



PROFESSION OF DOERS

Advice for the Aspiring Public Servant

Written By:

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2017 Urban Management Assistants of North Texas President

A Special Thank You

I want to give a tremendous thank you to the managers who took time out of their busy schedules to meet with me. This guide would not have been possible without their advice and sincere desire to mentor emerging leaders:

- **Wes Pierson**, City Manager, Addison, TX
- **Eric Ellwanger**, Assistant City Manager, Allen, TX
- **Peter Vargas**, City Manager, Allen, TX
- **Shelli Siemer**, Assistant City Manager, Allen, TX
- **Erin Rinehart**, City Manager, Carrollton, TX
- **James Fisher**, former City Manager, Forney, TX
- **Tom Hart**, City Manager, Grand Prairie, TX
- **Matt Mueller**, City Manager, Little Elm, TX
- **Paul Grimes**, City Manager, McKinney, TX
- **Cliff Keheley**, City Manager, Mesquite, TX
- **Mark Hindman**, City Manager, North Richland Hills, TX
- **Paulette Hartman**, Assistant City Manager, North Richland Hills, TX; former City Manager of Joshua, TX
- **Bruce Glasscock**, City Manager, Plano, TX
- **Mark Israelson**, Deputy City Manager, Plano, TX
- **Jack Carr**, Deputy City Manager, Plano, TX
- **Dan Johnson**, City Manager, Richardson, TX
- **Shana Yelverton**, City Manager, Southlake, TX
- **Robbie Corder**, City Manager, University Park, TX
- **Lea Dunn**, Director of Organizational Development, University Park, TX; former City Manager of Addison, TX



What do you want to be when you grow up?

A question we've all been asked since we learned to talk. Typical answers are astronaut, fireman, teacher, police officer, doctor, lawyer, etc.

I've never heard City Manager in that list. When I realized that local government was my future career, I began reading books on leadership and management. Most of the books, however, are written from the private sector perception. While there are countless similarities, a career in public service takes a special kind of person: **a doer**. A person with a servant's heart that, at the end of the day, realizes that their profession is all about the people they serve: the community, the Council, the employees, and the visitors. As I started to think about what I want my legacy to be as the 2017 Urban Management Assistants of North Texas President, I wanted to focus on preparing emerging local government leaders for taking on the next step in their career.

Over the course of several months, I interviewed 19 local government leaders made up of new City Managers, tenured City Managers, former City Managers, and Deputy and Assistant City Managers, and asked them the questions that emerging leaders are pining to know the answers to. This guide is intended to help early professionals be proactive in making opportunities for them to be successful in their current and future positions. I asked each manager the same questions and compiled their answers to form the following pieces of advice for career advancement. I hope this guide helps you as much as it has helped me.

- Caitlan Biggs

Be A Learner

Once you've graduated with your MPA, you're ready to take on the world and you know everything there is to know about local government. Right?

Wrong. The desire and willingness to learn and ask questions can not stop with a degree in hand if you want to be successful in this career field.

The managers mentioned the following departments that are critical for a City Manager to have a basic understanding of:

- **Finance/Budget:** how the budget and budget process work and be able to communicate it to the public
- **Human Resources:** learning how to master the art of having a difficult conversation in an appropriate and compliant manner
- **Public Safety:** know enough to be able to hire good chiefs to run operations
- **Development:** what is involved with negotiating incentive deals and land use rules and regulations

Additionally, some managers mentioned that it's less about knowing the subject matter, and more about having a general knowledge of every department and possessing the ability to learn how to manage anything whether you know a lot about it or not. This type of experience can be gained by leading a team or committee that is cross-departmental, giving you the latitude to manage from a strategic level.

Have the guts to stand up and tell people what you want and be bold enough to ask for help to get there.

- Tom Hart, Grand Prairie, TX

Be A Learner

As you get promoted, you're one step away from losing your vulnerability to say "I don't know." As a manager, you're held to an unrealistic expectation of knowing everything about everything. By raising your hand and asking the right questions, you gain experience that you might not get otherwise. Don't be afraid to say "I don't know, but will you teach me?" Most managers are mentors by nature and admire the young professionals who take the initiative to learn.

There are several ways to learn after your graduate, you just have to be willing and eager to ask. Some ideas to gain knowledge outside of your current scope would be to volunteer to do research on an issue, set up a one-on-one meeting with a director over a specific function, or get involved with projects that aren't in your primary area.

Dan Johnson, Richardson, TX

LIFE LONG LEARNING:

Keep up with technology and professional issues, and join professional organizations and participate

Dan Johnson, City Manager of Richardson, TX, recommended that emerging leaders look for group teaching opportunities. Find a topic that people are interested in learning about and get together to share the expense of training. Or if you have a subject matter expert in your organization, ask if they would be willing to host a seminar on an area and open it up to anyone who wants to attend. The great thing about our cities is that, while they all serve the basic needs of residents, they are all unique: some have airports, some have a strong resident base while others have a strong commercial base, some are in the midst of new development while others are redeveloping, some have taxing districts, etc. Each city deals with similar issues but in different ways. Assembling a group of individuals with different backgrounds who want to learn will allow you to learn about something that might not be a current issue or function in your own city.

Be Ambitious

Analysts, Assistants, and other young professionals often live in the portion of their job description of "other duties as assigned." While this is a built-in opportunity for learning, not every professional seizes it.

Making your own opportunities is the key for a generalist to gain technical experience. You have to actively prepare yourself from day one and be intentional about what you're going to learn from your experiences. This means that you look at each and every assignment as a tool that can mold you into a more well-rounded manager. By reviewing the business plans of other departments, you will find places where you can take action and plug the gap. This will help you to become indispensable to your organization.

Be able to identify your own personal gaps and make a plan to address them: attend trainings and seminars that are outside of your comfort zone, volunteer to lead or assist projects, or ask to attend meetings for specific departments or initiatives. Just being in the room will allow you to absorb information and become familiar with technical jargon.

Use this time in your career to go on tour of facilities and understand the operations of each. Be proactive and don't wait to be invited. You will never get this time back in your life where you have the freedom to bounce from department to department. Only you know what you don't know and only you can take steps to change it.



Coming up with **solutions**
not problems
can be **more powerful** than
raising your hand for opportunities.

ERIN RINEHART, CARROLLTON, TX



Be Ambitious (continued)

One mistake that young people make is that they think that in order to do the work, they should be getting the pay and the title. However, the pay and title comes with the experience and you can't get the experience if you aren't willing to roll up your sleeves and do the work. Some people are so focused on the next step that they don't perform well in their current role. Remember that "other duties as assigned" means that no task is beneath you.

Do your assignments well and better and broader than expected. This means not just taking care of the task, but being able to understand and communicate that you get the bigger picture of how it connects to the overall vision of the city. By focusing on how you can help the organization, not how the organization can help you, more opportunities will open. Use this time as an "other duties as assigned" employee to make the organization better.

The responsibility to develop yourself lies with you, not your manager. Be in the job that you're in and learn as much as you can. Don't allow yourself to be distracted in meetings, but really listen to what's happening and be engaged. Take notes and highlight things you don't understand so that you can better yourself and become apart of the conversations around you.

The best thing you can do to make yourself

MARKETABLE

is to make yourself

VALUABLE

to your current employer.

- Paulette Hartman, North Richland Hills, TX

Build Relationships

Everything is done through relationships. **Everything**. From addressing resident complaints, to building a budget, to executing City Council's vision, multiple people from various departments must be able to work together. However, if you aren't intentional about building a relationship with the employees in your organization, you won't get far.

The ability to relate to people and see things from their point of view is absolutely critical. Every person has to be managed and treated in a different way, which can only be found through taking the time to get to know them on an individual level. Once you have an established and ongoing relationship, you will know their strengths, weaknesses, and their aspirations so that you can help them be successful. In turn, they will trust you, be loyal to you, and help you to accomplish your goals.

It's important to remember that there is a difference between relationships and friendships. You aren't going to be everyone's friend, but you must maintain a good working relationship with everyone in order for the organization to be successful as a whole.

As you get promoted, there may come a time when you are managing someone that is either older or more tenured than you are. First impressions are absolutely critical. The worst thing you can do is go into a situation and be the first one to talk and direct. Instead, engage them and create opportunities to learn from them.

LEA DUNN,
UNIVERSITY PARK, TX

Understand what you need to do to build a high performing team that is respectful of each other's skills sets and is willing to work together to be successful.

Build Relationships (continued)

Lots of experts have valuable experience. Unfortunately, young people want the role so badly that they move too fast. Listening to the experience of your team will allow you to be a more -informed leader and to be a champion for them. Make it clear up front that they work with you, not for you. This shift in mindset will open up the door for collaborative learning.

You are providing the direction. They are providing expertise on how to get there.

Cliff Keheley, Mesquite, TX

It is also important to understand the value system for each generation and to meet them the way they want to be met. Generally, traditionalists prefer one-on-one meetings or memos, Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers prefer phone calls, and Millennials prefer emails. By building a relationship with each of them, you'll find out best how to serve them. After all, you can't serve your people if you don't really know who they are.

Your ability to build a relationship and be personable starts at the interview. Robbie Corder, City Manager of University Park, TX, conducts a "receptionist test" for job candidates. He said:

"I think it's important for anyone who wishes to pursue a career in public service to know that you are 'always on.' When you are a candidate, it's tempting to focus your thoughts and efforts towards the upcoming interview. Most who interview don't expect or assume the receptionist or administrative assistant who greets them to be part of the interview. In my opinion, the candidates that engage with everyone from the moment they walk into City Hall, are the ones who are predisposed to this concept of being 'always on.'"

Be Self-Aware

Knowing yourself and being able to adapt to your surroundings is a soft skill that emerging leaders need to focus in on. One of the situations we find ourselves in is in a room full of directors and managers discussing an issue and wanting to offer our opinion. But how can we offer our input in a productive way?

First off, if you're in the room, your opinion is wanted. Everyone should have the ability to challenge and be brave enough to argue. However, you have to know your place. You will never be successful if you're consistently contradicting the highest ranking person in the room. Most of the time, it will be less about what you say and more about how you phrase it. Just like in building relationships, tenured employees will be turned off to your ideas if you act like you're the smartest person in the room. There are a few ways that you can begin to establish credibility in your organization and navigate this thin line:

- Have a conversation with your boss to understand their expectations of your participation
- Write down your idea during a meeting and schedule a one-on-one meeting with the primary director/manager afterwards to discuss it
- Phrase it in a question (Can anyone tell me why this wouldn't work? Has there ever been any consideration given to this?)
- Introduce it as being from left field
- Relate it to story of something you've seen or heard in the organization and how it has evolved into your opinion or idea

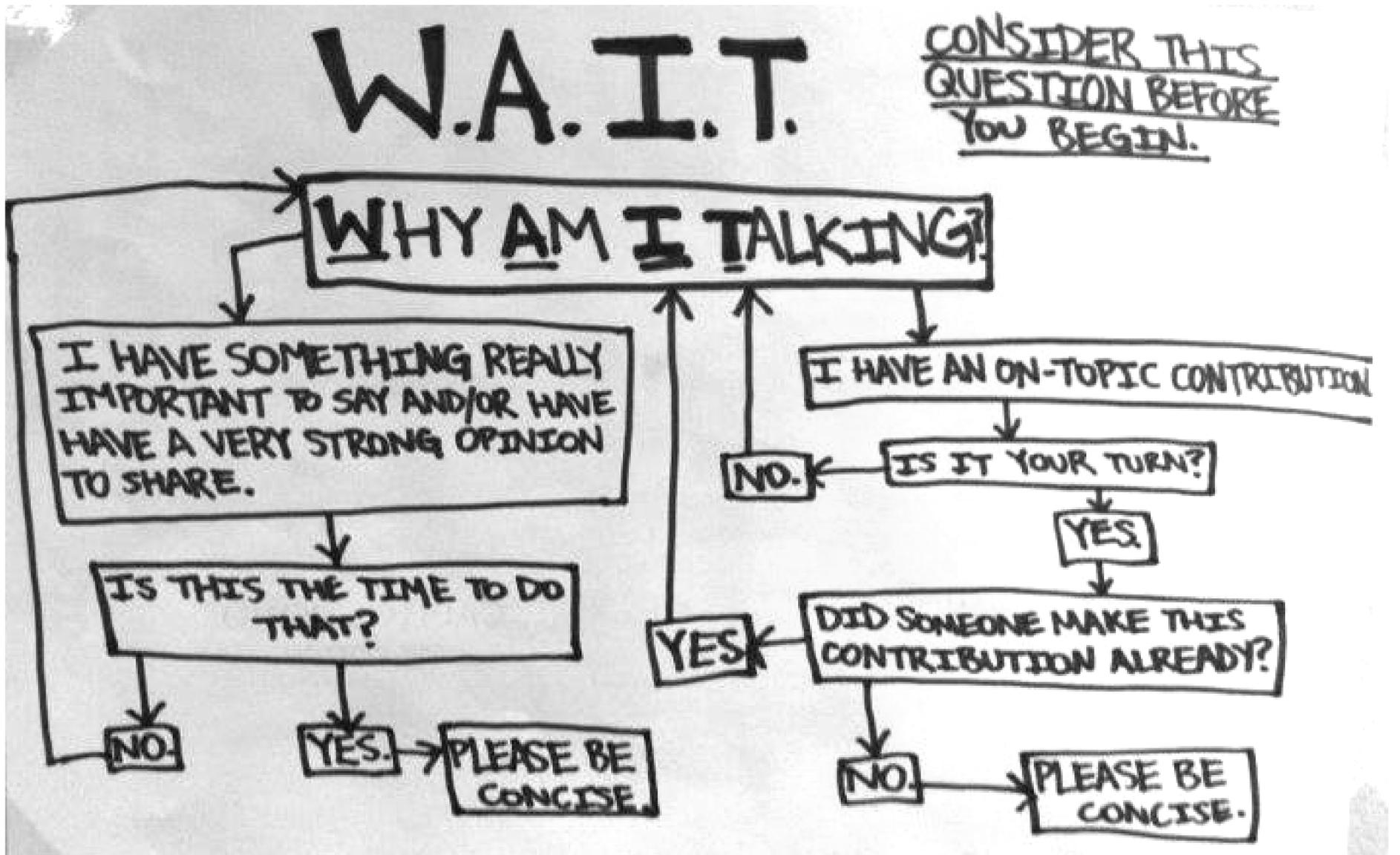
Don't be afraid to share your opinion, but learn to use discretion. Read the room and figure out who your audience is and whether what you want to say is appropriate or not at that specific moment. Asking more questions engages people.

**YOU CAN GET TO WHERE YOU WANT TO WITH
ASKING MORE THAN TELLING. - PAUL GRIMES, MCKINNEY, TX**



Be Self-Aware

The flowchart below was shared on LinkedIn:



The final outcome is to **WAIT** or **PLEASE BE CONCISE**. If you ask yourself these questions and answer honestly, you'll be able to contribute productively to a conversation. Also, you will build credibility in your organization by being known as someone who listens more than they speak, and when you do speak, it's meaningful.

Confidility

*Without confidence, we
don't have anything.*

-Peter Vargas, Allen, TX

Confidence and humility are two soft skills that were brought up in the same sentence from multiple managers. So I coined a new term: **confidility**. The definition is to have a feeling of self-assurance with a modest view of your own importance.

Fear is an emotion that can captivate an early professional: fear of being wrong, fear of public speaking, fear of not knowing enough. So when it comes time to make a decision, you feel unprepared and afraid of the consequences. There are times in this field where there isn't a black and white, right and wrong answer. You have to do what you think is right based on the information you've received. But if you don't believe in your own abilities, you'll have a hard time reaching a decision. Rely on the education and experience that you do have and get over the fear of what you don't have.

When you were hired for your position, your boss placed his or her confidence in you. You wouldn't have been hired if they did not think you were capable of performing the job duties. Therefore, have confidence in yourself. That's it. There's no magic to it. Study someone you want to be like, invite them to lunch, and ask them questions about areas you lack confidence in to start to minimize it. People are willing to be life teachers if you express enthusiasm and interest. The reality is, no one will ever know everything about everything. But you can know something about everything. The more you ask questions about what you don't know, the more confident you will feel in your ability to do your current job and be more prepared for the next one.

Confidility (continued)

However, confidence without humility can destroy relationships and create a negative reputation. As you promote throughout your career and your title changes, don't have the ego that you want to because you feel like you have to. Meaning, just because you're in a position of greater responsibility and authority doesn't mean you're the smartest person in the room. In our field, it's about "we." If you come across as arrogant, your colleagues will shut down and won't help you until you've messed up. You didn't get to where you are on your own and you won't get to where you want to alone.

If your ultimate goal is to be a City Manager, understand the position you're getting into: managing multiple bosses, oversight of internal and external operations, and the possibility of having a job one day and not the next. There is a level of risk, discomfort and instability that you have to embrace. One best practice is to live below your means so that you can make it if you suddenly lost your job.

Having confidility will help you believe in yourself and your ability to perform at a high level without losing sight of the team effort that makes your organization successful.

BE WORTH EVERY DOLLAR THAT YOU MAKE

BUT DON'T FLAUNT IT.

MATT MUELLER, LITTLE ELM, TX

Resume Review & Interview Prep

What stands out on a resume? Negatively, **typos, length, and job hopping**. Proofread, proofread, have someone else proofread, then proofread again. If it's over 3 pages, you've lost the attention of the hiring manager. Movement isn't necessarily a bad thing, but having a new job every year can be seen as a red flag.

Your resume should capture your education, progression in responsibility, and what you've learned. Highlight projects you've led or assisted that involve multiple departments to demonstrate your ability to manage and work with a team. Include experience with Council and community engagement, as well as operational experiences.

Your cover letter is the opportunity to let your personality show and market yourself. The letter should be tailored to include direct relevant experience to the requirements of the job you are applying for. State the connections between the dots on your resume and how they get you closer to your overall goal and how this position fits into it.

Questions that are asked during interviews serve multiple purposes: to gauge how you would fit into the organization, your level of experience, and your ability to effectively communicate who you are, where you've been, and where you want to go. Interviews can shed light on how concisely you can communicate on a topic you are comfortable with and how much research you're willing to do to be prepared for any question that may arise.



Take an introspective look at yourself and experience and determine how you're going to communicate what it is that you've done and how it's important to the hiring party.

-Mark Hindman, North Richland Hills, TX

Communication

As communication has evolved, local government has with it.

Professionals are having to communicate in a much faster way across multiple mediums: in-person, email, text message, or in 140 characters or less.

Being able to communicate effectively is a necessity for every local government leader. Written communication has become somewhat of a lost art due to this evolution of technology. Emerging leaders who authored papers in graduate school are lacking the ability to write to a specific audience in a clear and simple manner. In this field, we have complex issues that must be explained in a way that makes sense to every constituent, regardless of their knowledge of the topic at hand. When writing a memo or response, have someone else read it who knows little about it so that you can make sure you've written it in an understandable manner. And, as always, proofread!

If you can't simply explain something to someone, you don't understand it yet.

Wes Pierson, Addison, TX

Be cognizant of the tone that's used when verbally communicating.

Sometimes it's not what you say, but how you say it. That, along with body language, can communicate something different than your words. Take every opportunity to attend trainings on public speaking. Everything we do is communicating and we only get better at it by actively working towards it.

Servant Leadership

Be willing to do what is right and don't compromise your values. - James Fisher

Servant Leadership is an organizational lifestyle that **starts** and **ends** with you. At its core, servant leadership is leading by example, meaning to never asking someone to do something you wouldn't be willing to do yourself, and putting the needs of others before your own. City management is a calling greater than just a job. You are a public servant and are committed to making your community a better place by making people's lives better through the services you provide. Therefore, servant leadership and city management go hand-in-hand.

Supervisory experience will help you learn the balance between leading people and managing processes. You learn a lot about yourself when you supervise people: what works or doesn't work, how to delegate tasks, and what makes you a more effective leader.

In order to grow as a leader, this experience is necessary in learning how to manage personnel issues. Having a direct report is the most preferred type of experience because you are dealing with the hiring, managing, and firing processes. If you are in a position that does not have a direct report, seek out other opportunities to lead a cross-departmental project or volunteer in organizations where you can take on a leadership role. You can also attend classes that focus on leadership skills and supervisor trainings.

Being a servant leader also means to be ethical. You have to be willing to put everything on the line to do the right thing. You can always find another job, but you can never get your integrity back.

Crossroads: Stay or Go?

There comes a point in every career where you're faced with a decision of staying in your current organization or leaving for an opportunity somewhere else. How do you know what the right answer is?

There is no universal answer, only an individual one. Erin Rineheart, City Manager of Carrollton, TX, described it as when she knew she was ready to have kids: the excitement of it outweighed the fear of it. Ask yourself the same question the next time you're faced with a crossroad and see what your reaction is. It could be a leading indicator if you're ready or not.

Are you getting 3 years of experience or 1 year of experience 3 times? If you aren't being challenged, your responsibilities aren't increasing, and you no longer see your fingerprints in the community or organization after several years in the same role, it might be a sign to start looking.

If you're ready to move to the next step in your career, you may have to look outside your organization and take a lateral or step down in order to ensure upward mobility. Be open and transparent with your current boss if what you want to do does not exist in your organization. Don't leave just to chase a title. Make strategic moves that show a path that is working toward your vision for yourself.

You're ready when you finally get to the point where you feel like you've done enough and prepared yourself enough to have the confidence, not the ego, to lead people.

-Robbie Corder, University Park, TX

Words of Wisdom

I hope you've found this information encouraging and beneficial. I wanted to leave you with a few last words of wisdom from some of the managers as you continue on your journey as an emerging local government leader:

Mark Israelson

Your front line people are more impactful than any type of personnel. Be able to relate to them.

Shelli Siemer

Don't worry about what you aren't exposed to. The rest will take care of itself.

Bruce Glassock

Desire to provide a service and be willing to collaborate.

Paul Grimes

There will be good and bad days, but if you have a servant heart and are a servant leader, you'll do great.

Cliff Keheley

The opportunity will come at the right place, at the right time, with the right fit.

Matt Mueller

Look for the balance of the right opportunity to be successful, but be willing to take on a project.

Erin Rinehart

Soft skills will differentiate the speed of promotion.

Lea Dunn

Take on an assignment, understand what needs to get done, and get it done well.

Mark Hindman

It's about who knows what you know, not who you know.

Eric Ellwanger

Work for at least three managers before you become one to compare and contrast.

Robbie Corder

Be able to take a conversation to a high level to educate Council to make the right decision.

Jack Carr

Be a barn burner: hungry for more opportunities outside of your current scope.

Dan Johnson

Become indispensable. Do whatever it takes to show enthusiasm and commitment.

Shana Yelverton

Go to work each day with a lot of energy and commitment to follow up.

Paulette Hartman

Know how to develop and inspire people, give criticism when necessary and hold people accountable.
