



Meetings with Managers: Greensboro

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Last Thursday afternoon I had a lunch meeting with Bob Morgan, the Interim City Manager for Greensboro. Bob was the Town Manager for Farmville and then Carrboro for 22 years. He went to Greensboro as the Deputy Manager, and he was appointed to the interim position when the council fired Mitchell Johnson in March. For some reason I've always thought that Bob was a graduate of our MPA Program, but that is not the case—his degree is from NC State.

Greensboro has been dealing with the economic downturn in a variety of ways. Most local governments appear to have started managing the crisis at the beginning of the previous fiscal year. Greensboro cut 49 full time positions last fiscal year—they had a hiring freeze throughout the entire year, which allowed them to reduce spending by 10%. This fiscal year they cut another 8 positions, but no one lost their job. For the foreseeable future, the city is intentionally maintaining a 4% vacancy rate to save \$6M from their operating budget.

Our lunch conversation was wide ranging. Greensboro does a significant amount of in-house training, particularly in leadership and management. One recent shift in their emphasis has been to focus more on basic supervision and management skills and less on organizational development issues. This change was based on feedback within the organization that first-line supervisors and middle managers lacked basic skills. The city also recently asked the Employment Security Commission to conduct an employee survey, a service that they provide at no cost. It revealed that Greensboro employees have a high degree of satisfaction in their work, but it also showed that



they have concerns about communication within the organization and trust issues with management, especially around promotions. One interesting change is that the city now advertises for interim positions because they discovered that the person selected often ends up getting the job on a permanent basis. The survey results also prompted Greensboro to develop a succession planning process.

One of Greensboro's pressing issues is helping their employees deal with diversity issues in the context of problem solving—internally and in working with the public. Bob's experience is that diversity training that focuses mainly on race causes “the walls to go up” and is not that successful. He is looking for training that helps city employees develop their problem-solving skills in a way that highlights customer service and addresses nuts-and-bolts issues of dealing with difference. Bob wants to create a program that helps Greensboro's employees become more sensitive to all kinds of differences, not just racial and ethnic differences. He hopes that if you help people understand diversity in the context of another issue that they already identify as a priority—like problem solving—they will be more receptive to the diversity training and it will have a greater impact. This idea of bringing diversity training “in from the side” to help people deal more effectively with issues they have identified as a high priority seems promising. It will require a high degree of sophistication in designing the training to insure that the diversity issues really are addressed and not pushed off to the side as the conversation becomes uncomfortable.

I asked about *Popular Government* and Bob indicated that he very rarely reads it, partly because it is not easy to read. It always has felt more like an “academic publication” to him. In contrast, he pointed to [Public Manager](#) as a publication that he reads and finds helpful—it is published by the [International City/County Management Association \(ICMA\)](#). It is available electronically, comes to him automatically via email, and he can easily store it in an electronic folder for future reference. The articles are shorter and he finds them much more practical than *PG*. ICMA also sends out a short, biweekly publication called [Local Government Matters](#) that Bob finds really useful. The topics covered in each issue are listed clearly so that he can go only to those that interest him—he also likes the ability to easily email these short articles to others in his organization. ICMA also produces a monthly publication called [Academic Matters](#), which includes short pieces from public administration faculty members and others. Bob offered that he has used articles from *PG* over the years, but not often.

Then he told me the following story about not just continuing to do things without a good reason. A woman was getting ready to cook a ham and her husband noticed that she cut off about two inches from the end of the ham before cooking it. When the man asked her why she cut off the perfectly good ham, she answered that she had learned it from watching her mother. The man later asked his mother-in-law why she always cut off two inches from the end of a ham before she cooked it. She answered, “So it will fit in my pot.”