighborhood, they are more willing to be engaged and help make it stronger and safer.

Once residents connect with their neighbors, they are better able to then connect with local government. Local government can encourage building community by playing four important roles: 1) raising consciousness, 2) being a catalyst, 3) acting as a convener, and 4) becoming a facilitator. Nextdoor, Front Porch Forum, EveryBlock, and rBlock are websites used by neighbors to stay connected.

## **TIME FOR A NEW JOURNEY**

Managers are spending enormous time and energy on a model that does not work well. They are frustrated and tired of being yelled at, criticized, and blamed. The public is frustrated with being left out. Let’s quit beating our head against the old model and try the partnership model.

Of course, the change will be difficult. There are limited resources, and managers must learn new roles and skills. They must ask residents to spend some of their precious time helping local government.

Moving to the new model will require all of us to change: elected officials, managers, and residents. We will all be challenged. Elected officials will need to open the decision-making process to residents.

Managers will need to relax their need to be in control and rethink the way they always reach decisions. Residents will need to take some responsibility for the quality of life of their neighborhoods and their communities.

Let's all start this journey.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Citizen" in this context has nothing to do with legal status but means anyone who works and lives in a local government.

**FIGURE 1. Summary of Old and New Management Models in This Article.**

OLD	NEW
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- "Bitch and Fix" Model (Public as necessary evil)</li><li>- Resident as customer</li><li>- Local government is the decider</li><li>- City organization centric</li><li>- Service delivery focus</li><li>- Manager as problem solver</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Partnership Model (Public as partner)</li><li>- Resident as citizen</li><li>- Civic engagement</li><li>- Building community</li><li>- Community building/service focus</li><li>- Manager as engager and community builder</li></ul>

## RESOURCES

More information on the civic engagement process can be found in ICMA's *InFocus* report: "How Civic Engagement Transforms Community Relationships" (Volume 4, No. 4, 2011). Single-copy online issues are \$12.95 (ICMA members) and \$19.95 (nonmembers) at <http://icma.org/en/press/digital.>

Additional information about community building can be found in ICMA's *I.Q. Report*: "Community Building: How to Do It, Why It Matters" (Volume 41, No. 4, 2009, at <http://icma.org/en/press/digital>. Same pricing structure as noted above.).

You can also explore the topics of citizen engagement on ICMA's Knowledge Network at [icma.org/kn](http://icma.org/kn).