

## **Presentation for ICMA President's Colloquium**

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### **The Visionary Facilitator in City Hall and the County Courthouse**

As the challenges facing local government become more complex, cities and counties need an effective political leader. City councils and county commission members are more diverse, more activist in their orientation, and likely to see themselves as ombudsmen who help citizens solve problems with their government. The top elected official—mayor or commission chairperson—needs to be effective at providing a sense of direction, coalescing the council, and helping to ensure that all key actors work together effectively.

If “effective” leadership means “strong” leadership, the common impression from the media is that the mayor-council form has the advantage. The mayor in council-manager cities is dismissed as a “weak mayor” and a figurehead. The county commission chair usually does not even appear on the radar screen as a potential leader.

Based on a major new study of mayors with case studies from 14 cities ranging from Midland, Florida, with a population 1500, to Phoenix, Arizona with a population of 1.5 million, a new perspective on leadership emerges. The book *The Facilitative Leader in City Hall* will be published in December.<sup>1</sup> All cities and counties need visionary leadership, and mayors can be visionaries regardless of formal powers. Just as important, mayors should be facilitators who draw out the contributions of the council and administrative staff. New evidence from a national survey of council members shows that the facilitative visionary leader is more effective regardless of form of government. This style is not the second-best alternative that council-manager mayors must settle for, it is the preferred approach in a shared power world where no one is or can be in charge.

Cities with the council-manager form do not have to take a back seat to elected executive governments when it comes to leadership. In all local governments, mayors and chairpersons who are not visionary or do not use facilitative leadership are likely to be less effective than those who do, and their councils perform more poorly as well.

#### Alternate Model of Leadership in Local Government

Rather than focusing on the accomplishments of the mayor alone, it is important to assess the combined leadership of all officials, i.e., the capacity of the governmental “system” to identify needs and meet goals. This approach looks at the “power to” rather than the “power over.”<sup>2</sup> It is common to hear the observation that a mayor in a council-manager city exercises leadership despite having limited powers. Alan Greenblatt commenting on Mayor Gordon in Phoenix in *Governing* magazine expressed the sentiment this way: “Some mayors have it easy. They can write their own budgets and dismiss department heads who don't want to follow orders. The mayors of Phoenix can't do that.” Viewed differently, because he can't use powers to go his own way, one could argue that the council-manager mayor has an advantage. The mayor can develop a broader base of support by sharing credit

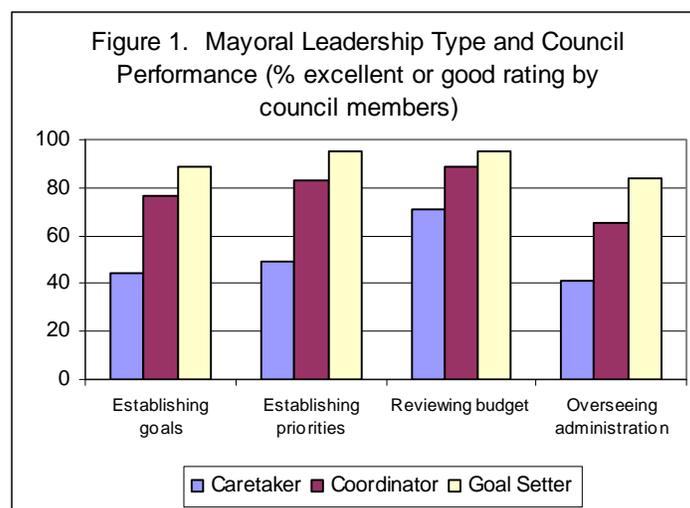
and building partnerships. Rather than assuming that mayoral powers are an advantage, it should be recognized that many mayors create problems for themselves by using their powers in ways that drive away supporters and undercut professionalism. They can wind up without a supportive council or a top administrator who provides honest, professional advice. They fall into the power trap.

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. It may be appropriate to explain the effectiveness of a mayor in a council-manager city because he or she does not have formal powers. On the other hand, some elected executive mayors are effective despite having formal powers, because these mayors were able to develop effective partnerships with the council, administrative staff, and other leaders outside city government to get things done. In other words, these mayors avoid the power trap and administrative detail trap that are common in mayor-council cities. In contrast, the council-manager mayor starts with the possibility of creating a strong partnership with the council and receives the support of the manager. In this view, the potential for leadership by all officials in a council-manager government—with effective guidance by the mayor—matches or even exceeds that of mayor-council cities.

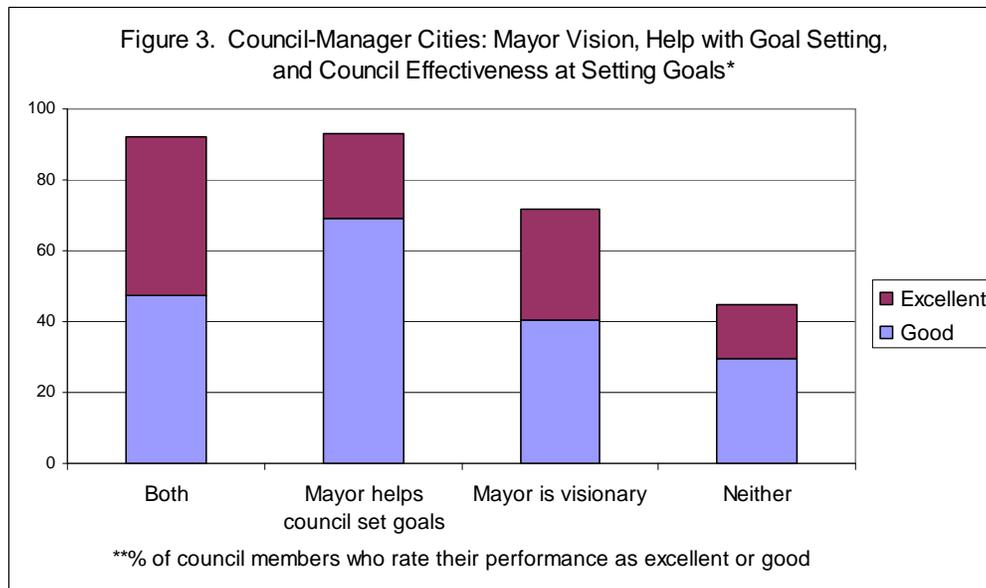
Top leaders work with an increasing number of actors whom they do not control. In an era of partnerships and networking—in a world in which no one is in charge, mayors and chairs regardless of their formal resources have to lead to creating shared goals and by bringing diverse actors together to accomplish them.

### Evidence of Impact

The evidence presented here comes from a 2001 survey of city council members in cities over 25,000 in population as well as the 14 case studies. Mayors in council-manager cities can be classified as caretakers if they fill all roles in a minimal way, coordinators if they promote communication within the council and positive relations with the city manager, and goal setters if they are effective at coordination and also help the council set goals. The effectiveness of the council in handling major functions is affected by the type of mayoral leadership, as indicated in Figure 1.

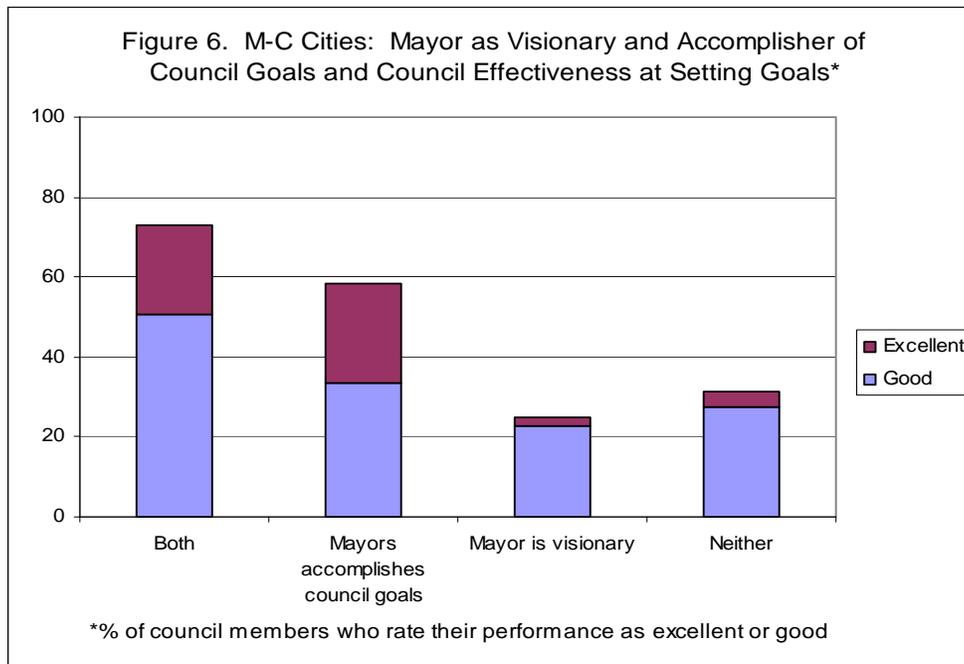


In council-manager cities, mayors can be effective at helping the council set goals—a facilitative leadership trait—and a visionary in his or her personal leadership qualities, effective in one area but not the other, or not effective in either area. In the following figure, the council members from cities where the mayor is both a facilitator and visionary are very likely to agree that they are effective at setting goals for the city. In fact, almost half feel that they do an excellent job at setting goals. When the mayor is effective as a facilitator but is not a visionary, council members are more likely to rate their performance as good rather than excellent.



When the mayor is a visionary but less effective at facilitation, the council effectiveness declines somewhat. When the mayor have neither quality, less than half of the council members rather their performance as good or excellent.

The new finding in this research is that the patterns are similar in mayor-council cities. The basic relationship between the mayor and council is different in these cities with separation of powers. Mayors can be divided into three groups of roughly equal size based on their orientation to the council—whether they provide sufficient information about policy choices from the council to make decisions, whether they provide information about performance to support council oversight, and whether they seek to accomplish the goals of the council. A third of the mayors are supportive of the council, a third are cool and reserved in their relationship (with medium scores on the three measures), and a final third are clearly separated from the council. One of these measures is used to summarize the extent of facilitative leadership—whether the mayor seeks to accomplish goals of the council—and the mayor is rated as a visionary using the same measure as in council-manager cities. The combinations have a similar impact on the council’s effectiveness at setting goals for the city. When the mayor is a facilitative visionary, approximately three fourths of the council members feel that they do a good or excellent job at setting goals, and three in five rate their effectiveness as good or better if the mayor is not visionary.



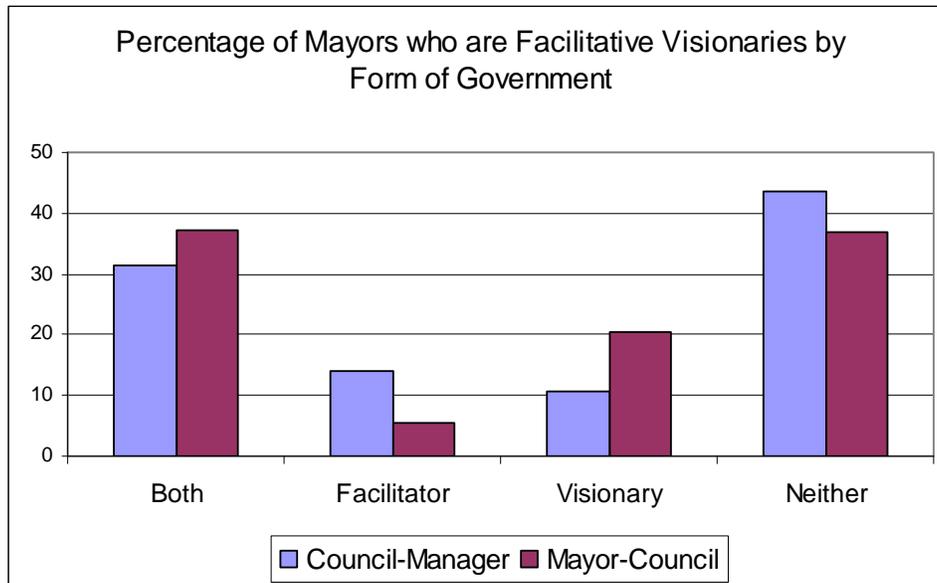
On the other hand, when the mayor is a visionary but ignores the council or is not a visionary and ignores the council, the council’s effectiveness drops dramatically. In the former situation, the legally powerful mayor is presumably pushing his or her own vision over the resistance of the council. In the latter situation, it is less likely that others can fill in for the mayor who is not providing positive leadership than in council-manager cities. Still, the basic point is that legally powerful mayors can achieve greater results by stressing a power with orientation and acting as facilitators rather than taking a power over approach.

### How Often Do Mayors Match the Ideal Model?

The visionary facilitator is the ideal, but actual mayors and commission chairs can fall short of achieving it.

The model of political leadership derived from the council-manager form is more effective than a power-centered model. The likelihood that mayors demonstrate the preferred model of leadership, however, is lower in council-manager cities than in mayor-council cities. Excluding mayors who responded to the survey, 42% of council-manager mayors were considered to be visionaries by council members compared to 58% of the mayor-council mayors. In council-manager cities, directly elected mayors are more likely than mayors selected within the council to be visionaries—46% to 35%.

When the mayor’s relationship with the council is considered, however, the mayor-council advantage is substantially altered, as indicated in the following figure.



The large visionary gap is greatly reduced—37% versus 32% of the mayor-council and council-manager mayors, respectively—are both visionary and attentive to council goals. The council-manager mayors are much more likely to be facilitators who are not visionaries, whereas the mayor-council mayors are more likely to be visionaries but not facilitators. The proportion that has neither quality is greater in council-manager cities but again the gap is narrower—44% and 37%. These figures lead to a conclusion that is dramatically different from the mayor-as-figurehead misconception: mayors and commission chairs are failing to take advantage of the great potential for leadership in council-manager cities.

### How to Improve Leadership?

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 aggressive leaders to feel that they must run against the form of the government rather than for the office of mayor. In counties, the high proportion of chair selected by the commission probably reduces the likelihood that visionaries will be chosen.

In addition, the variation in leadership capability points to the need for more effective training and development programs for mayors. Rather than empowering mayors, more can be accomplished by elevating the quality of their leadership.

This evidence offers a transforming view of the mayor’s office. Mayors in council-manager cities are at least as well and may be better positioned to develop positive and effective leadership than the power-oriented “strong” mayor in mayor-council cities. Furthermore, mayors in mayor-council cities can enhance their effectiveness and long-term impact by incorporating facilitative approaches in their leadership behavior.

## Conclusion

These conclusions run counter to popular perceptions and the bulk of the academic literature. It is well established in the general literature on leadership in all kinds of organizations that collaborative approaches to leadership are preferred to authoritarian and power-based approaches. The facilitative approach and visionary leadership are the preferred characteristics in studies of businesses, nonprofits, and administrative organizations in government. The major exception has been commentaries about and studies of elected political leaders where one still finds support for a “take charge” style of leadership.

The research summarized here does not turn the mayoral leadership literature on its head, but it turns it on its side and demonstrates the need for more attention to the horizontal dimensions of leadership—vision, empowerment, collaboration, engagement, and coordination—rather than the vertical dimensions of hierarchy, power, and control. The natural setting to look for such leadership is in council-manager cities where mayors work with council members that govern and city managers who offer professional advice and expert management to expand the community’s power to address its needs and achieve its aspirations. Other mayors can follow their example.

Many mayors in all kinds of cities and counties 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.

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Svara, Editor, *The Facilitative Leader in City Hall: Reexamining the Scope and Contributions* (Boca Raton, FL: Taylor and Francis Publishers, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> This distinction was developed by Clarence Stone in his 1989 book on urban regimes.