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What Do CAOs Really Do?

The purpose of this policy brief is to discuss what municipal chief administrative officers (CAOs) really do on a day-to-day basis. Their duties go far beyond the sterile job descriptions that present in legal terms the usual bromides of providing advice, implementing decisions, and so forth. Of course, it is important to be aware of these basic requirements, but they do not tell us much about how a CAO really occupies her or his time.

The Position of Chief Administrative Officer

The chief administrative officer plays a major role in the success of a municipality. He or she sits at the intersection of the council and administration. The CAO provides advice to council when it is making decisions, and after those decisions are made, the CAO must interpret the intentions of council, which are not always clear. The CAO must also take the concerns of staff to council, which does not always want to hear staff's cautions and concerns.

As I wrote in *Leaders in the Shadows*, my recent book on chief administrative officers:

CAOs can make a mayor and council look exceptionally good (or bad). They can be a source of great pride and motivation among the staff of the municipality (or not). They can be an important conduit in the two-way flow of information between community organizations and the municipality (or not). A tremendous amount hinges on how well a CAO carries out her or his responsibilities. (p. 3)

My main purpose in writing *Leaders in the Shadows* was to identify the traits, skills, and behaviours exhibited by CAOs who were successful leaders. My approach was to present case studies of five CAOs who have been recognized as successful leaders. As a byproduct of that research, I developed a good understanding of how successful CAOs viewed their position and what they

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actually did. To develop this understanding, I relied on the CAOs themselves and those around them (councillors, staff, and community members). I did not put much reliance on written job descriptions, which tended to be sterile re-statements of a standard list of duties without much life about how these duties are actually carried out in practice.

An important caveat in considering the role of the CAO is that every organization is a bit different, but there is a significant difference in the role of the CAO in small versus large municipalities. I will discuss this throughout the brief and return to it at the end. However, we should be careful in making too much of this difference. In broad strokes, the roles are similar regardless of the size of the municipality, but the style and day-to-day activities vary.

What do CAOs not do?

Before considering what CAOs do, I should clear up any misconceptions by discussing some things that CAOs do not do.

Directly manage operations

The CAOs I spoke with took pride in their role as the senior leader of the municipal organization, but they also lamented that they were somewhat removed from the direct delivery of services. Mike Garrett is an engineer who worked for a conservation authority early in his career and took great pride in his role in the construction of some very important parks. He lamented that being a CAO cut him off from the stimulation of being directly involved in service delivery; he talked about how he was jealous of department heads and middle manager who had that kind of direct involvement. Garrett likened his role to being the head of a holding company with several subsidiary corporations; nominally he was in charge of the entire organization, but in practice he did not have the time or expertise to delve too deeply into the operation of any of the subsidiaries.

Anyone aspiring to become a CAO or senior manager needs to think about this. Being responsible for everything that happens in the municipality at a high level means being cut off from direct involvement in many day-to-day service delivery issues. Everybody dreams about someday being the top dog, but you need to think frankly about what motivates you. If you enjoy the sense of fulfilment that comes from the direct involvement in construction of a park or dealing with a concerned resident, then you will be giving up something as you move higher in the organization.

... if you have confidence in the team that you have built around you and if the members of that team are uncomfortable with something that you want to do, then you need to think carefully about imposing your authority on them.

Use their authority

The person who resides at the top of the organization chart possesses a great deal of institutional power. Of course, there are some constraints in provincial legislation, council policies, and collective agreements, but these still leave the CAO with a significant amount of authority to command and control people further down the organization chart.

The CAOs I spoke to claimed that they used this blunt authority quite sparingly. Most CAOs preferred to rely on influence rather than authority to accomplish their goals. A CAO once told one of my classes that he felt that if he had to resort to authority to get something done, then he had failed in some way; if what he wanted done was such a good idea, then surely those around him would want to do it without being subjected to the force of authority.

The concept of team-building will be discussed below, but the idea is that if you have confidence in the team that you have built around you and if the members of that team are uncomfortable with something that you want to do, then you need to think carefully about imposing your authority on them.

What do CAOs do?

If CAOs do not do much direct operational management and they do not use their authority very much, then what exactly do they contribute to the organization? The answer is that they contribute a great deal, but much of it is in an indirect and intangible way.

Establish the organizational culture

The CAO sets the tone for the organization and has a major role in creating the organizational culture. CAOs can do things like infuse professionalism in the organization or convert an organization from a top-down command and control system to a more empowered organization. Michael Fenn was the second CAO in Burlington. The previous CAO had been somewhat top-down in implementing the new system, as he needed to be to accomplish the desired change. Fenn was hired to bring a more participatory style to the administration.

CAO can have a great impact because of their mere presence and the subtle signals they send. A senior manager who worked for Judy Rogers in Vancouver said that he never had to learn about ethical conduct in an academic sense, because a strong sense of ethical conduct was always 'in the air' around her.

The real idea of a team is that the team is composed of competent and committed members, but the team must function as a unit and act in the broad interest of the municipality and not in the interest of any individual unit.

Many CAOs probably underestimate the power that they possess to influence their organization through simply modeling appropriate behavior. When Keith Robicheau treated everyone in the organization from department heads to janitors in the same respectful manner, he was sending a powerful signal about the value he attached to every person in the organization.

Build teams

As discussed above, CAOs did not do much hands-on management, but an important part of their job was to assemble a good team around them. Having assembled the team, the CAO then let these competent people do what they do best—manage their functional areas.

Hiring the right person is very important, but that is only the beginning. The CAO must build a team ethos and retain these good team members. The team ethos begins by infusing the organization with the idea that the interest of the municipality is more important than the interests of any individual department. This can involve banning what one CAO called ‘turf talk’ at management meetings. It can also involve the use of interdepartmental task forces with real decision-making authority to break down the sense of silo management.

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Have vision, but a particular type of vision

Vision is a problematic concept for a municipal CAO, or any public sector manager for that matter. The picture painted in the private sector literature is a relatively hands-off board of directors that hires a CEO who has a vision of where he or she wants to take the organization. Then the board checks in once in a while to see how things are going.

Visioning is more complex in municipal government, because visioning is clearly the role of the council. Some councils do it better than others, but most want to retain a hands-on approach to establishing the vision of the municipality.

The CAO must respect this role of council, but CAOs can have a role in creating a vision; the CAO should not be totally passive. The engaged CAO can be active in a number of ways. The active CAO could bring problems to the attention of council even when council would rather not hear about them. This is what Rogers did when she made certain that Vancouver councillors were aware of problems in the city’s downtown east side.

Being too intrusive would signal that they lacked confidence in their department heads; being too distant would signal disinterest and mean that they would lose control.

Or the role of the CAO could involve guiding councillors into uncharted waters where they feel uncomfortable. Banff is relatively new as a self-governing municipality. It had never borrowed money before, but its underground services were in serious disrepair. Robert Earl gave the council confidence to borrow money that was needed to replace that infrastructure.

CAOs should also have a vision of how they want to guide the administrative operation. Several CAOs in the book inherited problematic situations between the council and staff. In this situation, the CAO must work with the mayor and council to solve these problems. The CAO should have a vision of the optimum role of staff.

Monitor performance, but don't dig in the weeds

It was mentioned earlier that CAOs do not directly manage services. However, the CAO has an important role in monitoring performance to ensure that the organization is functioning as it should, but CAOs need to be careful about not getting mired in micromanagement. Micromanagement not only takes time away from strategic management, but it also undermines the authority of other managers.

Good CAOs discover how to balance their system of monitoring their municipality's activities. Being too intrusive would signal that they lacked confidence in their department heads; being too distant would signal disinterest and mean that they would lose control. The key is obtaining the proper information in respectful ways, and using that information to monitor and motivate performance.

Garrett was known for establishing performance measurement systems. He did this originally to compare his municipality to other comparable municipalities, but he was also able to use this information to monitor staff performance.

Michael Fenn was noted for having tentacles deep into the community which allowed him to understand how the community viewed the quality of municipal services. He was also known for asking just the right incisive probing questions that went beyond micromanagement, but did remind managers that their boss understood the important points of their operations.

Manage financial and human resources

While CAOs made it a point not to manage most aspects of service delivery, there were some functions that they deliberately kept close to them. It is frequently suggested that the two most important resources that any

organization has are people and money. The CAOs in this sample made a point of retaining a significant involvement in the management of these two resources. O’Flynn found a similar tendency in his survey of CAOs.¹

Judy Rogers in Vancouver was a perceptive judge of people and knew the abilities of people throughout her organization. She was not shy about broadening people’s experience by moving them into unexpected positions. This is a refreshingly different approach in municipalities which tend to stunt the development of staff members by keeping them in their silos.

When Keith Robicheau arrived in Annapolis County, Nova Scotia, it was facing a difficult financial situation and had a relatively small reserve. Over time, he found ways of improving the situation and returning the reserve to a better position. Financial issues were crucial in this municipality, and he stayed close to this area.

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Big is different from little

Graham White has argued persuasively that there is a significant qualitative difference between large and small units of government.² He focused particularly on comparing the federal government with large and smaller provincial governments. Gordon McIntosh found that this distinction carried through to the municipal level in that CAOs in small and large municipalities viewed their jobs differently. “CAOs from larger organizations, with more managerial personnel, indicated they spent more time in the strategic directions than service delivery sphere,” while those in smaller places had limited time to devote to organizational issues.³

CAOs in larger places sometimes expressed envy at their counterparts in smaller places because the latter really knew the details of how their municipality operated. Earlier it was argued that CAOs do not engage in much hands-on management. This is probably a better description in larger places than in smaller ones. In Annapolis County, Robicheau functioned as the treasurer, partly because he had the skills to do it, partly as a way of training staff, and partly because there were significant financial problems when he arrived. He also developed great skill at drafting partnership agreements and other legal documents that would have been done deep in the bowels of the legal department in a larger municipality, except that for Annapolis County, he was the legal department.

The differences also extend to relationships in the community. No one expects to see the president of Canadian Tire when you go in to buy a light bulb. However, I know the owner of my local hardware store and I would be a bit miffed if he didn't take a moment to chat with me when I went in. According to White a similar thing happens in government organizations. He suggests that people who would be satisfied talking to a director general or lower official in the federal government would expect to deal with the deputy minister in a small provincial government.⁴

In larger places, being the CAO is a job; you are an important block in the organization chart, but still a block. In smaller places, the CAO is widely known throughout the community, and conscious of being the face of the municipality to large numbers of people.

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Conclusion

The CAO plays an important part in the efficient operation of the municipality. The CAO provides expert professional advice to council and ensures the proper implementation of council decisions. He or she is the link between the council and staff.

CAOs have job descriptions, as well as provincial legislation and sometimes employment contracts that set out their duties. However, these legal documents do not always capture the essence of what a good CAO actually does.

This brief has provided some insights into how successful CAOs fulfill their roles. The good CAO engages in a balancing act that is more art than science. He needs to monitor the activities of his organization, but not micromanage. She needs to guide council in making good decisions, but cannot be too directive with council. It can be a difficult route to navigate, but examining how successful CAOs have done this can assist people who aspire to the role in developing their own abilities. ■

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NOTES

1. Patrick Eamon O'Flynn, "The Evolving Role of the Municipal Chief Administrative Officer in Canada, 1985-2010," M.A. thesis, University of Guelph, 2011, p. 87.
2. Graham White, "Big Is Different From Little: On Taking Size Seriously in the Analysis of Canadian Governmental Institutions," *Canadian Public Administration*, Vol. 33, no. 4 (December 1990), pp. 526-550.
3. Gordon A. McIntosh, "Defining Situational Leadership for the Local Government Chief Administrative Officer," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Victoria, 2009, pp. 296. For other differences, see pp. 300, 303-5, 308.
4. White, "Big Is Different From Little," p. 546.



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