Mayors Who Make a Difference
James H. Svara
Arizona State University

As the challenges facing local government become more complex, cities have an even greater need for an effective political leader. Mayors can make a difference by providing a sense of direction, coalescing the council, and helping to ensure that all key actors work together effectively.

The common impression from the media is that the mayor in the mayor-council form of government has the leadership advantage. The mayor in council-manager cities is dismissed as a “weak mayor” and a figurehead. Based on the case studies of mayors from 14 diverse cities, The Facilitator in City Hall offers a different conclusion and new perspective on leadership: all mayors can make a difference by becoming a facilitative visionary leader to their council members and within their city.

The facilitative visionary leader is the most effective leadership style regardless of the form of government. All cities need visionary leadership, and all mayors can be visionaries regardless of their formal powers. Just as important, mayors should be facilitators who draw out the contributions of the council and administrative staff. The facilitative visionary leadership style is the preferred approach in a shared power world where no one is or can be in charge.

Vision and Facilitation

When mayors are visionary and use facilitative leadership, the city council performs better. This kind of mayor enhances the combined leadership of all officials. This approach looks at the combined “power to” of all officials rather than the mayor’s “power over” other officials. One could argue that the council-manager mayor has an advantage. The mayor can develop a broader base of support by sharing credit and building partnerships, particularly with the council, and the council as a whole receives the advice and support of the city manager. The potential for the mayor to provide leadership should be assessed in terms of the overall capacity of the governmental system to address problems and deliver solutions on a sustained basis.

Top leaders work with an increasing number of people inside and outside city government whom they do not control. In an era of partnerships and networking – in a world in which no one is in charge – mayors have to lead by creating shared goals and by bringing diverse stakeholders together to accomplish them.

Evidence of Impact

Mayors in council-manager cities can be classified as (a) caretakers if they fill the position in a minimal way, (b) coordinators if they promote communication within the council and positive relations with the city manager, and (c) goal setters if they are effective at coordination and also help the council set goals. Research shows that when the mayor is a caretaker, most council members rate their own performance as average or poor at handling their governance responsibilities. With a coordinator, most council members feel they do a good job. When the
mayor promotes coordination and offers vision, that is serves as a visionary facilitator, nine out of ten council members think they do at least a good job and half rate their performance as excellent.

**How to Improve Leadership?**

The challenge is that less than half of the council-manager mayors are perceived by their councils to be visionary, although it is more likely if they are directly elected. Leadership can be expanded by a better understanding of the nature of the top elected official’s position and by encouraging more creative and courageous persons to run for the office. Misconceptions about the position cause many assertive leaders to feel that they must try to “take charge” to be a leader. In contrast, facilitative mayors “take responsibility” for creating the conditions that enhance the performance of all officials. Mayors should promote their vision but incorporate the ideas of others as well. They should pull the council together to create support for a shared vision and improve communication. Mayors in all kinds of cities can enhance their leadership by moving toward the facilitative visionary model. In so doing, they not only expand their own contribution but expand the contributions of council members and top administrators as well.

---

**James H. Svara, Ph.D.** is a Professor in the School of Public Affairs and the Director of the Center for Urban Innovation at Arizona State University. He is the editor of *The Facilitator in City Hall*. He is presenting a workshop on visionary facilitative mayors in the Leadership Training Institute at the National League of Cities annual conference in San Antonio. He can be contacted at james.svara@asu.edu.