



# Tips for Planning Agency Managers

Redefining best practices for your office.



In Clark County, Washington, Randa Merrill (left) and her colleagues at the permit center put customer service first. Rich Carson, the county's former planning director, now consults on planning agency management with the firm Citygate Associates.

**T**he American Planning Association's mission statement says that the organization "provides leadership in the development of vital communities." But planning managers have another mission as well: the development of vital planning organizations. That can only happen when we take the time to learn and use the best management practices of our profession.

Most government agencies were ignored in *In Search of Excellence*, Tom Peters and Robert Waterman's groundbreaking 1982 book about the private sector. But the opposite was true 10 years later, when David Osborne and Ted Gaebler published *Reinventing Government*. Government planning managers were mesmerized.

In most cases, though, efforts to reinvent government went the way of strategic planning and total quality management. Government staffers saw a PowerPoint presentation or read a professional publication that told us such things existed and how they functioned. And some of us took an ill-fated stab at creating a high-performance planning agency.

As the former planning director of one of Washington State's largest planning agencies and, before that, planning director of one of the nation's most legislatively powerful regional planning agencies, I understand why it is so hard

to remake government, including planning agencies. I came to realize that the planning director's hectic work life often leaves little time for management innovation. We become so focused on our planning mission that we lose sight of our management mission.

So, 25 years after the organizational revolution started, the question you—as a current or future planning manager—should be asking is this: "If I am really serious about reinventing my planning agency, how would I do it and what would it look like?"

This is more than a rhetorical question. Believe it or not, your elected officials or city manager may be asking the same question about your agency. Whether you ask the question out of professional enlightenment or self-preservation, the answer remains opaque to many planning managers.

#### **Taking a risk in Clark County, Washington**

Clark County was the fastest growing county in the state of Washington during the 1990s, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, and today it has a population of over 400,000. I became the director of the Community Development Department in January 1999, just when a new

By Richard Carson

county auditor was elected to office. He had run on a platform calling for performance audits of county departments.

Knowing that, I did something that may sound a little crazy. One of my first actions was to ask for an audit of my department. It was risky, but I thought that if I asked for a performance audit early in my tenure, such a step would be to my credit, while an involuntary performance audit would be to my discredit.

The county auditor hired a Sacramento-based consulting firm called Citygate Associates to conduct the performance audit. The auditors were given an office in my department so we could communicate directly and often. They started by reviewing all of our documents, policies, and procedures. They also interviewed both our staff and our customers.

At the end of the process, Citygate Associates offered 44 recommendations for improving the department's management practices and the public's perceptions. The primary focus was to address customer service issues first and processing issues over time. That priority was important because, according to our score in a national performance measurement system, our department was less popular than the Internal Revenue Service.

Some of the recommended best management practices were simple. The customers' two major complaints were that no one called them back and that we lost their files. So we implemented a 24-hour call back rule that would be met 95 percent of the time. Everyone was given a call log book and was directed to document who called, what the callers wanted, and when they were called back. Each division reported this information monthly and I sent it out to everyone via e-mail.

Over time the department's worst offenders started to improve because they wanted to shed their bad reputations. In my annual report I was glad to note that overall we were returning 97 percent of our calls within 24 hours.

We also tightened up the document management process by imaging many incoming documents. This meant staff could access reports via the Intranet instead of going to the records office and checking them out. It's relatively hard to lose an electronic document, so the lost document problem was greatly reduced.

A lot of time was spent mapping our

major processes, such as conditional use permits and subdivisions, on the assumption that you can't improve a process unless you know exactly how it works. Frankly, we found that not everyone agreed on the mechanics. Once we reached agreement about how things were supposed to function, we spent time reengineering the process so it was simpler and more transparent.

We also established a number of performance measures by which to track our success over time. However, in the end there is only one meaningful performance measure: the number of calls that elected officials don't get! And most of the complaint calls stopped. The other important measure was a personal one: I went on to serve as the department's director for the next nine years.

Clark County auditor Greg Kimsey later noted that "the performance audit of the community development department identified many opportunities to improve customer service and accountability; the implementation of those recommendations resulted in improved relationships with those customers."

**Going local in Sacramento County**

Clark County wasn't the only planning department in need of an extreme makeover. Sacramento County, California, home to the state capital, has a population of about 1.4 million. The county government faced a big dilemma in recent years. Unlike other counties in the state, whose unincorporated areas are more rural, Sacramento County provides municipal services to a large urban population. The dilemma gets played out through the development review permitting process.

In 2005, four of the communities in the unincorporated part of the county

were given a level of local land-use authority so they could be more responsive to local issues. This was done through the newly established community planning councils, consisting of appointed officials who could make certain local, community-oriented land-use decisions. Among those decisions were use permits for things like guest houses, drive-up windows, private schools, and automobile auctions. Eventually the council's authority expanded to stop signs, sidewalks, and parking zones.

Although the county's goal is to enhance customer service, as a practical matter one by-product of having happy customers is that additional municipal incorporations slow down. At the same time—and this is what creates the dilemma—the county does not want to surrender control to the point where businesses, builders, developers, and individual applicants can be abused by the community planning council system.

Part of the impetus for the audit was a story in the *Sacramento Business Journal* that noted the "City of Sacramento has transformed its reputation among members of the development industry from a plodding, muddled 'pit of Hell,' as one put it, to responsive and punctual."

However, the article went on to describe Sacramento County as "a 'black hole' where it's impossible to get updates." Needless to say, this comparison caught the attention of the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors.

So the county hired an independent audit team and completed a best management practices review last spring and has since focused on the need for organizational change. Specifically, the report noted the need to consolidate the development review process into a single

agency and to break down the silos that had fragmented the review process.

The report further noted that it was important to empower results-oriented decision makers who could work across departmental lines. And it recognized the importance of improving communication both with day-to-day customers and with the community planning councils.

Jay Corey, Citygate Associates' project manager, noted that "to be successful, staff will need the active support of the county's elected officials, both in terms of encouragement and the allocation of resources, and the continued support and active constructive participation of customers and community stakeholders."

After the report was published, Sacramento County's deputy administrator of development services, Steven Pedretti, noted that "though we can't do everything immediately, we're addressing critical factors to insure that our development processes simply work better. Our customers have commented that they already notice improvements."

**Turning things around in Salt Lake City**

Nestled in the Rocky Mountains, Salt Lake City, Utah (pop. 180,651), is the main community in a valley of more than two million residents. The city's planning division had long been the pacesetter for planning in the state, but over the years, its leadership had waned. It had five different planning directors in eight years. The Salt Lake City council and mayor, realizing that the city's planning processes were in trouble, hired Pat Comarell, AICP, of Citygate Associates to figure out why.

Key recommendations of this 2008 study suggested that the city's planning

processes were dysfunctional and that the elected officials often tried to bypass those processes by meeting with planners on behalf of their constituents long before the application or issue reached the planning commission. That, naturally, had a chilling effect on the planning staff.

The community councils that had been established to advise the city council on area concerns had ill-defined structure and responsibilities. Over the years, a few of these councils had become quite strident; one even suggested that it should approve planning staff memos before they were forwarded to the planning commission.

The performance study made several recommendations:

- On all planning matters, develop a team approach involving the mayor, city council, community development director, and planning director.
- Create a supportive, inspired work environment for the planning division staff.
- Encourage the mayor and council to define the community council role in the development review process.
- Update the planning procedures manual, which provides checklists for each planning process.
- Reprioritize the long-range planning program.
- Ensure an effective project management approach for project review.
- Institute effective performance measures in order to gauge customer satisfaction.
- Institute an "unanticipated service" program in which the staff's actions exceed the customer's expectations.

Salt Lake City has turned its situation around. The elected officials have made it clear that all processes will be followed, the processes have been better defined, there is strong support to implement the recommendations of the study, and the morale of the planning staff has improved. The audit unleashed the creativity and strength of individuals working as a team.

As Mayor Ralph Becker, AICP, himself a planner, told a local newspaper, "I believe we have accomplished a great deal, particularly considering the fact that we need to hire a number of key positions. Once we've brought those individuals on board, I believe Salt Lake City will be on its way to putting this chapter behind us

Categories of Best Management Practices

The best management practices that need to be addressed in any organizational performance analysis are:

- Customer Service Systems
- Performance Measures
- Training and Professional Development
- Organizational Change
- Communications
- Technology
- Staffing and Turnover
- Procedures
- Cost Accounting
- Regulatory Improvements
- Document Management
- Facilitation

and moving forward with a stellar, highly functional planning department that will move our city forward."

**Tips for a management review**

- Don't do your own review. If you knew all there is to know about best management practices, you wouldn't need an outside review or recommendations. In fact, most managers have only a passing knowledge of best management practices and don't have time to do such a review.
- For the sake of credibility, it's best to hire a consultant from the private sector. Many of the ideas may be yours, but they will carry more weight coming from a professional consulting firm.
- Hire a consulting firm with seasoned professionals who have walked in your shoes and understand the profession.
- Make sure the consultant knows about professional planning best management practices.

Rich Carson is a senior associate and Pacific Northwest manager for Citygate Associates, in Vancouver, Washington. Before that he held positions as the director of Clark County, Washington's Community Development Department, director of Planning and Development for METRO (the Portland area metropolitan government), and director of Oregon City's Community Development Department.

A performance study in Salt Lake City's planning department revealed some dysfunctional practices at city hall.



**resources**

**MORE FROM APA** *Customer Service in Local Government: Challenges for Planners and Managers*, Bruce McClendon. Published by Planners Press in 1992.

**ALSO IN PRINT** *Improvement Driven Government*, by David Carr, Ian Littman, John Condon. *Management of Local Planning*, David Slater. Published by Coopers & Lybrand in 1996.

**ONLINE** "Performance Audits," BNET, *Encyclopedia of Business*, Mary Oliverio. Available at BNET.com; search for "Performance Audits" in the reference section.