



BY SEAN STEGALL

## ELECTION NIGHT

Not always necessary to dread election results

I spent my most recent election night alone in a hotel room watching reruns of *Law & Order: SVU*. No Internet. No phone. No contact with the outside world. No idea about who would be running my world when I woke the next morning.

It's not that any of the candidates would have been bad for the community. They all wanted to contribute—that's why they ran in the first place. Instead, it's fear of the unknown. Fear of plans being derailed. Fear of losing control.

So, on this election night, I surrendered to the unknown, realizing that I had as much control over the election results as I had over the criminal investigations carried out by the television show detectives, Stabler and Benson.

### A New Day

When I walked into city hall the next morning, the same people were gathered around the same coffee pots and water coolers, but my world had changed. The mayor I had worked with for the past eight years was gone, and two new councilmembers had joined the team of residents leading our city. Everyone was looking at me for what's next. To be honest, I had no better idea that morning than I did the night before.

I knew my former councilmembers. I knew who preferred e-mail to phone, who would ask complex questions five minutes before a council meeting, who

ordered Diet Coke with lemon, who cared most about parks, and who cared most about senior residents. I knew them, and I knew what they wanted for our community. Fear of the unknown was in full effect.

I decided to keep my mouth shut and listen. I discarded all the assumptions that had crept into my mind during the campaign about who these people were and what their vision for the organization and the community would be. There was no problem to solve. No call to action. I simply needed to listen.

During the next few weeks, I learned that this new council was genuinely interested in what was going on in the organization and throughout the city. They asked lots of questions and shared information gathered along the campaign trail. With the tools we had developed for the previous council, it was impossible to keep up with the frequency and detail of communication they needed.

### Changes Are Made

So, we created new tools and tactics that reflected how this new council wanted to receive communications and how they themselves wanted to communicate with the public.

Staff created a special Monday memo called "Starting Point" to prepare them for the week ahead. We organized listening tours and community walks for the mayor. We restructured council meeting

memos to be more user-friendly and added to our agendas more presentations from community partners. I started meeting face-to-face with each councilmember once a week.

It wasn't long before I knew who would reply first to my e-mails, who would post their thoughts on Facebook, who cared most about veterans, who cared most about the arts, and who would speak up in council meetings on a particular issue. Just six months after election night, I can confidently say that I know them, and I know what they want for the community.

With each cycle of council elections come new opportunities to explore uncharted areas of our communities and our professional careers. I look back on the results of each election I've been through and the assumptions I had made about how they would affect our community.

Had I not cast those assumptions aside and opened my mind, I would have missed out on some pretty amazing opportunities. Most important, I would have missed out on getting to know the newly elected officials on a personal level and helping them make their visions for our community a reality. If this means that at times my plans get derailed and I feel a little out of control, so be it.

There is no map to navigate the unknown. But the good news is that we, as managers, are the mapmakers. **PM**



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