"The future ain't what it used to be" said the eminent philosopher and baseball Hall of Famer Yogi Berra. For those working in local government, his adage could not hold more meaning than it does today. Local leaders are called upon to reshape their organizations to satisfy public expectations by maintaining or increasing services with a constant, if not declining, revenue base, as well as to prepare for a local government future that will increasingly reflect less homogeneity, a blending of service boundaries, and a growing emphasis on consumerism.

This new era, which is highlighted by the enormity, unpredictability, and rapidity of change, requires organizations to become more adaptive learning organizations that can respond quickly to ever-changing demands.

### Less Community Homogeneity

Most local government managers have been educated through a traditional curriculum that emphasized rational organizational design fixed to the business principles of efficiency and effectiveness. Our traditional political culture also placed value on local government services centered around the homogeneity of each community.

In the 21st century, societal homogeneity has evolved into far-reaching diversity. The unity of service delivery is being augmented with demands to proactively respond to a multitude of divergent group as well as individual interests.

As our diversity continues to increase, political demands to decentralize and individualize services to meet the discreet needs of diverse population groups will be increasingly dominant and a driver of public policy for local government.

To effectively address this diversity, managers, and equally important, state and local legislators, must understand that the one-size-fits-all service delivery system, historically used to insure societal equity, will not be operative as a controlling value in the 21st century.

### Blending of Service Boundaries

The 21st century local government has become more multifaceted with a proliferation of local, regional, statewide, as well as national entities that have overlapping responsibilities and mechanisms for service delivery. In addition, this blurring and growing irrelevance of jurisdictional boundaries for service delivery has resulted in residents receiving services or using governmental facilities from several jurisdictions.

In contrast with the traditional community, 21st century citizens increasingly...
see themselves more connected regionally, nationally, and globally through the information network and, through the national and international employment patterns that exist in the new economy. Residents are less concerned if the service received is provided by the local government in which they live. What they do expect is the service will meet their expectations for effectiveness and cost.

**Consumerism**

A hallmark of the 21st century is a conflict in societal values that pits the public interest against an individual centric philosophy focused on the maximization of personal gain. The political movement that emphasizes individualism over collective responsibility is leading citizens as well as managers of local government to view local government as a personal supplier of services.

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Too often, we in government have reinforced this myopic attitude by referring to residents as customers. An unintended consequence of governmental consumerism is the resident expectation that they can treat government as a smorgasbord, receiving and paying only for what is individually needed and received. Societal consumerism requires local government to schizophrenically attempt to fulfill demands from all “customers” who place demands on the system.

Sonny Perdue, former governor of Georgia, perfectly exhibited the government consumerist philosophy when he describes the customer-based service delivery promoted by the state of Georgia as “a full service, Wal-Mart type retail mentality.”

**Designing a New Local Government Structure**

Assisting elected officials and staff to accept and understand the most basic hierarchical structure can be challenging enough for any manager. Limited staff and limited staff time are constraints that exist in most organizations today, and modifying their organizational structure to respond to the changes referred to in this article could surely be more daunting. With the right plan, however, such restructuring can add clarity and flexibility for those people most responsible for seeing that services are delivered.

Here is a list of recommended steps that managers should consider:

**Implement a community-visioning and goal-setting process.** All local governments are forced to react to unanticipated situations. Some local government officials, however, find themselves reacting to all situations, even those that could have been anticipated. Implementing a visioning and goal-setting process can take several months to a year depending upon the methodology used.

The purpose of this process is to collectively gain a better understanding of the community’s challenges with homogeneity, service boundaries, and consumerism. It also is important to learn how these might impact the community’s future demographics, define service priorities, and identify resources available to meet agreed upon and practical service levels.

Minimum requirements for such a process involve a facilitator—this person might be a consultant or an adept and respected member of the community—to coordinate each step and to keep participants focused on the process and securing sufficient citizen input using public meetings, focus groups, questionnaires, or other means. Citizens should actually feel they helped write or had the opportunity to help write the community’s plan if they are going to be receptive to underwriting it later with taxes, fees, and so forth. The vision and goals established should be incorporated into the budget and should be used to evaluate employee performance.

**Develop hierarchical organizations that reflect how services are provided.** Traditional hierarchical systems should continue to be employed to provide control and consistency in service delivery. It is recommended, however, that this traditional hierarchy be augmented with a less structured component to administer services that are multidepartmental, multisectorial, quickly changing, involve unique clientele, and require specific patterns of delivery.

This modified structure should be customized and uniquely tailored to recognize the needs possessed by the local government population being served, as defined in the visioning and goal-setting process. If local services are increasingly regionalized, for example, multiorganizational teams will, in many cases, function as the primary providers for service delivery. The augmented hierarchical structure should include this function to accurately depict what is occurring with service delivery. This will improve opera-
tional understanding for elected officials, employees, and interested citizens.

Educate stakeholders on service delivery. With advancements in technology, local governments are able to quickly communicate in multiple ways, including websites, social media, webinars, and more. Let’s also not forget the value in face to face interaction.

Regardless of the resources available to a community, it is paramount that a community’s elected officials, employees, and interested citizens all understand the vision and goals of the community, along with how and why the community’s organizational structure is developed to implement the vision and goals. This is an on-going process and one that necessitates repetitive dialogue to keep stakeholders focused and to reinforce the process needed to deliver services successfully.

For local government managers, Yogi was correct. However, the skill set for managers, while not what it used to be, is still quite consistent with that learned in our traditional management education. Centered on the same foundation as those in the past, successful 21st century managers recognize the complex environment in which they operate and adapt their organization to fulfill the needs and expectations of the residents they serve. 

ENDNOTES


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