



CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP:
A Guide for the Next Generation in
Local Government

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A Guide for the next generation in local government

The Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA) is a national non-profit Association of senior municipal administrators that endeavours to “champion excellence in municipal administration and develop resilient leadership through professional development, networking and advocacy”.

Considerable research and a survey of the membership was undertaken to guide the development of our new Strategic Plan which was launched in April 2016. From that information, it was determined that a number of trends are emerging that could impact local government in the future. Over the next five years, municipal senior management and elected officials should therefore expect to operate in a context of radical, ongoing, and accelerating change, which will require strong leadership. On the other hand, it is a unique opportunity to attract and retain talented people, committed to the mission of local government and ready to embrace a change.

There is a demographic shift happening in CAMA's membership which will likely also result in different expectations. Given the impending retirement of a significant number of municipal administrators, municipalities have an opportunity to promote the positive rewards of having a career in local government. One of the Association's goals it to ensure that we are providing new and existing municipal administrators with information, and a network, that assists them in their role, encourages the next generation of leaders and, promotes the importance of the Professional Municipal Administrator.

This project was designed in recognition of the importance of providing useful career advice to the next generation of local government leaders, and to provide an opportunity for our more experienced CAMA members to give back to the profession. It is our hope that it will help CAMA members at different stages of their career, students considering a career in local government, and potential future CAMA members. This is also a great resource to share with direct reports and managers throughout your organization.

“What Advice Would You Give to the Next Generation of Municipal Leaders?” We posed this question to experienced CAOs from across the country to get their guidance on what it takes to make it in this profession. We asked them to share their accomplishments, challenges faced, some of the most important lessons learned, and the key competencies and skill sets required now, and in the future, to be great leaders.

It wouldn't have been possible to produce this document without the leadership of our Chair Marc Landry (CAMA Second Vice President and Representative for Alberta and the Northwest Territories), CAMA Staff, and the following nine CAMA members/mentors who have provided their great words of wisdom and advice:

- Mike Pinsent, Town Manager, Town of Grand Falls Windsor NL
- Chris MacPherson, Chief Administrative Officer, City of Fredericton, NB
- Duncan Campbell, Retired Chief Administrative Officer, QC
- Janice Baker, CAO/City Manager, City of Mississauga, ON
- Glen Davies, Chief Administrative Officer, Town of Gravenhurst, ON
- Jim Toye, City Manager, City of Prince Albert, SK
- Robert Cotterill, City Manager, City of Spruce Grove, AB
- Rhonda Stewart, Chief Administrative Officer Town of Virden, MB
- Gail Stephens, Retired Chief Administrative Officer, BC

It is our hope that this wealth of information will assist all of us to create stronger municipalities and communities. We want the next generation of leaders to be ready!



Marie-Hélène Lajoie
CAMA President

QUOTABLE ADVICE



Robert Cotterill

City Manager, City of Spruce Grove, AB

"Being a senior administrator in a municipality puts a great deal of stress on you and your family. Many years later I spoke to my kids about what was it like when my career was advancing. While you work in a fish bowl when you work in public administration, your kids are also part of that as well. Find time to talk to them and help cushion the negative aspects of your job. They are also in the fish bowl with you and may need help



Janice Baker

CAO/City Manager, City of Mississauga, ON

"A career in local government can be very rewarding. It can also be very challenging but if you are up for the challenge, you can be part of building a community and leading an amazing team of professionals. In short, you can make a difference."



Mike Pinsent

Town Manager, Town of Grand Falls Windsor, NL

"The next generation of CAMA members have huge opportunities ahead of them. Like any industry, you have to work your way up. Recognize the potential in your workplace and pay attention to what the entire organization does. Develop your strengths, improve where you are lacking. Do a good job where you are and keep an eye on where you want to be. Be known for a work ethic that gets positive recognition. Employers large and small are looking for their own employees to excel and advance. Be well rounded by developing a home life that is active and inclusive of family. "

QUOTABLE ADVICE



Duncan Campbell

Retired Chief Administrative Officer, QC

"Be patient. All us old boomers are pretty much out of the way. But watch out, we are going to retire to our homes and cottages and bug the hell out of you through our e-mail, Twitter or blog accounts. Pay as much attention to us as you would anyone else and just do what you believe is the right thing to do. Bonne chance, we all need you to succeed!"



Gail Stephens

Retired Chief Administrative Officer, BC

"Lead a life of continuous improvement and positive change. You will never grow old. As Leo Buscalia once said: "Change. It has the power to uplift, to heal, to stimulate, surprise, open new doors, bring fresh experience and create excitement in life." Certainly, it is worth the risk. So, take on career challenges, work hard and the rewards will come."



Jim Towe

City Manager, City of Prince Albert, SK

"My career as a Chief Administrative Officer has been very rewarding in many ways. If you have the four attributes of honesty, competency, the ability to inspire a team, and being a forward thinker, then you have the keys to success in this profession and you should go for it!"

QUOTABLE ADVICE



Chris MacPherson

Chief Administrative Officer, City of Fredericton, NB

"I would simply say, it's a great profession. I love my City and the people I work with – I know others would as well. It's tremendously satisfying and you can make a real difference in people's lives."



Rhonda Stewart

Chief Administrative Officer, Town of Virden, MB

"This is a rewarding, yet challenging career!! There is never a dull moment, as things change from day to day. If you have the opportunity to be hired at a municipality, take it!"

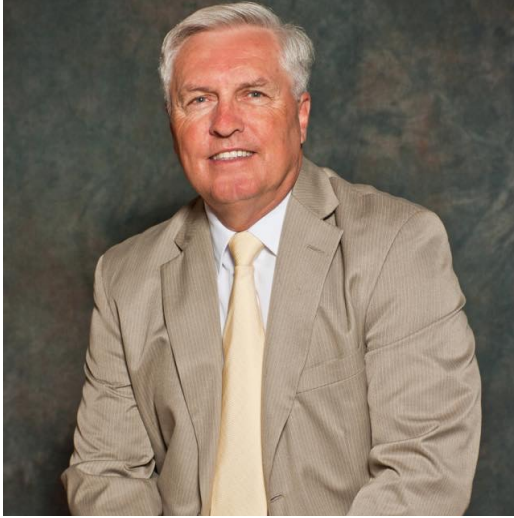


Glen Davies

Chief Administrative Officer, Town of Gravenhurst, ON

"Keep things in perspective! One should take the job seriously but not necessarily take one's self too seriously. What goes with that is maintaining a sense of humour and an ability to take things in stride. A whole organization, and sometimes Council, is looking for someone to be resilient in the face of difficult situations and the ability to do that in part comes from this attribute of keeping things in perspective."

Robert Cotterill



I have been a CAO for 15 years and Senior Engineer/Director of Public Works in three municipalities for 18 years. My career has been spent in four provinces and two territories and I have worked for five municipalities. I have been a CAO in three municipalities and each province and municipality has its own legislation and challenges.

What are the most important points of advice that you could provide to the younger generation that is considering a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

Don't stay in any one municipality or position for more than three to five years. After three or four years you are relearning the same things and ultimately not growing. As much as it is nice to be close to family, don't be afraid of looking beyond the boundaries of your region or province. Learn new things every day. You can do that by reading, taking courses or just by asking questions and learning the other disciplines within a municipal government.

When looking back in your career, what is the biggest accomplishment that you are most proud of?

This is probably the hardest question to answer because my 33 years of service have been so diverse. As an engineer I have worked with teams to solve some very interesting and challenging civil engineering challenges. Several of the solutions have been written in the Civil Engineering journals and to have your name on the paper along with your colleagues is rewarding.

I worked for a CAO/mentor who was always willing to look for innovative solutions to help a municipality that was financially challenged. That gave me the courage to think outside the box and look for partnerships where previously such initiatives were never considered. In my career we have taken over a short line railway line, purchased another, owned a working grain elevator, became part owner of a fibre optic company, owned and operated a marina, and started an economic development and tourism corporation.

Robert Cotterill

What is the biggest challenge that you had to face in your career as a Senior Administrator? Now looking back at this challenge, would you do something differently?

I worked in a City where the municipality experienced five emergencies in six years. We activated our EOC five times. The challenges included:

- A failed girder on a major bridge. The bridge was closed for major truck traffic for a year while we determined the cause of the failure, ascertained how to repair the crack and ensured the rest of the bridge didn't suffer a similar fate.
- A plough wind that damaged buildings and destroyed part of our urban forest;
- An ice storm that left the City without power for almost two days causing major sewer flooding;
- A water treatment plant valve failure that placed a boil water order on the City for five weeks;
- Storm flooding that threatened a major park, park facilities and a wooden highway bridge.

As a CAO, I was thrust in front of media explaining the technical issues that we faced and left to assure the public that the City was safe. While I am proud of what my team was able to do to keep the citizens safe, I regret being placed in front of the media so much and not insisting that the Mayor take more of an active role in media relations. The CAO should never have a higher profile than the Council. The CAO should not be the spokesman for the City, as that is the Mayor's role. To do so, places you too much in the spotlight and the residents want and need to hear from their elected representatives. You should only be there to answer technical questions and to support the Mayor.

As a leader I had the opportunity to introduce an initiative called the Four Disciplines of Execution to my organization. There are other initiatives similar to it such as Six Sigma but this methodology allowed our entire workforce to be totally engaged in a single corporate goal for a whole year. Our goal was to improve our financial sustainability by finding new initiatives that would improve the City's financial position. After one year the City realized new revenues or reductions in expenditures totalling \$2.2 million. The organization as a whole was engaged and working together.

Is there anything you wished you would have known before becoming a Senior Administrator or Chief Administrative Officer?

I wish that I knew that the life of a CAO would at times be a lonely one. You aren't a member of Council but you are their only one employee. As a result you have a close relationship with them but you aren't one of them. You are also an employee but as the senior employee you lead the administration, but while friendly to the staff, you also have to remain at times distant. In the community, you are seen as the senior administrator and that comes with it the challenge that you and your family are in the spot light, always being watched.

I also wish that I had someone in my early career that could have given me advice when I needed it and help me understand that you have to have a work life balance. That means taking proper vacations away from the municipality so that you recharge your batteries.

Robert Cotterill

Why do you think individuals should consider a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

The role of a CAO or senior administrator is very rewarding. Especially when you are able to work with a team of administrators who are all working together to bring about the mission, vision and strategic plan of the municipality. Watching a community being transformed and changed as the town or city grows is very rewarding. While a municipality doesn't erect monuments to recognize outstanding employees, having your name on a plaque in a new building or receiving a Governor General's award for years of service lets you know that what we do is very important.

What are some of the most important lessons learned that you would like to share?

Too many professionals that work for communities forget that the vision and strategic direction of a community comes from the Council. We guide and direct their thinking but when all is said and done, we support the direction of the Council. We serve at the will of Council and we ultimately provide them our best advice and follow their direction.

You control your career and you should take control of where your career will take you, not let your career just happen. Sit down each year and look at what you have learned, where you want to be in the next three to five years and set a strategy to get there. Don't count on others to ensure that you are successful, control your own destiny. Talk to your employer and get his/her advice. If your municipality doesn't do a 360 degree appraisal, do one yourself. Be honest with yourself as to what you did right and wrong. Learn from your mistakes and ask others for their honest input.

Finally, keep your municipal lawyer on speed dial. Have your solicitor working with you as you develop solutions to problems. It is easier to fix something if the solicitor is working with you than to have to expect them to fix something after it is gone wrong.

What key competencies / skill sets do you believe Senior Administrators are required to have now and in the future?

Most administrators come from a single discipline such as fire, protective services, finance, planning, or engineering, to name a few. While good administrators may never have worked in or all of these disciplines, he or she should have a good understanding of what each discipline does and when to look to leaders in these areas for advice. Look to all disciples for their input into the challenges that you face. A good problem solver doesn't rush to a decision without looking for several solutions to a problem before deciding which to recommend and why.

A good administrator is a good listener, respectful of others and their opinions, but who is also decisive once a decision needs to be made.

Robert Cotterill

What items should the next generation of Senior Administrators focus on to continue progressing and evolving in their careers (example: professional development, other career opportunities, lifelong learning)?

Seek out a mentor, even if you think you know it all, find a seasoned veteran who you can call up and bounce ideas off of.

Future generations of administrators must be more of a generalist and less of an expert in any one discipline. That will require continual learning and relearning as technology changes and solutions change.

Find out who is doing things differently and innovatively, and seek to find out why, and if what they are doing could help you be more successful.

Finally, being a great leader is about people. As a senior leader you can get so focused on the day to day issues that you forget about your people. Every day take time to think about what you can do to improve the health of your organization. A healthy corporate culture will lead to a great rate of return for you and your senior leadership. People will work harder and smarter when they enjoy the culture that they work in.

Why do you believe it's important to be a CAMA Member and what benefits has CAMA given you?

CAMA for me has always been about networking. Talking to your peers and finding out what challenges they face. CAMA members never want to know how big your municipality is or the number of employees. The members just accept you as one of their own and they are always open to sharing. It can be lonely being a CAO in a remote part of the province and many times you can't talk to people in your community about the challenges you face. Find a CAO that you feel comfortable with and see if he or she will act as a mentor. I did and to this day he is a close friend that I talk to about important issues.

Based on your experience, what points of advice would you give regarding work / life balance? Do you have any specific examples you would like to share?

Most of my career I have put my municipality and my career ahead of family and my personal needs. Now that I am coming to the end of my career, I can see that I should have made sure that I took more time for me and more time for family getting away time. Council will never thank you for staying behind, working the long hours and always being available. They will just come to expect that you are always there. Protect your family and home time as something precious that you guard with your whole being.

Also make sure that you have good time to destress in your life. Proper diet and proper exercise have to be lifestyle choices that set as a priority when your health is good.

Janice Baker



I joined the City of Mississauga in May, 1999 as Commissioner of Corporate Services and Treasurer and was promoted to City Manager and Chief Administrative Officer in 2005. I have 29 years of municipal government and fiscal administration experience, serving as Director of Finance and City Treasurer for the City of St. John's, Newfoundland and Commissioner of Corporate Services and then Commissioner of Public Works for the City of Oshawa, Ontario. Prior to that, I worked in the private sector. I have a Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) degree from Memorial University of Newfoundland, and I am a Chartered Professional Accountant.

What are the most important points of advice that you could provide to the younger generation that is considering a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

First you need to have a passion for the work of leadership and community building. You also should try and gain experience and show flexibility by moving around within or between different organizations. As you plan your career with local government employers, look for depth, breadth and a variety of experiences. We try and provide that in Mississauga through a robust Talent Management approach that puts high potentials on key projects, that seconds people into short term assignments to meet their career development needs, and that supports their personal development plan. If you want to move into local government leadership, ensure you look for those opportunities with your current employer.

When looking back in your career, what is the biggest accomplishment that you are most proud of?

Clearly becoming the City Manager and CAO for the City of Mississauga is the highlight of my career. I had the opportunity to work with the great Mayor Hazel McCallion and really shape the growth and development of a city going through a transition from a suburban to an urban municipality. Our strategic plan which Council approved in 2009 was a major milestone in that journey and a policy document that still shapes our priorities today.

I am also very proud as a woman leader to have been a three time Women's Executive Network (WXN) Top 100 Award winner in the Public Sector Leaders category, and inducted into the WXN Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women's Hall of Fame in 2010. There are great opportunities for women to assume leadership roles in local government, so to be recognized as a role model was very special for me.

Janice Baker

What is the biggest challenge that you had to face in your career as a Senior Administrator? Now looking back at this challenge, would you do something differently?

About two years after I became CAO for Mississauga, the Council launched a judicial inquiry into whether our Mayor had a conflict of interest in a development deal. This was a very divisive and politically charged issue with the Council. Our staff was drawn into the inquiry to give evidence and it was a very stressful time for everyone. What I am most proud of is that at the end of the inquiry, it was clear that our staff had conducted themselves professionally and with integrity in all of the issues that had been examined. The challenge for me was to be seen to be impartial, and not to take sides and support the will of the Council, and not the individuals involved. It was not easy, but I accomplished that and got through what was a very difficult issue that went on for over two years from start to finish.

Is there anything you wished you would have known before becoming a Senior Administrator or Chief Administrative Officer?

Not really. I think like all jobs there are some things where your perception and the subsequent reality can be a bit different, but you learn to deal with those as you go forward. I would share with you the best piece of advice that I got when I became the CAO of Mississauga. My Director of Communications told me "Janice, you cast a long shadow." What she meant by that is people will always watch carefully what I say and do as leader of the organization, whether I'm "on stage" or not. It was a reminder that you need to walk the talk as a leader. You must be consistent, you need to be a role model and you must always be aware that people pay close attention to what you do, what you say and how you behave. They will not accept and follow what you say, if it is not congruent with what you do and your values.

Why do you think individuals should consider a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

I think the primary reason is that the work is both interesting and very rewarding. It has lot of variety, diversity, and is extremely challenging. You meet and work with lots of different people, from staff to citizens, to business leaders and leaders at senior levels of government.

What are some of the most important lessons learned that you would like to share?

Along with consistency and integrity, communication in senior rolls is also key. With councils you must follow the principle of "no surprises". If they don't hear important news and information from you and your team first, before they get it from the media, or Facebook or Twitter, then you have not done your job. And your staff need to hear from you regularly as well, not just when something goes wrong. We have a full CAO Communication Plan that provides a regular stream of information and updates by email, by video and face to face.

Sometimes this job requires you to have courage to speak up, even when what you have to say will not be popular. My advice in those situations is have the facts, dig deeply into the issue so you understand all its layers, and be the voice of reason at the table. Your job is to inform and advise, and respect differing points of view while expressing yours.

Janice Baker

What key competencies / skill sets do you believe Senior Administrators are required to have now and in the future?

Senior administrators need to be collaborators, influencers. They need to have the highest ethics and integrity, and they need to have both the courage and the communication skills to speak the truth to the elected officials, staff and the public.

They need to foster innovation and smart risk-taking in their organizations. They need to be accountable for results and build relationships across a broad spectrum of stakeholders. And last but not least, they need to give credit and recognize others for their success and their contribution. You do not stand on a pedestal, you stand on the shoulders of a lot of people who in their own way, big and small, contribute daily to the organization's success.

What items should the next generation of Senior Administrators focus on to continue progressing and evolving in their careers (example: professional development, other career opportunities, lifelong learning)?

I support the principles of lifelong learning. I also believe that varied experience, demonstrating a willingness to stretch and take on things that may be difficult or challenging will build a track record that will showcase your leadership skills.

I have served on many Boards and Committees for community organizations and have always enjoyed volunteering. It not only helps you with skills development, it also helps you to build a strong network in the community.

Why do you believe it's important to be a CAMA Member and what benefits has CAMA given you?

For most of the problems and challenges any of us have encountered, it is very likely that someone else has had a similar experience and can offer the benefit of that experience and their wisdom. Being a member of CAMA has allowed me to build a wide and deep personal network which is invaluable. In addition, the benefits of continuous learning and access to information about best practices is great.

Based on your experience, what points of advice would you give regarding work / life balance? Do you have any specific examples you would like to share?

Today we talk more about work life integration, because technology inevitably means they bleed into each other. These jobs are 24/7/365, and in many ways unstructured. Everyone, including a senior administrator for local government, needs to program down time and family time into their schedule and that needs to be done deliberately, well in advance and compromised only in true emergencies.

For example, I have made an agreement with my Mayor that she can reach out to me anytime Monday to Friday and she will get a very quick response. However, on the weekends I would prefer she stick to really important matters, and my response may not be as timely. It sets boundaries, and it has not caused any issues.

Mike Pinsent



I am a Professional Engineer and was hired by the Town of Grand Falls in 1987 in that role. After a year as Director of Engineering and Works, the CAO moved on and Council promoted me to replace him. At that time, Grand Falls had a population of 10,000 people and were experiencing some challenging times so the position offered was a combination of Director of Engineering and Works plus CAO duties. Being a young man, I readily accepted the combined position. The Town had a number of infrastructure issues and they felt it was the right combination of skills at that time.

These were very interesting and extremely busy times. We had a regional water supply servicing 18,000 people in three communities that was in desperate need of a water treatment plant. There was a provincial government focus on amalgamating Grand Falls with the adjacent town of Windsor with a population of 5,000. We also had serious human resource issues with regard to a skilled workforce.

Having worked for the same municipality for 29 years, I have many highlights or accomplishments that I am proud of. Probably the most significant is building our organization from an employer of last resort to an employer of choice. When I look at our workforce now compared to what it was, there is no comparison. This was a strategic effort that took several years to accomplish and maintain.

The second accomplishment that was a defining exercise for me was the successful amalgamation of the Town of Grand Falls and Windsor. Combining the workforces, Collective Agreements and establishing consistent and equal levels of service was a daunting task. The new Council was naturally territorial in the beginning but the management team really worked at servicing the combined towns as one. We are now celebrating our 25th year as an amalgamated community.

Of course there are significant infrastructure accomplishments such as full water treatment for the 25,000 people in our expanded regional water system, 100% sewage treatment for the Town of Grand Falls – Windsor, a significant recreation complex operated for the Town by the YMCA, as well as the regular infrastructure improvements and replacements.

We began our existence over a hundred years ago as a pulp and paper town. The mill closed in 2009 which was a huge economic blow. The challenges that presented were formidable, but we were a regional hub. Economic development and diversity was crucial to our sustainability as a community. We embarked on numerous initiatives and since the mill closure we have had significant growth in our housing starts which is a leading indicator. We have proven to be resilient, and that was certainly a highlight in my career and continues to be.

In 1992, I became involved in our provinces Professional Management Association representing the communities of the Central Region. I continued on the board for ten years, ending my involvement as President for the last two years. This was a very rewarding experience and gave me great insight into the problems facing the great diversity of municipalities in Newfoundland.

Mike Pinsent

What are the most important points of advice that you could provide to the younger generation that is considering a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

I have found that a majority of people are not aware of what a Municipal Council does. They know they pay taxes if they are property owners. They are aware of recreational programs and the services provided but largely take them for granted. If a young person is considering a career as a senior administrator, I would advise them to do research into all the business units or departments of a municipality. They will find that a municipal corporation is a complex organization that involves nearly every trade and profession. The diversity and responsibility of work is vast with regard to operations, accounting, parks and leisure services, economic development, planning and community development. The only way to get an understanding of what is involved is to take a community, look at its website, read Council minutes, examine the budget and interview a CAO or Department Head. The opportunities you find will be surprising.

When looking back in your career, what is the biggest accomplishment that you are most proud of?

The biggest accomplishment that I am most proud of is the development of our workforce into a professional multi skilled team that does an exceptional job of providing services to our residents and businesses. This may be considered a “motherhood” type of accomplishment. Given the challenges of amalgamation and mill closures, it was essential to have the right people from the ground up to ensure sustainability and continuity of service and quality of life during trying times. Often people say that your employees are your greatest resource. That is only true if you have the right ones.

What is the biggest challenge that you had to face in your career as a Senior Administrator? Now looking back at this challenge, would you do something differently?

The biggest challenge I had to face in my career was in 1991 and involved the amalgamation of our two communities. The two towns had a huge disparity in revenue, service range, quality of service and infrastructure. It involved merging two unionized workforces, two collective agreements, as well as dealing with inadequate equipment for this size of community, and inadequate information regarding underground infrastructures. On the management side, there was a duplication of positions. There was two fire halls, two town halls and two municipal works departments and only one of each were required.

At the time, I was working with the two incumbent Councils and the newly elected Council for a three month period. Dealing with these proved interesting to say the least, particularly when the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of the larger, newly amalgamated town were the Mayor and Deputy of the smaller town.

Looking back, I can't think of anything I would have done differently, we had a well thought out plan and executed it; our amalgamation became official on January 1, 1991, at the height of the snow clearing season. We knew amalgamation would be judged on the level of snow clearing provided and we spared no expense. We received accolades from all parts of town and this small initiative contributed to the acceptance of amalgamation at that time. Since then, I can confidently say that we have provided equal service throughout.

Mike Pinsent

Is there anything you wished you would have known before becoming a Senior Administrator or Chief Administrative Officer?

Early in my career, I was very vocal at Committee meetings, pushing issues the way I believed was the right path. At times, I was at odds with Councillors or the Mayor in doing that. It took many years to realize that if you provide the necessary information on a matter, it will get debated on its merits. Each Councillor gets one vote and with municipal politics, and there are no party lines to tow. Generally, I find common sense will prevail and the right thing gets done without me as CAO getting vigorously involved and consequently being viewed as taking sides. There are battles you have to engage in but you have to choose them wisely. This is something I wish I had known or had experience with and is something I constantly coach my department heads on.

Why do you think individuals should consider a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

A career as a senior administrator in local government is challenging and varied. Municipalities are involved in extremely diverse areas. We are probably the largest construction company in most communities albeit for one client. We provide arts and entertainment, sports programs, festivals, water treatment, sewage treatment, and a vast array of municipal services. We are a sizeable utility company, building maintenance company, economic development and marketing company. We have significant accounting and business processing operations.

Every day brings a new challenge and subsequently a new sense of accomplishment. I began work with the Town of Grand Falls – Windsor after working for a large private company. I did not intend to be here this long but public service gets in your blood. Municipal government is close to the people served. The work you do impacts people's quality of life directly and immediately. It can be very satisfying and rewarding.

What are some of the most important lessons learned that you would like to share?

One of the greatest lessons I have learned is to delegate responsibilities and work. Giving department heads and managers autonomy within their work spheres pays back dividends. They tend to take ownership and that means they take the responsibilities and exhibit dedication. If you hire the right people, give them autonomy, and it will ease the CAO's work load considerably.

Giving someone autonomy and responsibility does not mean you don't communicate, just that you don't micro manage. Communication is the key to it all. Much of my day is spent talking to department heads, supervisors and employees. Through communication, many potential mistakes are prevented and better plans made. There will always be things that go wrong, but communication can prevent many from happening. It takes up a lot of time but it is essential to have an open door policy.

Mike Pinsent

What key competencies / skill sets do you believe Senior Administrators are required to have now and in the future?

Senior Administrators are expected to be good communicators. Keeping Council informed on what is being done and what is needed is definitely a required skill. How you do this is very important in order to get the desired effect. In this day and age, Councillors are very wary about public perception which is immediately known through social media. It is necessary to provide copious background information and benchmarking both within the organization and with other comparable municipalities. Communication with employees and unions is essential to develop cultures of safety and productivity as well as adherence to policy.

Senior administrators need to be highly organized due to the complexity and variation of departments and initiatives. Coordination of all your resources takes organization and communication in order to be efficient.

All senior administrators have a core specialty such as accounting, planning or engineering. However, CAO's and department heads who are successful tend to be "generalists" who have an appreciation and knowledge of all professions and skills. You don't need to know everything, just have the people around you to provide the answers. There is an old saying "Why keep dogs and bark yourself?".

What items should the next generation of Senior Administrators focus on to continue progressing and evolving in their careers (example: professional development, other career opportunities, lifelong learning)?

Lifelong learning is more than just a buzz word. As I mentioned before, every career starts by following a specific profession. I would advise that you immerse yourself in that entry level position and take every opportunity to acquire training in that position. You are not likely to advance unless you do justice to where you are. Whatever that position is, if you are organized, a good communicator and be productive and efficient, your work will get noticed. It also will become easier with experience and allow you to pay attention and cooperate with other work areas or departments. Doing courses and professional development to extend your training in other fields will help advancement. Depending on the size of the organization you are working with, this should be strategic and will depend on where you can see opportunities evolve.

Most organizations are concerned with succession planning and would like to promote from within if possible.

Mike Pinsent

Why do you believe it's important to be a CAMA Member and what benefits has CAMA given you?

I am working in a municipality of approximately 15,000 and it is a service hub for approximately 60,000 people. By most provinces standards, we are a small community but here in Newfoundland, we are the sixth largest. We are considered leaders, and I have served on our Provincial Municipal Administrators Association for a ten year period, the final two as President. A lot of the professional development opportunities here are focused on smaller towns because that is where the greatest need is.

For me, CAMA provides the opportunity for professional development, information resources and a contact base of peers to consult with. I am of the opinion that it is important to be a member of CAMA for that reason.

Based on your experience, what points of advice would you give regarding work / life balance? Do you have any specific examples you would like to share?

Working as a Senior Administrator has a lot of demands. Our Councillors have working lives and families, so many of our meetings start at 5:00 p.m. or 7:00 p.m. This makes for long days throughout the week. In addition to the long hours, the stress of the work you are involved with has you thinking about it constantly. My wife would, and still does, say "I'm not talking to you anymore, you don't pay attention". She does of course, but the message is loud and clear. Work can consume you. When you get my age and you have to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, you pray that you don't think because you won't get back to sleep.

Maintaining a good work life balance is difficult but essential. You have to be fair to your family and you have to look after your health. This means getting away and doing physical activities that involve family. Skiing, snowshoeing, canoeing, camping, walking, jogging, and travelling. I have a house with a woodstove. My kids are grown up, so on weekends, my wife and I go to our cabin and I get out the chain saw and set out to destroy. Usually in the form of dry dead falls that are perfect for burning. It is hard work, I cut and she hauls it out on the snowmobile. Then we have a fire and lunch, a two hour snowshoe, supper and a bottle of wine. Not ever do I think of work.

This is so important and there are opportunities to get away from work everywhere and in every season, you just have to force yourself to do it.

Duncan Campbell



I have a degree in Civil Engineering and a MBA from the Ivey School of Business. After working 14 years for the CNR in various management positions, I joined the municipal ranks in 1988 with the Town of Mount Royal (TMR). I worked as Director General for TMR and the City of Westmount and as Associate Director General for the City of Montreal. Though I formally retired in January 2015, I helped out the Town of Hudson, Québec as its interim Director General until September of last year. I am currently a consultant and ski instructor.

It was my honour to serve on the CAMA Board in the early 90's and was named our Association's President from 1995 -1996. I acted as Chair of the ICMA Host Committee for the 2009 Montreal Conference and Chair of the ICMA Planning Committee for its 100th Anniversary Conference in Charlotte, NC in 2014. I was a recipient of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012.

What are the most important points of advice that you could provide to the younger generation that is considering a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

The majority of your residents will evaluate your administration on the delivery of the basics: garbage removal, snow clearing, water quality, public safety, etc. Everything else is optional. So, make sure that the basic services are delivered efficiently before taking on additional services and projects.

Your constituency is changing. In the 70's & 80's, it was all about unions, negotiations, strikes, etc. Today, it is the residents that are demanding attention and are becoming more aggressive in what they expect from their city. Learn to listen to the 95% of the population who will never contact you and not just the squeaking wheels.

Remember that you are responsible for your staff just as you are responsible to the council. Look after both. Don't fall into the habit of spending most of your time looking after the council at the expenses of your employees. They are looking to you for leadership. Act like you are the boss in your dress, language & behaviour. Develop your organization to be self-sufficient; delegate and empower your managers and train employees to take on more responsibility.

Read George Cuff's books!

Duncan Campbell

When looking back in your career, what is the biggest accomplishment that you are most proud of?

I have several. Firstly, from an organizational point of view, our reaction to the emergency situation in the Town of Mount Royal with the 1998 Ice Storm that hit eastern Canada was a significant test for the management team that I had developed. With the rule book thrown out the window, our ability to react successfully to the ever-changing crisis with ingenuity and action was amazing. It took discipline, quick decision-making and novel ideas to continue to serve and protect our residents through this emergency.

Secondly, from a project point of view, it was the construction of the \$40M Westmount Recreation Centre from 2011- 2013. In many ways, it was a unique project that was both an architectural and financial success and has garnered a number of awards since its completion.

Lastly, the survival of CAMA. In the mid - 90's, the Association was in serious trouble though the members and the Board had no idea. When elected President in 1995, I soon discovered that our finances were in complete shambles, we were living off our cash flow from a dwindling membership base and we owed the government taxes and suppliers money. We were essentially bankrupt, and this for an association that championed good governance in Canada! We had to fire our Executive Director, move our offices away from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and work to stave off our creditors. Merv Becksted from the Region of Ottawa-Carleton loaned us Gabriel Ahad for a year to help the Board get the day-to-day operations of the Association back on track as well as put together the 1997 CAMA Ottawa Conference. This helped us get back into the black. We subsequently went through some more changes before reaching the success we enjoy today thanks especially to the help of Paul Stapleton and the City of Fredericton.

What is the biggest challenge that you had to face in your career as a Senior Administrator? Now looking back at this challenge, would you do something differently?

I had two. One was a challenge to my values and ethics when I discovered the sitting mayor falsifying his expense reports. The matter became very public and political. The second was a challenge to my reputation when I was suspended unjustly by a newly-elected mayor and I sued for damages. The matter took five years and the Supreme Court of Canada to put an end to this personal, professional and financial ordeal for my family and me.

In both cases, my reputation as being fair, honest and professional was challenged in the public eye. I would do exactly as I did to fight for my reputation and my values.

Duncan Campbell

Is there anything you wished you would have known before becoming a Senior Administrator or Chief Administrative Officer?

Starting my municipal career already armed with an MBA degree gave me the framework (finance, operations, HR) to understand the key elements in any organization. Nevertheless, this is a very people & process-oriented business. I would look at expanding one's knowledge base as early in one's career such as spending time in operations (public works, fire, recreation, etc.) to find out what is really going on outside City Hall.

Why do you think individuals should consider a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

Being the top manager is like being a CEO of a company. You get to wear many hats and the job challenges your abilities. To hold a position that can improve the lives of your residents can be very satisfying. By being in charge, you have the ability to lead all efforts to shape the organization to meet the community's challenges and expectations. There is never a shortage of work and you will be constantly surprised by what working with the public will bring. Governments at all levels in Canada need competent people and no more so than at the local level.

What are some of the most important lessons learned that you would like to share?

Just when you think things are under control, watch out! Complacency has a way of ruining your life. Have a strong set of values with integrity being the most important. At the end of the day, your integrity is really all you carry with you. Lose it and you are done. Don't be afraid to put strong alternatives in front of a council for its consideration. Part of your job is to provide them guidance and often this takes the form of the recommendations you put forward. It makes decision-making easier in an era where councils opt for consultation rather than action. You are working for the entire community and not just for those who come to council meetings, voted for the mayor or write letters in the local press. Learn to step back and validate your actions and recommendations for the benefit of the entire population.

What key competencies / skill set do you believe Senior Administrators are required to have now and in the future?

The most important skill set you will need is the ability to communicate and work with people. This has always been and will continue to be the most important aspect of your job. Learn to speak in public (take a Dale Carnegie course). You need to be more adept with social and traditional media as the public nature of working in the public sector has increased. You are not expected to know all the answers but you are expected to know where to find them. Having a high level of initiative will do you no harm as will a sense of humour and a thick skin.

Duncan Campbell

What items should the next generation of Senior Administrators focus on to continue progressing and evolving in their careers (example: professional development, other career opportunities, lifelong learning)

If you have the chance to work for a number of organizations, you will experience a variety of corporate cultures. If you have a chance to work in big and small communities, again, you will see how different they can be. Take every opportunity to improve your own knowledge base. Read, attend seminars & conferences, visit other towns to find out what is going on. Be curious and ask questions why we do things the way we do. Never accept the reply of "That's the way we've always done it...".

Why do you believe it's important to be a CAMA Member and what benefits has CAMA given you?

It is very easy to get bogged down in your own organization's issues where you rarely have time to get up and breathe. It is important to be a member of CAMA to provide you support and re-assurance that what you are facing in your town is not unique and many managers have similar issues and, more importantly, solutions. Besides opportunities to network with CAMA and, through its partnership, with the ICMA, the ability to travel to other provinces and states and learn what is going on elsewhere is invaluable. The members of CAMA are all pretty easy-going and willing to help out. As a result, friendships that you develop will remain for years.

Based on your experience, what points of advice would you give regarding work / life balance? Do you have any specific examples you would like to share?

I would first make sure that you have a very good Executive Assistant who will control your agenda for you. It is very nice to have an open door policy but you need a gate-keeper just the same. Block out your personal time and stick to it. Take your vacations and make sure your managers do the same. This job can keep you busy 7/24, 365 but you are no good if you don't get a chance to clear your head. Have an outside interest that gives you a chance to get away from the job and, ideally, an activity that keeps you in shape. These jobs can be tough on the mind and body! Don't answer e-mails on the weekend or after a certain hour and insist that your employees do the same. If it is a real emergency, someone will call you. Look up videos on YouTube of Linda Duxbury of Carleton University and listen to her messages. They're gold!

Gail Stephens



I have had a very varied career in numerous challenging and exciting roles including Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and City Manager for two major cities, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the BC Pension Corporation, Interim President and CEO and Chief Operating Officer (COO) of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, and roles in the private and government sector as Chief Financial Officer (CFO). I began my career as a teacher, then switched career paths, studied and received my Certified General Accountant (CGA) designation in 1990.

What are the most important points of advice that you could provide to the younger generation that is considering a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

The services that local governments provide have a direct impact on the quality of life of each and every citizen. From clean drinking water, community recreational opportunities, municipal planning and development to emergency services like police, fire and paramedic services, people want to be involved in decisions that touch their lives. Finding creative and meaningful ways to engage and consult with the community helps a municipality set priorities and resource allocations, especially critical when most municipalities are facing limited resources and growing infrastructure deficits.

When looking back in your career, what is the biggest accomplishment that you are most proud of?

Winnipeg faced a serious arson issue in the inner city where fire/paramedics call outs reached historical highs with dozens of calls each day. The average age of the individuals setting the fires was 12. I pulled together all the senior leaders to look at how each area could provide innovative solutions to what was becoming a very serious problem for the inner city. The resulting strategy (developed and executed in a matter of days) was a multi-disciplinary one that included educational training on the dangers of fire, boarding up vacant properties, increasing garbage collection, increasing the hours of operation in recreational facilities, dedicated phone line and integrated police/fire response, neighborhood watch groups and others. The resulting reduction in the problem was significant.

Gail Stephens

What is the biggest challenge that you had to face in your career as a Senior Administrator? Now looking back at this challenge, would you do something differently?

One of the biggest challenges I faced was the oversight of the Johnson Street Bridge in Victoria. It was a very controversial project as a large number of citizens wanted to refurbish the existing bridge and were very opposed to building a new bridge. It was also very complicated because of the need to withstand potential earthquakes, span an ocean and be sensitive to fish runs, and be able to lift to allow marine access. This resulted in a bridge cost that was extremely costly for a city the size of Victoria and very difficult for a small team of staff to manage. Because of restrictions around federal funding, the timelines were extremely short. If I could go back and do things differently, I would probably have done far more community outreach at the beginning of the project regardless of timelines to gather their feedback and support for the critical decisions that needed to be made (refurbish/rebuild, bike lanes, rail continuation, design, etc.).

Is there anything you wished you would have known before becoming a Senior Administrator or Chief Administrative Officer?

I learned, over time, how important it was to set very clear expectations with Council in terms of priorities, milestones and deliverables. Without clearly articulating outcomes, administrators run the risk of shifting priorities and disappointing Council.

Why do you think individuals should consider a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

Leadership at the local government level allows you to make a difference in the lives of others in very meaningful ways. The experience stays with you forever. I never travel to another city without looking at their recycling bins, street lamps, parks, new developments, etc. in a new light. The work is very challenging and rewarding; days are always eventful and varied. Boredom is never on the menu!

What are some of the most important lessons learned that you would like to share?

- Persevere. As Helen Keller once said: "Be of good cheer. Do not think of today's failures, but of the success that may come tomorrow. You have set yourself a difficult task, but you will succeed if you persevere, and you will find a joy in overcoming obstacles."
- Learn to laugh and share laughter in the workplace. Laughter lifts the spirit and reduces tension.
- Lead a life of continuous learning. You will never grow old.
- Develop great relationships with the people you work with. Care about others beyond just work issues.
- Never over promise and under deliver. Do what you say you will.
- Measure and communicate performance.
- Spend time with the front line and spend time in the community. You will gain better insight into the issues and challenges of municipal service delivery.

Gail Stephens

What key competencies / skill set do you believe Senior Administrators are required to have now and in the future?

These are some of the key competencies/skills that are important for Senior Administrators:

- Visionary and strategic thinking, creativity and innovation.
- The ability to facilitate consensus, support and teamwork.
- Excellent communication skills including the ability to communicate sound information and recommendations to Council.
- Personal integrity and accountability.
- A bias towards exceptional service delivery.
- Financial literacy and governance expertise.

What items should the next generation of Senior Administrators focus on to continue progressing and evolving in their careers (example: professional development, other career opportunities, lifelong learning)

It is important to keep developing skills and abilities, constantly seeking feedback from Council and direct reports on areas to improve and progress. Managers will continually be assessed by how emotionally intelligent they are so that they can harness emotions and apply them to creative thinking and problem solving. Networking and sharing best practices ensure that administrators are always aware of new trends and products. Technology allows for new and interesting ways to engage the community and front-line staff.

Why do you believe it's important to be a CAMA Member and what benefits has CAMA given you?

CAMA is an excellent organization for professional development, networking and advocacy. Membership and conferences are very affordable even for small municipalities. I found the conferences outstanding opportunities to hear from engaging speakers, meet with exhibitors and develop new colleague relationships. Many of the panel discussions were so relevant and timely and keynote speakers were inspirational. As a national body, it is tremendous opportunity to meet people from across the country from small municipalities to large ones.

Based on your experience, what points of advice would you give regarding work / life balance? Do you have any specific examples you would like to share?

These jobs can often mean long hours including evenings and weekends. Managers are often on call seven days a week. So, it can be very easy to burn out or get ill. Finding balance is essential to maintaining a healthy lifestyle and being effective. Everyone has different ways to unwind and relax. I have always enjoyed visiting spas that encourage exercise, healthy food and stress free spa treatments and relaxation. So, I try to escape for a week or so, leave my cell and computer behind and return refreshed and ready to take on new challenges. I also find cooking very relaxing, long walks, good books, family and friends.

Jim Toye



I have worked in five different communities in Saskatchewan, all of which I have held senior management positions. I have been President for both the Urban Municipal Administrators Association of Saskatchewan (UMAAS) and the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA). I have been recognized with the Province of Saskatchewan Centennial Medal for contributions to Municipal Government (2005) and received the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for contributions to Municipal Government (2013).

What are the most important points of advice that you could provide to the younger generation that is considering a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

I think there are four main attributes to a successful leader and before considering a career in local government, they should ask themselves if they currently have these attributes or can attain them:

- Honesty
- Competency
- Ability to inspire a team
- Forward thinker

When looking back in your career, what is the biggest accomplishment that you are most proud of?

While in one municipality, we built a large complex consisting of a 375 seat capacity Performing Arts Theatre, a fieldhouse with two soccer fields, a curling rink with six sheets of ice and an aquatic centre with a wave pool, competition tank, two waterslides and lazy river for a total investment of \$54 million dollars. The uniqueness of the project was the funding model which required contributions from the federal government, provincial government, First Nations, surrounding rural and urban municipalities, community groups and organizations as well as service clubs and citizens. If the fundraising model had failed, the project would also have failed; however, the City united all parties to a common goal and the result was a great accomplishment. I believe this goal was reached because I used all four competencies mentioned in above.

Jim Toye

What is the biggest challenge that you had to face in your career as a Senior Administrator? Now looking back at this challenge, would you do something differently?

After being City Manager for a little over one year at a City, we had a major water contamination event which made the national news for many days. No lives were lost as a result but a dark shadow was cast upon the City. There was an inquiry with a number of recommendations, all of which were implemented in a timely way.

From this challenge I learned to question the status quo and make sure my staff knew and understood very clearly the results of their actions, or inactions, on processes they perform for the municipality.

Is there anything you wished you would have known before becoming a Senior Administrator or Chief Administrative Officer?

Surround yourself with very good staff.

Why do you think individuals should consider a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

It is a very rewarding career that the sky is the limit in terms of the size of municipality that you can work for.

What are some of the most important lessons learned that you would like to share?

Understand your role and do not get involved in the politics of your employer. City Council passes bylaws, resolutions and policies and it is up to the Chief Administrative Officer and his/her team to ensure those bylaws are enforced, the policies adhered to and the resolutions are carried out.

What key competencies / skill sets do you believe Senior Administrators are required to have now and in the future?

Through my experience, a successful Senior Administrator would need to be honest, competent, an inspirational leader and be able to think outside the box.

What items should the next generation of Senior Administrators focus on to continue progressing and evolving in their careers (example: professional development, other career opportunities, lifelong learning?)

There are a few items I would recommend:

- Establish a group of peers you can contact to chat about issues of concern or share best practices.
- Be a continual learner. For example, technology continues to change at a fast pace and you and your team can be more efficient if you embrace this change.
- Get involved with your provincial and national professional associations.
- Professional development.

Why do you believe it's important to be a CAMA Member and what benefits has CAMA given you?

CAMA has provided me with an opportunity to establish a Canada wide group of peers, professional development opportunities at the Conference and webinars, access to white papers and various draft documents that can assist Chief Administrative Officers, a National Conference with a top notch trade show, world renowned presenters and guest speakers, networking opportunities and an opportunity to travel to various Cities across Canada.

Based on your experience, what points of advice would you give regarding work / life balance? Do you have any specific examples you would like to share?

One of the most important aspects of any career is to have work / life balance. A career as a Chief Administrative Officer in a community has major demands on your time including evening meetings, long days (going in early and staying late), and attending events/ conferences/meetings outside of your community which may require being away for several days at a time.

It is imperative that before or after these events, you take the time to spend with your family. It is also important that you take regular days off and holidays. These are times to rest, rejuvenate and recharge and to also spend time with family and friends. There are times when we all think there is no way we can take time off but you must find a way to make time and remember that your life is more than your job.

Chris MacPherson



I have worked for the City of Fredericton for 40 years in various capacities – Assistant Director of Recreation, Director of Corporate Services, Assistant CAO and now as the CAO. I have been the CAO for approximately five years.

In terms of education I have an undergraduate Degree in Recreation, another in Business and a Masters of Art Degree. I am a Lean 6 Sigma Black Belt and am currently enrolled in the Directors Education Program working toward the ICD.D certification. I have also attended numerous Executive Education Programs (two at Banff and one at Harvard University).

In terms of personal highlights, I look at the evolution of our organization and how well we are operating as a team. I feel like we have our management systems well developed, we have endured a major organizational restructuring and we have overcome significant financial hurdles. I am proud of our staff and I take great pride in seeing them develop and grow – I feel that is my most important personal highlight – I feel like we have the next leaders all in place and ready to replace our current group.

What are the most important points of advice that you could provide to the younger generation that is considering a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

I have always been a strong supporter of continuing education – many of the skills you will need as a senior administrator can be learned. I would also encourage younger staff to find mentor(s) who can help guide you through your career. If possible, seek a Department Head or senior manager who will commit one hour per month of their time to work with you and to help you succeed. I would also encourage young people to have the courage to try different jobs within a local government organization even if the jobs are not in your line of study. Personally, I would also recommend every young person work on their communication skills – the ability to articulate difficult subjects and situations will be keys to your success.

Chris MacPherson

When looking back in your career, what is the biggest accomplishment that you are most proud of?

I think I may be a bit of anomaly in that I have spent my entire 40 year career with one organization. I am proud of my commitment to this organization and the staff that work for it. I can see developments in the community that I have a part in making happen and I am very proud when I see how great our city is and the great reputation our organization has with our citizens – my biggest accomplishment in my view is knowing I had a part in making this city a great place to live.

What is the biggest challenge that you had to face in your career as a Senior Administrator? Now looking back at this challenge, would you do something differently?

I have had a number of challenges over my career; I became an Assistant Director as a 23 year old and a Director at 38 when most of my staff was senior to me. I am not sure I would do anything differently; I survived those challenges by being humble, working hard and treating everyone with respect. I like getting my hands dirty and I still do. Managing by “walking around” is still a great tactic – it allows you to be seen, it helps you meet your staff, to take a personal interest in their well being and for them to see how much you care about them. I have learned much over the years, but the one “learning” that I wish I had known earlier in my career was the importance of valuing the people that work with you – I know this now but in my earlier days probably didn’t spend enough time getting to know my staff.

Is there anything you wished you would have known before becoming a Senior Administrator or Chief Administrative Officer?

I wished I had known how very difficult it can be to balance the needs of Council, staff and the public. The needs can often be in conflict and you do need to exercise a certain amount of diplomacy if you are going to succeed. I also wished I had known the commitment that is required. These are not Monday to Friday jobs. They are everyday, all day jobs but they are worth every minute. There is a great deal of satisfaction that comes with this kind of occupation. The other thing that sometimes people don’t consider is the isolation you sometimes feel as a CAO. You are the only CAO in your organization and joining an organization like CAMA should be one of your first steps – you get an instant network of colleagues who do the same work you do.

Why do you think individuals should consider a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

I would recommend a career as a Senior Administration in local government for a number of reasons, some of which I have already noted. There is a tremendous amount of satisfaction in seeing your staff grow and develop, as is the satisfaction seeing how your community grows and develops. It’s also a great occupation to help you grow as an individual – you will learn lots in course of your work. Lastly, these are very responsible jobs and the compensation normally reflects that – the pay is normally very good.

Chris MacPherson

What are some of the most important lessons learned that you would like to share?

My lessons that I would share include:

- Embrace lifelong learning.
- Value the people you work with.
- Find mentors to help you along the way.

What key competencies / skill sets do you believe Senior Administrators are required to have now and in the future?

I believe the key competencies and skills required to be successful as a Senior Administrator include:

- Political astuteness.
- Good management skills.
- Good communication skills.
- Caring, empathetic person but still able to make the tough decisions when required.

What items should the next generation of Senior Administrators focus on to continue progressing and evolving in their careers (example: professional development, other career opportunities, lifelong learning)?

I have already touched on many of these including those noted in the question above. I guess the other ones I would note that differ from these, would be to recommend to the next generation to volunteer, or to take on corporate projects when the opportunities arise, to make yourself visible to the organizational leaders. They should also have the respect of their peers – be a helpful person who always maintains a positive attitude and speaks positively about the organization and its leadership.

Why do you believe it's important to be a CAMA Member and what benefits has CAMA given you?

Joining CAMA provides you with an instant network of colleagues. Being a CAO can be a lonely profession – there is only one CAO per organization so having the network of colleagues from around the country is a great support network. In addition to the networking opportunities, CAMA provides great professional development opportunities with its National conference in addition to regular eBrief updates to all members. I believe it's a must have membership for anyone in this profession.

Based on your experience, what points of advice would you give regarding work / life balance? Do you have any specific examples you would like to share?

Work/life balance can be a bit of a challenge, but as your career goes along you learn to better manage your time. I rarely look at being a CAO as a job; it's just what I do. While I live and breathe the city, I also like my 'away' time. I go to the gym every day no matter what time it may be, when I get an opening in my schedule, I work out. It keeps me sane and physically healthy. I am also a big believer in using your vacation days – I always take vacations to really unwind.

Rhonda Stewart



I started my career in the accounting field, working for three different firms before joining the Town of Virden in 1991 as the "Assistant Secretary-Treasurer". In 1999, I was promoted to the position of Chief Administrative Officer.

What are the most important points of advice that you could provide to the younger generation that is considering a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

Always be prepared to listen and actually hear what people are telling you, including ratepayers, Council and staff. By taking the time to listen to your ratepayers, you may become aware of a serious problem in your community, that you otherwise may not have found out, except when it hit social media! Not always can you solve their problems, but by listening and explaining to ratepayers why things are the way they are, helps to build a better relationship between the municipal government and the citizenry. Council are your bosses, and even though you may not always agree with the direction that they provide, it is critical you follow that direction and delegate it to staff in a positive manner. Council is out in the community, talking to the ratepayers and hearing what is happening. If they come to you with concerns regarding staff, operations or whatever, take that concern and get to the root of it.

As for staff, they are your most valuable asset. It is critical you listen to their concerns and ideas as to the operations of the municipality. By engaging them in the discussions and recommendations going forward to Council, they will take ownership and pride in their work, getting it done in the most efficient and cost effective manner. If you don't have a good relationship with staff, and staff who are engaged and well-trained in their duties, you will be constantly struggling with your role as senior administrator.

Rhonda Stewart

When looking back in your career, what is the biggest accomplishment that you are most proud of?

This is a difficult question to answer, but in a municipality our size, it is difficult to keep key personnel, as we are often seen as “a stepping stone” in people’s careers. My accomplishment has been my ability to keep the municipality operating and moving forward despite often being short those key personnel. I have been required to learn a great deal more about recreation and sewer, primarily, than most senior administrators are required to, and take a hands on role, until positions can be filled. We have completed some major projects in our community that have never been held up due to staffing shortages.

What is the biggest challenge that you had to face in your career as a Senior Administrator? Now looking back at this challenge, would you do something differently?

While being a woman did create some obstacles earlier in my career, I found as Councils changed so did the thinking towards women and issues around equality in pay scales and training. I think the biggest challenge is dealing with the ever evolving social media tools and how to react to the negativity they can cause. While social media can be used in so many positive ways, and can be a very valuable tool, it can also cause a lot of problems especially in a smaller community when staff know the people who are commenting negatively towards a topic or towards a certain municipal department. This has created low morale and lack of self-esteem at times, with staff, which results in them losing pride in their work.

It can be very discouraging as generally, all the staff want to do their best and take pride in their work for the municipality as that is where they live and raise their own families. The Town and myself are still working at how to deal with this. I believe being one step ahead of the media and the public by getting communication out as soon as the Town knows there is an issue, instead of “reacting” to negative press or post will help with this, but of course never eliminate it. Regular press releases or communications keeping the public up to date with what is happening within the municipality on a regular basis, good and bad, is also a good route. Sometimes this is difficult in small municipal offices though, with smaller staff numbers but large workloads.

Is there anything you wished you would have known before becoming a Senior Administrator or Chief Administrative Officer?

I went into my position as Chief Administrative Officer with a solid background in accounting/finance, which I felt would be primarily what I would need to be successful in my position. I soon learned that human resource management, especially in a small community, is an area I wish I had more training and background in. I also never realized, that in a small community, the CAO would be expected to wear several different hats, especially when there are department head vacancies such as finance, planning, human resources, sewer and water, cemetery, etc.

Rhonda Stewart

Why do you think individuals should consider a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

This can be an extremely rewarding career as you are at the grassroots level. Working with your Council and staff allows you to be part of an organization that can bring positive change and improvements to your community.

What are some of the most important lessons learned that you would like to share?

Don't take things personally. As hard as it sometimes is, it is important to do your job as Council directs you, even when it is something that the public is very upset about and you and your staff end up taking the heat over it. Unfortunately most public don't realize that senior administrators take their direction from Council, so therefore we are the ones to get criticized by the media and the ratepayers. Council members are the lawmakers, we just enforce the law. Have a good communication strategy that will hopefully get the information out to the citizenry. But no matter what, you have to accept that you can't keep everyone happy. For someone like me, I still struggle with it.

What key competencies / skill sets do you believe Senior Administrators are required to have now and in the future?

In small communities you have to have knowledge in not only management, but finance, planning and human resource management. You have to be well organized and be able to react positively to emergency situations. You must be able to multi-task and set priorities on the run, as your priorities can change day to day, depending on what crisis occurs.

What items should the next generation of Senior Administrators focus on to continue progressing and evolving in their careers (example: professional development, other career opportunities, lifelong learning)

It is critical to continue professional development opportunities. The municipal world is constantly changing, as is legislation, so it is essential that you keep up with those changes in order to effectively do your job. Take advantage of all the professional development opportunities offered by your associations, but also keep up to date by reading current publications of Municipal World and other municipal related books.

Why do you believe it's important to be a CAMA Member and what benefits has CAMA given you?

CAMA provides excellent professional development opportunities, while providing an opportunity to network with Senior Administrators from across the country. It also gives you an opportunity to meet with suppliers that you may not be aware of otherwise, that can provide required services for your municipality, sometimes providing cost savings, or alternatives to how we offer our services.

Rhonda Stewart

Based on your experience, what points of advice would you give regarding work / life balance? Do you have any specific examples you would like to share?

Be prepared to spend the time required at your job to do it properly, but, don't forget about your family. Family will be the ones there for you long after you have retired from your career, providing you made sure you took the time to spend with them, especially for special events. Sometimes it can be very difficult, and it may seem easier to just tell your family you can't commit to them, but by juggling your schedule, prioritizing your work and being prepared to spend extra time at the office at other times, you can commit to those important family functions!! Don't ever wave family off. When my father was still alive, he lived a little over an hour from where I did. I had a rule at the office, if my Dad shows up, you interrupt me no matter what!!! Staff always made sure that I knew when he popped in, and it made my Dad feel very important! I would make sure I took an extra long coffee break or lunch break with him. Now that he is gone, looking back, those were some of the best we had and no one can take that time away from me!

Glen Davies



My career in municipal work is now over 40 years in the making. I entered frontline work in a municipality straight out of university not having a very conscious understanding of the place that municipalities occupy in our universe – it was a job doing something vaguely like I wanted to do. Being aware from the earliest beginnings of the things that captured my interest and attention helped shape my path. I learned quickly that organizations are imperfect and that there are opportunities to shape how they look and operate even from a frontline position. The desire to have broader, system-wide impacts on change took me to grad school and made me want to explore promotions that took me into supervisory roles within the first six years.

This early period solidified my love of organizational change and a willingness to find opportunities through moving geographically. These earliest changes also brought me into contact with several important mentors. Latching onto supervisors who are willing to train and guide you in the learning of a new job in a new organization is always important, but having a mentor who is willing and capable of providing knowledge and model behaviour that expands one's view of "the possible" is a crucial piece of career advancement. During my 13 years with my second employer I held seven different jobs and had a myriad of new opportunities to grow and expand my understanding of what municipalities did and how they influence people's lives.

Approximately 18 years into my career I had taken the opportunity to diversify my experience within the municipal environment as I moved up the proverbial food-chain. This movement of increasing responsibility and authority as well as entering into "new" areas of responsibility helped broaden my knowledge of municipal operations. During that time I also came to find out that some of the most important growth opportunities are preceded by points of failure or disappointments.

Often times, points of failure or disappointment caused me to sit back, reflect and consider what those points in time meant and what I would do with them. On occasion the resultant plan was to take a parallel move to a new employer with the view to opening up new opportunity with the benefit of having learned from the past mistakes or shortcomings. In a new environment I have taken advantage of fresh opportunities and new perspectives to move the trajectory of my career path upwards again and to seek further diversification and broadening of my responsibilities. With the right mentor and boss I have been able to stretch into new roles and be encouraged to explore my growing abilities with confidence.

Glen Davies

My first opportunity to explore the “fit” of being a CAO came about as a result of the departure of the CAO from the City where I worked. I accepted the role of acting CAO while the search got underway for a replacement, and due to circumstances that became a year-long assignment. That gave me the true opportunity to try it on for size for real. It proved to be an experiment that allowed me to conclude that it was a role that I wanted to take on, on a permanent basis. As is often the case, pursuing a permanent CAO position necessitated making another geographic move, in my case to another province.

A stop to work in the private sector for approximately four years gave me a new perspective on the business of leading a municipality and this took me back into a CAO role in yet another province and a larger and very different city. After a ten year period of change and improvement I chose to move back closer to family and roots but continue my involvement in municipal life as CAO in yet another province and yet another different municipality.

What are the most important points of advice that you could provide to the younger generation that is considering a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

I would say there are a number of things to be mindful of, some of which I have already mentioned in my opening comments. One is to consider the importance of the “noble calling”. Being part of the public service, providing services to communities at any level is an important consideration – contributing to the public good. But it is all the more important to consider it from the perspective of being the one in charge – being able to influence all aspects of the municipality.

Another point is to be open to the less obvious paths that can lead to being the senior administrator – rarely is there a stove pipe pathway from a frontline job to the highest office in a municipality. Moving from department to department, gaining broad understanding of the operations can be a very important part of preparing for the senior job. Similarly, it can be advantageous to leave the municipality entirely going to another municipality or other sector entirely to again, broaden work and life experience.

And finally, it is important that as a developing municipal employee and aspiring senior manager one becomes sensitized to the uniqueness of working in an environment and position that is so closely tied to the world of politics. This is a very different beast and learning to live and work with the vagaries of having political bosses is an important consideration before contemplating the senior administrator role at all. In that regard it is critically important that it be understood that Council decides. Irrespective of the technical knowledge and expertise of the bureaucracy, Council has the ultimate authority (in most instances) and that needs to be understood and respected, not just tolerated.

Glen Davies

When looking back in your career, what is the biggest accomplishment that you are most proud of?

Building broken bridges between Council and administration has been an area where I have had some success over the years. While this has not been without some failure along the way, I believe my focus on openness, transparency, respect and a willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue has helped in a number of occasions to either enhance or create a strong working relationship between Council and Administration.

I would say in more recent times a very meaningful accomplishment was achieved in the City of Regina while I was there. A number of years into my tenure we were confronted with the prospects of building a new waste water treatment facility and a new football stadium. Either one of those projects was larger than anything the City had undertaken in its history and the City was poised to take them both on at the same time. These projects, extremely large and complex by Regina standards, required that the organization take a very measured and purposeful approach to managing them to ensure successful outcomes. My commitment to this, with Council support, allowed the organization to develop some structure to focus accountability, invest an appropriate level of resources to preparation and ongoing project management as well as good process to achieve the desired outcomes. I take some credit in ensuring that the proper framework and the right people were put in place to ensure that the right level of attention and awareness was present so that distractions of ongoing activities did not interfere with good accountability.

A third accomplishment that I have consciously replicated over time has been the successful recruitment and development of staff. A leader is successful largely to the extent that they have high quality people around them to contribute to success in large complex organizations. I have paid particular attention to trying to make sure that I was always hiring the best people possible and finding ways to enable them to contribute. In more recent years I have taken the commitment to the development of people as a bit of a personal calling. Finding younger, developing employees who might benefit from some conscious mentoring has been something I have done over the last number of years in an effort to give back in a way for what was given to me over the years by my mentors.

What is the biggest challenge that you had to face in your career as a Senior Administrator? Now looking back at this challenge, would you do something differently?

The biggest challenges I have had as a senior administrator have been where I have been tested on the strength of my convictions on a values level. There have been occasions where I have had to consider whether to stick with my values in the face of challenges, particularly in a complex political context. That has taken the form of speaking truth to power, giving advice that ran counter to popular desires and out-right refusal to act in the face of something being unethical or contrary to policy. There have been big ones and little ones but in each instance I realized I was confronted with the perception and the reality that to stay the course could have negative implications on the relationship with my "boss" which might range from bad feelings to loss of compensation to being ostracized to out and out dismissal. The temptation to "let that go" or "I'll give in on this one" or whatever the form of justification is great in such circumstances as no one wishes to disappoint their employer or be at logger-heads on a day-to-day basis.

Glen Davies

It is my belief that during the course of my career, the decision to stay with my convictions and uphold the belief in what is right, not what is expedient was always the right one where ethical, legal considerations were at play. It was usually anxiety-provoking to do and sometimes had very negative consequences but it was always something I believed was right and so resonated with my core. I would not have dealt with those decision points differently and it is a consideration for anyone considering becoming a CAO.

Is there anything you wished you would have known before becoming a Senior Administrator or Chief Administrative Officer?

How truly difficult it is to effectively manage in the so-called grey zone that separates the administrative from the political. While lots is written about the need to separate the political from the administrative, and it is the basis of our democratic structures in Canada, the literature does not talk extensively about the need to navigate in and through the grey zone. Spending time understanding the perspectives of the elected officials, explaining administrative imperatives to them, trying to balance the political perspective with technical perspectives without offending the independence and importance of each is work the CAO often has to do. Many things are black or white but some require the CAO to go back and forth between the politic and the administrative to find compromises and blended solutions where they makes sense. This is precarious work where the CAO can be seen to be interfering or "selling out" but it is necessary work – it is naïve to believe that all the machinery of a municipal government will work well without some tending from time-to-time and there are no "how-to" manuals. Intuition, political acumen and good common sense in support of open-communications are required to make it work.

Why do you think individuals should consider a career as a Senior Administrator in local government?

It is a calling. It is a calling to contribute to doing public good, to contribute to making a community better and thereby contribute positively to the quality of life that the people living in the community enjoy. It is not for everyone, but having the opportunity to lead a municipal organization and thereby have a broad and direct impact on the quality of life of people living in the community is a compelling motivator for many.

As one grows older and spends more time in such a position, it is also possible to mentor and help grow younger developing staff within the organization. This is something that being in the CAO's chair makes possible and I might argue required as a leader.

What are some of the most important lessons learned that you would like to share?

There are many lessons to learn in a career if you care to pay enough attention to the mistakes you make! In all seriousness, there are a number of significant learnings for me that were important to take into my role as a CAO.

Glen Davies

One of those things is to be respectful of the role of Council as a whole and the individual members who make up the Council. I have seen far too many senior administrators behave as though they are the only ones who know the right answer and treat their political masters with disdain. Ultimately Council decides, and if it isn't unethical or illegal, the policy decision made by a majority of Council provides the direction that administration should carry out. And in carrying it out, it must be without judgment or derision. This goes a long way to building a trusting working relationship between the CAO and Council.

I would also say that in keeping with building the right working relationship, being open and transparent with Council is a very important lesson. If Council has the ultimate authority to make policy decisions, they must do so having being presented with the best, most transparent information and analysis possible. Hiding things, glossing over things, trying to be too political or just giving the minimum answer to a question does not engender trusting relationships between Council and administration and invites members of Council to doubt administrative advice and/or to delve more deeply into "administrivia" than is healthy.

What key competencies / skill sets do you believe Senior Administrators are required to have now and in the future?

I remember once hearing the venerable Mayor, Hazel McCallion speak at a conference about what a Mayor looks for in a CAO and her somewhat tongue-in-cheek comments was that, "they had to be able to walk on water". While clearly an exaggeration, it was meant to be impactful because the role of a CAO does require a range of skills, knowledge and abilities in order to survive and be successful.

The successful CAO must have both great leadership abilities and strong managerial skills. The CAO does not need to be an expert in everything from a managerial perspective, not even in a particular discipline. But they do need to know enough about key things to provide appropriate oversight and to be able to ask the right questions. At the same time the successful CAO must be a great leader.

What items should the next generation of Senior Administrators focus on to continue progressing and evolving in their careers (example: professional development, other career opportunities, lifelong learning)?

There is a need to be constantly learning. The world changes, and it is changing faster all the time and the ability to keep up requires that someone is open to learning. Learning new skills, learning technical information, learning new ways to look at things – always being open to a new or different perspective. The minute someone believes they know it all and they've got all they need is the beginning of the end from a career development standpoint.

Find a good mentor! Trying to provide younger, developing people with the "benefit" of age and experience so as to enhance the trajectory of their careers - to the extent that I have been able to do that, I am most proud. I have had the benefit of having had a number of impactful mentors at critical points in my career who had a positive effect on my growth and development and as I've progressed throughout the years I have tried to give back in ways that help others as I was helped.

Glen Davies

Why do you believe it's important to be a CAMA Member and what benefits has CAMA given you?

The single most important benefit I have derived from being a member of CAMA is the networking. Being a CAO is a lonely position a good deal of the time and finding a place where you can talk about shared experiences, ask about solutions found and simply be able to talk about the experience in the job, knowing that the other people "get it" is profound. A mid-career mentor of mine once "warned" that becoming a CAO is not just becoming a bigger department head. Part of what he meant was that there are no peers in the organization to share experiences and seek advice. CAMA can offer that through its networking of administrators.

Based on your experience, what points of advice would you give regarding work / life balance? Do you have any specific examples you would like to share?

This is a very personal matter as what constitutes good work/life balance for one person may not fit for another. This will also change over time – what is required for good work/life balance may be different when you have a couple of young children at home versus a point in time when they are grown and off on their own. The primary consideration is to be aware that defining an appropriate work/life balance is an issue. It is something you need to be conscious of and manage and that is certainly true as a CAO. From there taking on the task of defining your particular needs in the context of your employment obligations is a personal journey. Once defined, it can be a tricky business to enforce it and typically people will not always be consistently successful at it. An important consideration though is that sharing that expectation with your employer and "negotiating" a mutually agreeable approach to that is pivotal. Absent the conversation and the agreement, the employer may not find your work/life balance to be appropriate for ongoing employment.

In the position of CAO it is also unrealistic to believe that flexibility is not needed and warranted from your perspective. A respectful Mayor will be accommodating whenever possible but the nature of municipal work, particularly the interplay with members of Council, will dictate that the work/life balance is not something that can be set in stone. The flip to that, however; with the support of a respectful Mayor that flexibility can be used to drive out opportunities for downtime or away time. In fact, I have worked for Council's who believed that "noodling time" was actually part of the job.



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