

# SUPPORTING A MANAGEMENT COLLEAGUE IN DISTRESS

Proactive steps to take  
to show you care

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**H**ave you ever . . .  
Read or heard that a colleague was under fire?

Witnessed a colleague who seemed uncharacteristically “uptight” or “stressed out”?

Wanted to support a colleague in distress but did not know how?

Felt under duress yourself and, looking back, wished that someone would have reached out to you?

There is no doubt that being a local government executive is often an extremely challenging job. In fact, in California during 2015, Cal-ICMA surveyed city and county managers and conducted follow-up focus groups to identify conflicts and stressors impacting managers’ work lives.

Among the principal challenges identified were:

- Governing board members who do not understand or value the council-manager form of government.
- Attempts by governing board members to interfere with administrative matters or to micromanage.
- Political conflicts among governing board members or “outlier” members, causing serious negative impacts on the staff and the organization.

Sources of stress can also arise from financial challenges, community discord, negative media coverage, personal attacks, ethical challenges, and conflict with department heads.

## **A Professional Value—Support for One Another**

It has long been a value in local government professional management to support our colleagues. It is understood that our profession has unique challenges and demands. It is often difficult for those who are not doing our work to fully appreciate the pressures that managers experience.

The profession can often feel “lonely” if we have few in our communities with whom we can confide. It is for all these reasons that the local government

management profession has an expectation of collegial support.

While it has long been a value in our profession to reach out to colleagues in distress, our profession does not always live up to this expectation. The reasons for not doing so can be varied and understandable.

We may simply not be aware of the distress that a colleague is experiencing. Even when we do perceive the distress, we may not always reach out to offer support. We may not be proactive because:

- We may fail to see it as our role.
- We are busy with our professional and personal lives and find that, even if we intend to reach out, we do not get around to it.
- We may not know how to appropriately reach out.
- We may feel uncomfortable bringing up a sensitive topic with a colleague.
- We are anxious about how our concern and efforts to support will be perceived by the colleague.

While we may feel uncertainty regarding reaching out and supporting others, it can make a world of difference to a colleague. Likewise, we in local government management need to create a culture of support and caring so that support is offered when we ourselves need it.

## **Warning Signs of Distress**

In order to be able to support colleagues in distress, we must first recognize the warning signs and symptoms of distress. The warning signs may include one or several of these symptomatic attitudes or behaviors:

- Withdrawal from colleagues or increasing isolation; for example, a manager may stop coming to professional meetings.
- Emotional outbursts.
- Loss of patience.
- Frustration with the daily give-and-take with elected officials.
- Denigration of elected officials, staff, and community players.

- Feeling “put-upon” or not understood.
- Lack of engagement.
- Self-doubt or questioning one’s professional judgment.
- Resigned to gridlock or conflict.
- Feeling overly fatigued.
- Drinking to excess.
- Loss of weight.

How can we be sure if a colleague is experiencing any of these symptoms and facing challenges? There are often four ways to sense a colleague is under duress:

1. You may personally observe troubling behaviors or attitudes.
2. You may hear of a manager in distress from other colleagues who have recently interacted with the manager.
3. You may hear a comment from one of your department heads or elected officials who may have heard from a counterpart in another jurisdiction served by the colleague in trouble.
4. You may be alerted by coverage in the news media that a colleague is in distress.

## **Providing Support**

To check your perceptions, you may want to talk to other managers to see if they also see some symptoms of distress exhibited by the colleague. The basic approach is to proactively reach out, engage your colleague in conversation, ask questions, empathize, and demonstrate that you care.

Here are specific ideas on how to reach out to a colleague:

**Call your colleague and ask how he or she is doing.** While this would hopefully be followed up by a meeting, it can be the best way to undertake an initial outreach.

**Invite the colleague to meet one-on-one.** If you can get the colleague away from his or her office, it can promote open conversation that initially focuses on non-work-related topics, including family, sports, or some other topic you may have in common.

This can help create a relaxed atmosphere to encourage open communication. Perhaps you can invite the colleague to a mutually appealing away-from-work activity like a sporting event, a short walk, or a hike.

**Ask open-ended questions and simply listen.** To help your colleague share, you can ask these types of open-ended questions:

- You don't seem as energized in your role anymore. What is happening?
- There seems to be a lot of conflict on your board. How is that affecting you?
- Your board and community seem very demanding and even unforgiving. Are you and staff members feeling under the gun?
- Your local press seems hypercritical. How is that impacting you and your organizational team?
- How is your family dealing with the adversity that you are experiencing?
- How have you tried to respond to this challenging situation?
- Do you feel that current circumstances are taking a toll on you?

Listening to and acknowledging your colleague's challenges without necessarily providing solutions is a gift and demonstrates that you care.

**Take your colleague to a meeting.** If the manager in distress is withdrawing and becoming isolated, you can suggest that you pass by city hall and pick up the manager on the way to a local, regional, or state meeting of fellow professionals. This also provides an opportunity to engage the manager in conversation to and from the meeting.

**Share your own challenges and "story."** It may be helpful to share similar challenges and adversity that you have faced in your career. This can demonstrate that bad times do not last forever and can be overcome. Again, you share your relevant "story"

or experience as an opportunity to empathize, not to solve the problem.

**Provide resources and advice, if appropriate.** The key is to provide social and emotional support while also identifying other resources that may be of assistance. Possible questions to explore include:

- What have you tried to do to address the situation?
- What are some other options?
- Have you considered \_\_\_\_\_?
- May I send you an article (or other resource) that I have found helpful?
- Have you considered talking to \_\_\_\_\_? She faced a similar problem.
- Have you considered a "coach" to assist you in thinking through this difficult situation? (See ICMA Career Compass #45 "City Managers Need Coaches Too" available at [www.icma.org/careercompass](http://www.icma.org/careercompass).)

In terms of resources, the Cal-ICMA Survival Skills Project is currently developing a website in conjunction with the Institute of Local Government to provide a one-stop compendium of resources. These online resources will help promote positive council-manager relationships and help assist managers survive and thrive as they experience adversity.

**Encourage others to reach out.** To provide additional social support, it may be a good idea to suggest that another manager or the ICMA senior adviser in the region reach out as well.

### Ethical Issues

Suppose the colleague's distress is a result of actual or alleged inappropriate conduct and unethical behavior. There can be occasions when a fellow manager is in trouble because of poor judgment, unprofessional actions, or alleged unethical behavior. If the trouble is self-inflicted and even detrimental to the profession, some

managers wonder if they should reach out to the colleague.

It is also important, however, to keep in mind that there are circumstances when managers are unfairly accused of misconduct by those seeking to discredit the manager or seek some sort of advantage.

There certainly can be circumstances when the conduct of a colleague is so egregious that offering "support" is not appropriate. There can also be circumstances when even self-inflicted wounds, short of clearly unethical and illegal behavior, can result in impacts that call for peer support.

Often, we may not know if the accusations made against a colleague are valid. If you do not know, you can reach out to support your colleague without judging what may have happened or offering unconditional support.

### Building a Culture of Support

Many of us in local government management experience distress at different points in our careers. To survive and hopefully thrive, we need to feel that we are part of a professional community that cares about and is willing to support us.

While it may be difficult the first time we reach out and engage a troubled colleague, our skills in doing so, like most things, will improve with practice. Besides, we will find that it is rewarding to help others. Such a community of caring will also support us when we need assistance.

Managers can build a culture of support and caring by:

- Recognizing the warning signs of colleagues in distress.
- Reaching out to those in need and providing support.
- Encouraging others to do the same. **PM**



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