

## **So, You Want To Be an Interim Manager?**

### **--Some Thoughts From the Encore Manager Committee--**

A number of Managers who have transitioned into their “encore” careers consider Interim Manager positions in local government. There are certainly a variety of benefits from doing interim work:

- You are familiar with the demands of a City/County Manager position and already have the skills.
- It’s good income.
- You can stay connected with colleagues and the profession.
- You can be as forthright and direct with elected officials as need be.
- You can help prepare the organization for the new, permanent manager.
- You can have a positive impact on another organization and community.

While interim work is often a preferred encore opportunity pursued by retiring Managers, some may not fully consider the ethical, professional and personal considerations associated with this unique engagement.

### **Getting Considered for an Interim Assignment**

If you are interested in an interim assignment, you should let people know so you can get on the Council’s or Board’s list of possible Interim Managers to be considered for the position. Customs are different in different states. Some typical ways of getting considered are to make it be known to colleagues (Managers and HR Directors) and ICMA Senior Advisors/State Liaison that you are available for interim work; notify executive recruiters of your availability; and post your resume on the municipal league’s webpage featuring interim assignments or consultants (if the league provides that service to its member agencies). A private consulting firm or a regional agency may also suggest to Councils possible Interim Managers.

The Council or Board (hereafter referred to as the “Council”) may interview two or three candidates for the Interim Manager position. The interview process and questions may seem like going through a recruitment for a permanent position. Obviously, candidates must do a little research on the city and agency and some of their challenges, especially in the next six months. You should not be put off by this process since the Council has the responsibility to find the best Interim Manager available for its organization and community.

### **Ethical and Other Key Issues**

After interviewing a number of Managers who have served in an interim capacity, the Cal-ICMA Senior Manager/Encore Manager Committee has identified the following ten issues:

#### **1. ICMA Code of Ethics—On or Off?**

When you retire from local government management, you are no longer required to abide by the ICMA Code of Ethics. For instance, you can make donations to political candidates or campaign for them. However, if you become an Interim Manager, you must abide by all the provisions of the Code.

If the previous manager left under an ethical cloud or you discover some unethical behaviors on the part of the previous manager, how do you handle the situation given the ICMA Code of Ethics? You should start by discussing the breach with the Mayor and City Attorney to determine the extent of the ethical or legal problem. You should also consult with ICMA for guidance. If any problem is in a “gray” area and the manager is gone, the Council may feel that the matter is resolved since the manager has left the organization and the Council just wants to move ahead.

#### **2. Commitment**

If you are going to serve as an Interim Manager, you are making a significant commitment for typically six months or more, and not just “warming the seat” for the incoming “permanent” Manager. Even if you negotiate a three-four day work week or make it clear that you are not on call on the weekends (except for emergencies), the Council, the organization

and the community all deserve your full energy and attention. Your commitment may preclude you from taking advantage of other encore activities, such as traveling with your partner or cycling every morning with your bike club.

Therefore, those seeking an interim assignment must assess whether they have the time, energy and heart to serve.

### **3. Candidate for Permanent Position**

If you are a candidate for the permanent job, it is an ethical “must” to declare your intention during the interviews with the Council. If you are not a candidate, you need to make this clear as well and then stick to your decision even if they like your performance and want you as the permanent chief executive.

If you are not a candidate for the permanent position, make this clear with those who may be interested in the job. If there is a question in the minds of qualified candidates, they may choose not to apply. It is your obligation to help the organization get as many qualified candidates as possible.

### **4. Involvement in Recruitment and Selection of Permanent Manager**

During the interviews with the Council, you should set expectations regarding your involvement in the recruitment and selection of the new Manager. The Council and staff may expect you to promote the opportunity and seek candidates. Do you feel comfortable with that role? While it is perfectly fine to let colleagues know about the recruitment and provide your perspectives about the opportunity, many Interim Managers prefer to let the HR department or an executive recruiter handle the recruitment. Not only do you as the Interim Manager have more pressing concerns, but it may get messy if you are screening and recommending candidates to the Council. However, other Interim Managers like to provide input in the screening process since they have come to know a lot about what the organization may need and therefore the desirable skill set for the new, permanent manager.

If you are the Interim Manager in a very small community and organization, the agency may neither have an HR Director nor can it afford an executive recruiter. In such a case, the Council may ask you to conduct the

recruitment process. ICMA has a well-regarded publication entitled *Selecting a Local Government Administrator* which will help guide you and the Council through the recruitment process. In such a case, we suggest that you ask Managers and/or HR Directors from nearby cities to help screen candidates and recommend those to be interviewed by the Council.

At some point, the Council members may ask you whom they should select. This is their decision and one of the most important decisions they will ever make. Council members need to “own” their selection. If you do feel pressured by them to comment on the top candidates, you can provide the upsides and downsides of the finalists but surely do not make any recommendations.

#### 5. **Overseer or “Fix-It” Expert**

In the interviews with the Council, you should discuss their expectations of you during the interim assignment. Are you an administrative overseer just keeping the organization on track until the new Manager arrives? Or, do they expect you to fix up the organization and make some major changes in the coming months that you serve?

You should also discuss your preferences. You may not feel comfortable being a caretaker if the organization needs some immediate changes or if by nature you are an activist manager.

Even if the Council wants you to just “keep things together,” you have the obligation to listen to employees and key stakeholders, assess the organization, and identify any key issues or problems that the organization needs to address during your interim term or that you need to highlight for the incoming Manager.

If the Council wants you to make some specific changes (for instance, firing a specific department head), you should not be making any firm commitments and explain that you have the ethical responsibility to listen, assess, and then recommend to the Council or decide what you think is the best for the organization and the community.

#### 6. **Council Member Encroachment**

Interim Managers must defend the administration of the government from Council member encroachment. Elected officials of agencies experiencing a key vacancy tend to get more “hands on” because of the uncertainty. Your job is to make sure that does not happen and to explain why letting the Manager manage is best for the long-term health of the organization. Remember that policy-makers are often service-driven and their enthusiasm is a great strength as well as a potential problem.

If Council members have always tended to encroach into the administration of the organization, you will be doing a great service for the incoming Manager if you begin to appropriately train the elected officials about the benefits of the Council/Manager form of government and the expectations of a professional manager.

#### 7. **“Clearing the Decks” for the Permanent Manager**

A good Interim Manager will “clear the decks” for the incoming Manager. The Interim Manager can ask department heads if there are lingering or emerging issues that might be difficult for the new manager to confront. This often entails making tough personnel decisions or budget cuts or concluding contentious labor negotiations. If you can appropriately deal with these issues, the new Manager can begin his or her tenure without some difficult confrontations and therefore get off to a good start.

#### 8. **Hiring Senior Staff**

If at all possible, you should resist the temptation to hire department heads or other senior staff. These are key decisions for the incoming Manager. However, in some cases, it may be desirable to act. For instance, if the Fire Department has been operating with an acting Chief for 18 months, it may not be in the best interests of the department or the organization to wait several more months until the incoming Manager gets settled and assesses the situation and the personnel.

#### 9. **Whom Do You Trust?**

While Council members or department heads may make assertions that you can’t trust this person or another, it is your ethical responsibility to make your own determination about who is trust-worthy. However, you don’t have a lot of time to make judgments, especially if the Council wants you to

restructure the organization or make some other changes. To consider any such changes or other issues, you need to begin your assignment by interviewing individual Council members and department heads in order to identify personality conflicts, festering issues, and key projects in trouble.

Another way to get a better feel for senior staff such as department heads is to get their personnel files from HR and call colleagues in other organizations in which they have worked. Chief executives from adjacent local government agencies can also provide you some perspectives.

## **10. Employee and Community Involvement**

When a Manager retires, resigns or is fired, there is a sense of loss regardless if the Manager was beloved or not. Within six to nine months, the Council members, employees, and community members will have experienced three different organizational leaders: the exiting Manager, the Interim, and the new Manager. This is a time of change and uncertainty.

Within this transitional period, employees and community members as well as Council members need to see leadership from the chief executive. Consequently, an Interim Manager needs to spend time with Council members, visit different facilities, meet employees, and attend community functions. The Interim Manager must model optimism, steadiness, and calmness regardless of the challenges. During transitions, people need reassurance.

### **Your Health and Family**

Oftentimes, when Managers retire, we want to devote more attention to our physical or emotional health and/or to significant relationships (partners, children, parents, or friends). While the authority, influence and status of a chief executive job can be addictive, one seeking an Interim Manager position must decide if such a commitment is detrimental to health, relationships or other commitments.

### **Consider Non-Manager Interim Positions and Other Energizing Opportunities**

If you are not energized by developing new relationships with elected officials and spending a lot of time with them, or wish to minimize the

typical demands of a chief executive position, you may wish to seek an interim department head or other senior staff position. Interim department director positions have many of the same advantages and benefits of Interim Manager jobs yet minimize some of the potential downsides.

In any case, given the limited time frame of an interim assignment, many managers enjoy the flexibility of working in areas that energize them and delegating tasks that do not. For instance, if you have a passion for coaching and mentoring, this is a rewarding area to focus your time and efforts.

### **A Major Contribution**

You may think that an interim assignment is not a big deal and that you can handle anything for a short time. We “encore” managers are at a point in our lives where we neither have the capacity nor the need to “put up with anything.” Therefore, we suggest that you thoroughly evaluate whether the interim assignment is a good fit, in terms of:

- your skills and interests
- the demands of the position
- the chemistry with the Council members
- your energy and enthusiasm for the challenge
- your personal life

Your job as an Interim Manager is to provide professional and high-quality leadership to an organization that is going through an often difficult time of change and transition. It is your responsibility to see that things go well.

When they write the history of the community, it is unlikely that you will be mentioned, no matter how well you do. That is okay. After all, the great public administrator Louis Brownlow named his autobiography *A Passion for Anonymity*. If all goes well, what you will take away with you is the satisfaction of playing a crucial part in helping a community and its local government through a difficult time.

### **Peer Advice**

The following Encore Managers have served as Interim Managers and are willing to talk with you about the issues identified above or any other questions regarding interim work:

Kevin O'Rourke	<a href="mailto:kevin@kolgs.com">kevin@kolgs.com</a>
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In addition, the Cal-ICMA Senior Manager/Encore Manager Initiative has developed a list of peer coaches who can provide guidance regarding interim and other encore opportunities. To view the list of peer coaches, go to [www.cal-icma.org](http://www.cal-icma.org) and click on "Senior Manager/Encore Manager Program" and then "Resources."

### **Your Observations or Questions**

We would like this short guide to be a living document. Would you like to share any questions, comments or observations on Interim Manager opportunities? If so, please email your questions or comments to:

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