

# **Animal instincts and local government management**

## **John Kleem**

My local government career has seen two distinctly different phases, as a practitioner and a consultant. In the first phase I was always mindful, as a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), of the heavy responsibility of allocating scarce resources to a diversity of functions administered by local government. Whatever the composition and persuasion of elected members, it was always within my capability to encourage or coerce council to allocate more or less resources to a particular service. In turn, I was often persuaded by logical argument placed before me by managers and staff who supported sound and well constructed programs by appropriate and strategic objectives.

I would have to say that until 1990 when I concluded my first career phase, the case for the allocation of the dollar towards urban animal management was not always clearly researched and did not necessarily reflect the professionalism and community interest that is now in evidence.

As a consultant, working only in local government, I have often been engaged by councils as a de facto coach through recognition of the fact that the full achievement of performance measures may not necessarily be enough to secure continuity or renewal of an employment contract. I have therefore become more interested in the style and personality associated with senior positions in local government and the psychology that is appropriate both in the delivery of that role and in the manner that others secure preferred outcomes. So quite apart from more recent research which has complemented the management and control of pets in an urban environment, it seems proper that I give you some insights into the make-up of a CEO, the essential survival kit and the pet idiosyncrasies.

In recent years I have facilitated many workshops within councils designed to produce strategies and discuss resources, be they physical, human or financial.

There is no question that the animal management lobby in Australia has proved to be most successful and many local authorities have been able to respond through a priority assessment of the issues. A key component of progressing those successes is to take a psychological journey into the life of the local government CEO and to maximise the skills of those charged with animal management to access that intellect to advantage.

At any given point in time, the mind of the CEO is a veritable zoo, comprising both companion and exotic animals. Each species is publicly exhibited to suit circumstances and I cite some examples:

- rhinoceros - on occasions the CEO must exhibit the hide of a rhinoceros in challenging the assertions of council, in responding to criticism or in making difficult choices from credible options;
- fox - then again it can be appropriate that the CEO show cunning and guile in his style of management, although one should never suggest that personal objectives include a sly element;
- elephant - some deliberations of the CEO may seem to be ponderous, thoughtful or thick-skinned. It is likely however that the memory bank remains alert and focused;
- gazelle - on other occasions the CEO should be fleet of foot to dodge predators or rough terrain;
- dog - loyalty and support for the CEO can have its rewards, reciprocated by adherence to the council position and expressions such as 'off the leash' and 'walking the dog' have their own interpretations;
- cat - then again the CEO can be expected to seem aloof and independent when circumstances dictate, with the confidence to quell intruders but conscious of warmth and comforts.

These are just some examples of the personal zoo that is the domain of the CEO and, if you are visiting, it could be feeding time for any one of the exotics. The analogy of animal instincts is but one of a ten point survival kit that I believe is necessary for local government management. They are required not only in the CEO but in any local government discipline, especially that to which many of you are committed.

The second element of the survival kit is to massage your ego. From time to time it is important that you tell yourself what a good job you're doing since you may not get that impression from the reaction of others, either in word or by body language.

The third skill is to be humble. Great people can have only so many thoughts at once and humility is a quality to be admired.

The next desirable ingredient in the survival kit is the ability to make it happen. In this respect your own perspective for animal management may vary from the focus of the CEO but the principle is no different.

Yet another element that we must acknowledge is to expect the unexpected. This is particularly relevant to urban animal management and the actions of animals can be even more unpredictable than those of humans.

A further skill necessary is the ability to be able to bite your tongue. Many will be familiar with circumstances where thoughts should not be converted to the spoken word.

Another skill for local government management is recognition that you don't please everybody. There is a wide disparity between accommodating individual requests and rationalising the worth of those requests.

It is also important to dream a little. This is a distant cousin of boarding the helicopter and helps in the formulation of vision and strategies.

Another essential for the managerial survival kit is to be ready to praise. Too few local government organisations have developed a climate where a pat on the back or a word of encouragement is offered for a job well done. Positive reinforcement is a quality that inspires even better performance.

Above all, it is desirable that the goal of any employment be to have fun. In my experience not enough people subscribe to the enjoyment of tasks and responsibilities or to the work ethic that derives from job fulfilment.

Noting that Brian Watkins is addressing the conference on issues of communication and teamwork relevant to the operations of shire ranger, I want to extend the theme by some reference to the use and control of our greatest management resource - time.

We need to acknowledge that the fundamental causes of problems in the management of time can be traced to tendencies of human nature. The oversight of a task or responsibility, or a delay in producing information or a result, are the types of things that are retained in the mind of the CEO or the elected member.

Individual killers associated with the management of time by the CEO, environmental officers and rangers in local government relate consistently to international studies, which have been undertaken and most commonly identify the following as the greatest time wasters:

- management by crisis;
- telephone interruptions;
- inadequate planning;
- attempting too much;
- drop in visitors;
- ineffective delegation;
- personal disorganisation;
- lack of self discipline;
- inability to say no;
- procrastination;
- meetings;
- paperwork;
- leaving tasks unfinished;
- inadequate staff; and
- poor communication.

I have seen the consequences of people failing in one or more areas of those I have identified and, whether consciously or otherwise, the top three seem to come out as being management by crisis, personal disorganisation and procrastination. I would suggest that the occasional revisit to the principles of managing one's time is a critical but basic training tool for all officers in local government.

As with any discipline in local government, those processes which define urban animal management are as much a part of the changed agenda as any aspect of reform which has pressured local government to do it better.

People in authority in local government often forget that they need to plan the change, create the right climate, anticipate the resistance, sell the benefits, listen and follow-up.

Studies suggest that 10% of affected people will actively support change, 10% will actively resist and 80% will wait and see. It's the duty of CEO or anyone acting as change agent to get the 80% of fence sitters to join the active supporters.

Increasingly, the bulk of change issues in local government are not through policy creation of the council, but by appointed leaders who have a responsibility to apply the notion of excellent customer service, accountability and efficiencies measured by the ratio of output to input. I have found that too many people in local government fail to see that many people will be afraid of change and often do not ensure that everyone knows how the change will affect them.

There are a number of properties in local government management that can be identified as 'communication killers'. These include those actions which have the capacity to be seen by others as negatives. Many of the following are alive and well in local government management:

- threats;
- name calling;
- 'shoulds';
- 'oughts';
- blame;
- withholding relevant information;
- interrogation;
- praising to manipulate; and
- changing the topic.

Your relationship with council management and the CEO's relationship with council can involve a series of mind games. The application of that basket of interpersonal skills that are nominated relate not only to your welfare but to those functions for which you are responsible.

Any issue of potential controversy can recoil to your own disadvantage and as it was once expressed to me, "the toes that you step on today may be connected to the legs that support the bottom you have to kiss tomorrow".

For the future, performance of all those associated with urban animal management will be a key ingredient in determining the relevance of policies and the quantum of resources available to administer those policies.

It is appropriate, therefore, to pick up the theme about developing and maintaining effective teams, since there is a correlation between your performance and the least effective member of the team. As I see it there is a correlation, in respect of any weakness within a team, that the other members pick up that person, whether they like it or not, because any weakness in the team will ultimately reflect upon every individual in some way.

The best teams have the following properties:

- members share explicit common objectives;
- the output of the whole is more than the sum of the individual parts;
- all members share responsibility for success or failure;
- members are clear about roles and relationships;
- working procedures are understood and observed by members;
- issues can be discussed in a mature and constructive manner;
- the contribution of team members is valued and respected; and
- each member of the team is a resource for other members.

In keeping with the principle of the CEO's zoo of animals we each have our own group of Directors in our make-up. There may be the Director of Organisation, the Director of Time Management, the Director of Change, the Director of Communication and the Director of Interpersonal skills. It is often appropriate that we call a meeting of these Directors to ensure that priorities are compatible and interests are balanced.

It seems to me that the strategies by local government and agencies towards urban animal management are formulated with good sense and education that the voluntary effort of the pet owner is the best resource available to local government. I have endeavoured to examine the psychology of the CEO through a blend of personal experience and observation. The psychology of management in local government suggests that elements of timing and relevance are key factors in securing resources and preferred outcomes.

Not removed from the equation is the influence of the community and the visible and responsive nature of animal management has no doubt contributed to the importance of that shared role between local government and the community it serves.

I have suggested that the local government CEO maintains a private zoo for public display as required. There is also the very public zoo that those assigned with urban animal management administer. In the broadest terms, even the CEO exercises urban animal management many times during each working day. Some understanding of that responsibility and an awareness of the zoological similarities may well be useful allies in the continued enhancement of initiatives and policies for urban animal management.

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John was City Manager at Salisbury for seven years after service at six New South Wales councils. A former Federal President of the Institute of Municipal Management, John has operated a local government consultancy since 1991. With a preferred knowledge of reform agendas, structures, systems and practices John has consulted nationally to over 100 councils combining proven experience with superior communication and facilitation skills. John heads the Australian Local Authorities Reform Alliance (ALARA), a group of independent specialists sharing expertise to meet the contemporary challenges of competition, benchmarking, structural reform, performance management, recruitment and strategic planning

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