

An Attitudinal Response to Role Conflict in Local Government

Laurie J Cetinic-Dorol
Western Australia

Local government consists of elected community representatives, who serve on a part-time basis, hold office for a limited term and do not possess particular managerial skills. The chief executive officer (CEO) is appointed to manage the local government entity. Role conflict becomes an issue due to the competing values of the council and the CEO regarding resource allocation and the overall direction of the organisation. This paper looks at the underlying issues of the friction between the volunteer council and the paid staff and what strategies could be implemented to ensure the two functions are complementary and not conflicting.

Role conflict raises a number of interesting issues which need to be canvassed. The issues concerned have taken prominence in the debate of recent times on the subject of improving the Australian local government system. For example, the transition of local government from a mechanistic system to an organic system encapsulates the thrust of the Hilmer Report (1993) to achieve efficiency and effectiveness in addition to the managerialist views of Bains (Tucker 1997) which supported the modernisation of local government legislation. Hence, the matter of contention centres on efficiency and effectiveness in the utilisation of resources to provide improved services, which is interrelated to leadership within a system that maintains a dual structure. The council and the CEO represent the dual structure.

Dualism, as it existed in local government, created role ambiguity and failed to illuminate concepts and direction. 'The role of councillors and the role of officers ... [remained] unclear, misunderstood, [and] unsatisfactory' (Samuels 1990:951). It was because of these reasons, as well as the inappropriateness of the local government legislation, that changes were made to the local government system in Australia. The

objective behind the defining of the roles for both the council and the CEO was to dispense with role ambiguity, which was counter-productive, and to implement a structure which could cope with the challenges of the 21st century.

Unfortunately, the evolution of change with its reliance on concepts developed for vastly different cultures has not resolved the question of role ambiguity. Role ambiguity is still an issue in local government. In this regard an assertive council terminates the services of its CEO. Other situations can occur whereby the CEO resigns rather than continuing with an untenable arrangement or the CEO simply stays put and rides out the storm. Nevertheless, in organisations that are as complex as local government entities conflict is inevitable because of the 'different goals, values or perceptions' (Stoner et al. 1994:314) with regard to the allocation of resources and the overall direction of the organisation. It is therefore important that the conflict which arises is managed in order to achieve beneficial outcomes for the organisation. To achieve meaningful results the CEO must not lose sight of the fact that he or she works for the council and needs to be less domineering and more conciliatory in the pursuit of issues. And

the council needs to be less assertive and more professional in its approach to policy objectives. Moreover both parties must be aware of their responsibilities, which have been written into legislation.

Background

Local government has evolved from what has been described as a simple administrative organisation (Tucker 1997) into a complex service institution, that is, a multi-professional service institution characterised by task specialisation and which is confronted with issues of social and economic change. The social and economic changes which have taken place have immense implications for local government, emphasising the benefits derived from the call for improved management skills. In this regard some two decades ago Jones (1977:2) stated that there is 'an ever-increasing need for high quality, more capable management' in local government — a view, which is still relevant today as chief executives and other senior personnel tend to rest on their laurels rather than pursuing higher management qualifications to cope with the challenges facing local government.

The quality of management presents a problem for local government as there is 'the conspicuous presence of the elected member' (Jones 1981:64) who can be a barrier which results from the fact that councillors, in the main, have no management skills. This is because '(m)any council members are "amateurs" attempting to cope with the demands of local government politics, administration and technology while serving part-time' (Newnham and Winston 1997:112). However, this inhibiting factor cannot be assigned solely to elected members as there are CEOs and other senior personnel within local government who fall into the same category because they have difficulty in dealing with '[t]he complexity and professionalism of modern management' (Newnham and Winston 1997:106). They have been awarded their appointments simply because of the archaic staircase mentality. That is, appointments are made based on seniority (the staircase) with no regard given to qualifications.

Local government is subject to internal and external influences exerting pressure for reform — opposed by a society that is better educated (though perhaps at present largely indifferent

to the existence of the local government system in Australia) and consequently demanding greater accountability. The lack of constructive action in dealing with issues of community concern and the waste of resources fosters apathy.

As there was no distinct direction for local government, an impetus grew advocating the revitalisation of attitudes toward the establishment of a conceptual framework — a participative philosophy — an organic structure which would allow greater flexibility and information to flow freely, with the emphasis being upon objectives by strategies rather than set procedure. 'Without explicit objectives ... [there is] no meaningful evaluative criteria or performance indicators and without these there can be no coherent and rational allocation of resources' (Foley 1978:299). In essence the issues at hand hinge on the meaningful use of limited resources in achieving the predetermined objectives as outlined in the Principal Activities Plan.¹

The Hilmer Report (1993) underpinned the impetus for change proposing the introduction of the National Competition Policy, while new local government legislation 'incorporated the managerialist doctrines first laid out in the Bains report (1972)' (Tucker 1997:85). The challenge to implement a participative philosophy was taken up by Victoria, which directed 'that city managers were responsible for the administration of local government business and staff management. Councillors were supposed to provide direction to management' (Newnham and Winston 1997:109). This system is not too dissimilar to the American local government system where council sets the policy and the city manager implements the policy.

Councillors in Victoria and Western Australia were not entirely happy with the proposal. And although writing the functions of the council and the CEO into legislation was undoubtedly a positive step, it is sometimes difficult to teach an old dog new tricks. Councillors (elected members) appear to have had difficulty coming to grips with the new arrangements as they continue to interfere in local government administration. When it is suggested that they refrain from interfering in the administration they become somewhat belligerent. For example, a representation is made to an officer by a councillor not to continue

with a particular course of action or to take a more sympathetic view to an application and when that position is not accepted by the officer the elected member becomes aggressive in the hope of achieving the purpose of the representation.

The diffusion of ideas is not uncommon; indeed recognition of its benefits often eliminates the need to 'reinvent the wheel'. Other states have taken up the Victorian concept of defining the functions of the CEO and council through the introduction of new Local Government Acts. However, the system of local government is not identical in every state of Australia. The reader will be aware of the functions of local government and therefore there is no need to provide an overview of the local government systems.

Problem Identification

The characteristics of the local government system were such that it maintained a differentiated, departmentalised structure which was cumbersome and without specific role definition. Stakeholders questioned the ability of the organisation to function in a rational way. Councillors were renowned for giving instructions to staff with the Shire/Town Clerk not knowing what was happening within the organisation. With respect to the interference of councillors, Tucker (1997:85) has this to say:

[C]ouncillors traditionally viewed their responsibilities as entailing a right — even an obligation — to interact directly with council employees ... More forceful councillors in some places made no bones about issuing instructions to employees ... Such conduct from elected councillors had been the cause of many bitter disputes and power struggles ... Sometimes with the mayor, sometimes with the town or shire clerk, and sometimes with the senior official in charge of the employee so directed. Obviously this was an important area of concern, requiring an end to the role ambiguity that was at the heart of the problem.

This display of coercive power was common because the council was the source of authority and without role definition it was difficult to maintain a sensible position in management

terms. It would be fair to say that this dysfunctional approach to management in local government was widespread. Employees followed the instructions given by councillors because they had a mortgage to service and to provide for their families. With change different attitudes prevail. The interference by councillors in the administrative affairs of a council has often resulted in industrial action being taken. Without resolution of the aforementioned problem, nothing constructive can be achieved. So a regimental approach was taken towards the problem along the lines of 'you do this and you do that'. The former referring to the role of councillors and the latter referring to the role of the CEO. Defining the roles of both parties has resolved one dilemma, but raised another. As Newnham and Winston (1997:112) point out:

There is a lack of understanding from both sides as to how the other carries out its part of the job. Communications are often undertaken with mutual distrust and a misunderstanding of roles.

There may be deficiencies in comprehension by elected members, which is obviously detrimental to the process of managing a local government entity. It is submitted that the CEO and senior staff take advantage of the situation by lobbying councillors regarding policy issues, advancing propositions which may be in opposition to the direction the council wishes to take due to community concerns. Here the construct of organisational politics emerges as an actor in the process — 'hidden agendas and unsanctioned behaviors create ambiguities ... and the inherent ... nature of [organisational] politics creates conflict potential' (Gilmore et al. 1996:482). Without cohesion conflict will emerge and its disruptive influence will impede the organisation in achieving its objectives. '[C]onsensus-building and rapport-building' (Lan 1997:29) is a way of dealing with conflict whereby a mechanism is established by finding common ground to diffuse the situation.

Functions — Chief Executive Officer and the Council

The functions of the CEO and the council have been set out in the various Local Government Acts and according to Tucker (1997:85) they have been framed in line with 'managerialist

doctrines'. In essence they distinguish the 'networks or roles; division of labour; and hierarchies defining the relationship of each activity, ... [in relation] to [the] overall goals of the organization' (Cunningham 1977:465).

The functions stated are quite clear; however, 'role conflict arises ... [because council and the CEO have] different motivations and different perspectives on the task at hand' (Newnham and Winston 1997:112). Resolution of role conflict must come through leadership by the CEO and the mayor.

Leadership

Local government has been transformed (or is being transformed) from a legalistic system, restrictive in relative terms and totally procedural, into what has been described as 'a comparatively sophisticated model of management' (Tucker 1997:70). Newnham and Winston (1997:117) have expanded somewhat upon this point by stating that:

The new model ... supports a managerialist approach, which demands public assets are used for efficient and effective service delivery and provides for the use of public assets. This model requires a more business oriented approach to the delivery of service and accordingly a clarification of the role of managers and elected members to ensure that there is certainty of approach and direction to facilitate long term planning for strategic resource use.

What has evolved from this corporate approach to local government is a paradigm which is economically motivated and according to Mintzberg (1989:334) has 'immoral consequences by trading off social benefits'. Johnston (1997:230) expresses a similar view in stating that 'with the strong focus on efficiency, or unit cost, it is difficult to determine the extent to which social objectives can also be accommodated'. And Jones (1993:13) argues that '[m]anagerialism has a natural contempt for non-management issues'.

Leadership is a phenomenon of social influence and through the interaction of human behaviour becomes a persuasive tool to motivate others toward predetermined objectives. And according to Stogdill (1974:21-2) a 'function of leadership [is] to realise ... motivational potential ... and at the same time contribute

toward the accomplishment of the organizational goals'. It is of paramount importance that both the council and the CEO form a cohesive alliance to work towards achieving the objectives of the organisation. However, only time will tell if such a direction is correct given the social obligations local government has in its expanded role. The juggling of the business component within the new management model to achieve efficiencies — and the disregard to the social obligations which local government has — is causing belligerent attitudes to surface between council and the CEO.

In this regard it becomes necessary 'to balance economics with democracy and social issues' (Jones 1993:14).

The new paradigm for local government is based on the notion of direction and focus to achieve objectives and the rational use of resources. To achieve these aims the organisation must be efficient and effective. Efficiency is the 'capacity to produce results with the minimum expenditure of energy, time, money, or materials' (Roberts 1997:124). Since there is a cross-functional relationship between efficiency and effectiveness it is reasonable to say that one cannot succeed without the other. The concept of effectiveness revolves around the comprehension of principles interrelated with motivational forces and the distribution of energies towards the attainment of goals. Goals cannot be achieved unless strategies are formulated and organisational goals are only a descriptive representation of the organisation concerned. Put another way '[e]ffectiveness refers to the appropriateness of organisation behaviour, given its operating environment and objectives' (Wright et al. 1997:2.2).

Conflict Resolution

The divergence of opinion which exists between the council and the CEO regarding the allocation of resources emphasises 'the tension [that] exists between microeconomic and social objectives' (Johnston 1997:229) of the organisation. For example, a parcel of land becomes available and the issue for the local government concerned is what to do with the land. Opinion is divided. The community and some elected members want the land retained as community public open space while other elected members want the land to be subdivided and sold to reap an

economic benefit. The objective is to find an equilibrium by balancing economic issues with social goals. Without reconciliation of the differences role conflict becomes an issue, which is disruptive to the organisation. The working relationship between the council and the CEO becomes strained. Factions develop, which are an unstable influence, and confidence on both sides degenerates, adding to the dysfunctional attitudes within the organisation — obviously a most inappropriate set of circumstances given that both parties are in control of a multimillion dollar local government organisation.

A dominant feature of conflict is that the actors 'are more concerned with maintaining boundaries and preserving power and prerogative, than with collaboration to accomplish clearly defined common and desirable ends' (Tecker and Fidler 1993:40). What is required to overcome such difficulties is leadership on the part of the CEO. In this regard, Arnold (1993) (cited in Newnham and Winston, 1997:112) makes a useful suggestion, namely: 'the role of the local government manager must include a component of suggesting actions and counselling them [councillors] on how to achieve their goals'. The functions of both the council and the CEO are unambiguous. By assuming a leadership role the CEO through persuasion and mediation may well diffuse problems 'by arranging compromises and balancing (competing) interests' (Banfield 1969, as cited in Jones 1989:22) for the betterment of the organisation.

Conclusion

Confronted with the challenges of an ever changing environment — stakeholders demanding greater responsiveness to the management issue — a new management model was devised for local government which according to its designer (the state) was to be the panacea for the problems facing local government. Yet partisan attitudes continue to persist, causing the system to remain fragmented and disjointed in its approach to management issues. Conflict becomes the dominant issue within the organisation, resulting in the inability of the CEO and the council to develop a harmonious working relationship.

Despite the inadequacies of the local government system, it is possible nevertheless

to achieve a workable relationship to accomplish desired outcomes. However, the harmonious resolution of friction existing within the organisational hierarchy will only come about by leadership. Leadership is on the part of the CEO and the mayor or president of the council has a dual responsibility. In this regard the CEO must not lose sight of the fact that he or she is employed by the council, and the mayor or president must not overlook the fact that he or she was elected along with other councillors by the people to oversee their interests.

It is submitted that when these organisational variables are brought together there will be a cohesive relationship demonstrating purpose and commitment — local government will possibly succeed in delivering effective outcomes.

Note

1. In New South Wales it is referred to as the Management Plan and in other states a similar nomenclature would apply.

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