

ASSISTANTS AND DEPUTIES: Assistants Are an Asset to Any Organization

Many CAOs have never served as an assistant or deputy and therefore may not understand how multifaceted the assistant position can be.

by [Pam Hylton](#) | Jun 01, 2023 | PM MAGAZINE - ARTICLE



When I started my career in local government 27 years ago, the path to becoming a city manager or county administrator was nearly etched in stone: get a masters of public administration degree, intern with a local government, land a job as an assistant to the city manager (or possibly an assistant city manager) or deputy county administrator, get at least two years of experience and then start seeking a CAO position.

Flash forward 27 years and my, how times have changed! Managers are coming into this profession from a variety of different backgrounds and career paths. Many CAOs have never served as an assistant or deputy and therefore may not understand how multifaceted the assistant position can be. These managers may struggle to see the value of the assistant/deputy position for their organization.

Gone are the days of the assistant or deputy being viewed as a CAO-in-waiting. In my experience, this dynamic could result in some mistrust between CAOs and their ACAOs. The city manager/county administrator could sometimes feel threatened that the assistant was just waiting for them to lose their job so the assistant could move into that position. This resulted in CAOs encouraging assistants/deputies to move on to other positions within a few years so they could “get more experience.” This type of churn in the assistant/deputy position could also be viewed as a disservice to the organization as they never got to really settle into their job and gain valuable experience and institutional knowledge.

Many of my colleagues view their assistant/deputy position as their career goal. We all come into this profession with different skill sets. I have served as an interim city manager twice in my career. One thing I took away from both of those experiences was the revelation that I really don't enjoy dealing with politically

motivated elected officials. I am fortunate to currently work for a city with incredibly supportive and forward-thinking elected officials who truly want the best for their community. They don't view their time on the city council as a stepping stone to higher political office. I enjoy the internal organizational focus of my assistant city manager position. My city manager encourages me to be her second set of eyes and ears in the organization, building trust with employees and helping to ensure that we are meeting their needs. I manage the day-to-day functions of city hall and other administrative functions, such as HR and IT, that are very important to keeping our organization running smoothly.

CAOs would also benefit from making sure that the assistant/deputy is kept up to date with most happenings within the organization. Life is very unpredictable. Any number of occurrences could result in a city manager needing to step away from their duties for a short or long period of time. Continuity is important in any organization and vital in local government. My city manager keeps me informed on many issues, large and small, so I am able to almost seamlessly assume her duties if it becomes necessary. This gives her peace of mind and is vital for her to maintain a work/life balance. It's helpful to be aware to prevent missteps or for someone to try to take advantage of a situation and slip something through. A void in leadership for whatever reason can be filled in a positive or negative way.

CAOs should take the time to understand their assistant's career goals, organizational interests, and motivations. Allowing the assistant time to grow in their position and carve out their niche can only serve to strengthen both the organization and the CAO/ACAO relationship. The result is a well-run organization providing the best services for our communities, which is what we all hope to achieve.



PAM HYLTON is assistant city manager of Richmond Heights, Missouri.

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