What Makes Municipal Councils Effective? An Empirical Analysis of How Council Members Perceive Their Group Interactions and Processes

Kimberly L. Nelson, Ph.D.
Division of Public Administration
Northern Illinois University

Gerald T. Gabris, Ph.D.
Division of Public Administration
Northern Illinois University

Trenton J. Davis, Ph.D.
Department of Political Science
Georgia Southern University

Abstract

Although local government scholars acknowledge the centrality of the municipal council to overall government performance, the literature provides limited guidance regarding how those councils can improve their effectiveness. Councils that display recurrent patterns of dysfunctional behavior are more likely to be ineffective in their core functions. Although there is research that identifies dysfunctional council behavior and its potential consequences for government performance, there is limited investigation into what aspects of member behavior are related to the functionality of the council itself. This study uses surveys of council members to identify which aspects of council behavior (interpersonal relations, leadership, staff competence, and conflict) have the greatest effect on perceptions of council effectiveness. The findings indicate that both interpersonal relationships between members of council and the mayor's leadership ability are significantly related to perceptions of council effectiveness.

The public management literature acknowledges city councils as the primary policymakers for local government systems, yet provides nominal guidance on how such councils might improve their effectiveness. This is perplexing given that the success of the administrative officer often hinges on the quality of the council-administrator interface (Golembiewski 1985). Councils that display recurrent patterns of dysfunctional group behavior are likely to be ineffective in their core policy and accountability functions. Based on strategic planning data derived from 51 local governments in three states over a period of 25 years, one study found serious council dysfunction in about one third of cases (Gabris and Davis 2008). John Carver (1997) argues that many governing boards unwittingly engage in dysfunctional and ineffective practices that make their organizations worse rather than better off.

By knowing what specific group behaviors associate with perceptions of council function and dysfunction (Carlson and Davidson 1999; Forbes and Milliken 1999), it may be feasible to design a process for helping councils understand how they may become more effective decision makers. Sustaining and improving council effectiveness should be a high priority for city administrators. While the least serious cases of council dysfunction may simply cause administrators frustration, the most egregious cases can precipitate problems in service failures or incapacity to respond to pressing organizational needs. Published research that identifies dysfunctional council behavior is quite limited. Further, there is even less literature on how councils can improve their performance (Carlson and Davidson 1999; Vogelsang-Coombs 1997; Vogelsang-Coombs and Miller 1999; Roberts 2002). This study investigates how interpersonal relations, mayoral leadership, perceptions of staff effectiveness, and conflict among council members affect perceptions of council effectiveness from the perspective of the council members

themselves, and thus sheds light on how councils might improve their performance.

Municipal Councils as a Special Type of Small Group and Decision-Making Team

The literature on group behavior and organizational teams is expansive. The literature discussion that follows focuses on patterns of behavior commonly found in small groups and teams that tend to associate with group effectiveness. This literature is drawn upon to identify and construct variables that comprise the empirical basis for this study.

The great majority of local government councils have small memberships. In this study, of suburban Illinois municipalities, the median size of municipal councils is seven. Small size is important because council members cannot easily hide or camouflage their personal policy differences, and must work closely together to achieve effective policy outcomes. This puts a premium on maintaining intra-group civility. Councils are sensitive to member acceptance of expected roles and group norms. Failure to conform to group norms (unwritten rules) can result in dominant group insiders ostracizing other members of the group (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995; Blau 1955).

Some council members may prefer playing the role of outsider who frequently challenges group decisions. These outsiders can be called "rogues." Rogues refuse to accept or submit to dominant group expectations. Nevertheless, small groups exert strong pressure on their members to conform to the group culture (Kaufman 1960; Schein 1985, 1988; Argyris 1985; Ott 1989; Zander 1985; Golembiewski 1962).

Edgar Schein, a pioneer in developing applied small group behavior analysis (Schein 1988; 1999) suggests that several core human processes take place within small groups that influence group effectiveness. These processes include group maintenance, communication,

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problem solving and decision-making, and group culture. He further argues that groups must learn how to operate within intergroup environments, where processes between groups also become salient. Group maintenance involves how individual members identify with a specific group and gain meaning from group membership, as well as the benefits a specific group can derive from its members. Groups expect members to contribute resources and effort to ensure the maintenance and survival of the larger whole. As group norms emerge, they become woven into a system of shared beliefs constituting the small group culture. Healthy small groups, and hence municipal councils, are aware of their cultural norms, and are willing to grow and adapt in a constructive context by periodically reviewing the soundness of their conforming expectations. When a council no longer displays a shared group culture, or a shared vision or clear goals, the members of the council are likely to see a decrease in their decision-making effectiveness.

Interpersonal Relationships

Based on his research in organization development, Robert T. Golembiewski provides useful guidance for understanding the dynamics of interpersonal relationships (1977; Golembiewski and Kiepper 1988). Golembiewski focuses on the four interrelated, reinforcing variables of trust, openness, risk, and owning. When trust, openness, and owning are high, and risk low, conditions are fertile for regenerative interpersonal relationships. If council members trust and believe in one another, they are likely to communicate openly about their policy positions. They do so because the risk is low. They perceive strong within-group support. This enables them to be responsible for what they really think, or to own their views openly.

Conversely, low trust has a deleterious effect on openness. Council members stop communicating, they hold their cards close to their vests, and perceive high risk in stating their

ideas openly. This leads to a condition Golembiewski characterizes as degenerative

interpersonal relationships (1988). In this situation, council members will accomplish little of

substance. In fact, until the council succeeds in regenerating its interpersonal relationships, it

will find it difficult to focus on task-oriented work, such as making policy decisions. By

knowing where and how group members are experiencing poor interpersonal relationships, one

may be able to identify the causes and not just the symptoms associated with group conflict. The

conclusions from this literature lead to the first hypothesis:

> **H$_1$: Perceived municipal council effectiveness is positively associated with the**
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> **perception of positive interpersonal relationships among council members.**

Perceptions of Staff Competence

Municipal councils do not exist in a vacuum. As Carver suggests (1997), effective

councils need effective staffs to carry out their policy objectives. Councils are not simply

isolated small groups independent from everyone, but are an integral component of a larger,

interdependent organizational team. Members of effective councils collaborate for the

betterment of the whole, beyond individual self-interest, by working collaboratively with staff on

complex municipal problems and services (Dyer, Dyer, and Dyer 2007). Councils that have a

higher respect for their professional staff and see themselves and the staff as constituting a

collaborative team, should be more capable of producing effective policy outcomes and

innovations (Gabris, Golembiewski, and Ihrke 2001; Gabris, Ihrke and Proctor 2003). Hence,

one indicator of how a council perceives its effectiveness may involve how well council

members perceive their team relationship with staff. The authors argue that when council

members trust their staff and perceive them as competent, they will also likely consider staff as

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an integral part of a municipal team that includes both the council and staff. This contention is the basis for the second hypothesis:

H₂: Perceived municipal council effectiveness is positively associated with council members' perceptions of staff competence.

Facilitative Leadership

That mayors play important political roles on municipal councils is not a novel insight (Banfield and Wilson 1963; Royco 1971; Bowers and Rich 2000; Svara 1990; 1994; 2009). What is new is the notion that mayors can play a special leadership role where the success of the council is strongly influenced by the mayor's style of team leadership. James Svara provides evidence that the most effective type of council leadership is a facilitative leadership style (1990; 1994; 2009). Facilitative mayors promote task accomplishment by enhancing the effort of others. Svara argues that (1990) "rather than seeking power as a way to accomplish tasks, the facilitative mayor seeks to empower others" (87). Effective team leaders are empathetic, communicative, visionaries, and able to think in win-win terms (Wikstrom, 1979; Bennis 1985; Kouzes and Posner 1987).

An emerging model of team leadership in organizational behavior appears to support the facilitative leader role described by Svara and others (Hill 2004; Porter and Beyerlein 2000; Zaccaro, Rittman, and Marks 2001). According to LaFasto and Larson (2001), successful team leaders help keep their group focused on goals, maintain a collaborative climate, build confidence in members, demonstrate technical competence (acting as a role model), set priorities, and manage performance. This provides the basis for the third hypothesis:

H₃: Perceived municipal council effectiveness is positively associated with the

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perception of the mayor as a facilitative leader.

The Impact of Conflict on Council Effectiveness

Encouraging council members to collaborate on policy decisions implies open and constructive dialogue between individuals on the council (Roberts 2002). While there exists research relating to council conflict (Svara 1990; Ihrke and Niederjohn 2005), it has not reached a point of providing a sufficient critical mass for explaining the often debilitating patterns of behavior that can occur among council members in their governing capacity. Parallel research in the private sector, primarily from empirical work on the study of work teams in private firms, indicates that intra-group conflict can have consequences for council effectiveness (De Dreu and West 2001; Jehn 1995). Conflict has been defined as both a "process resulting from tension between team members because of real or perceived differences" (DeDreu and Weingart 2003, 741) and "the result of both conflicting interests and incompatible behavior" (L. Brown 1983, 5).

While some conflict between council members is normal and can actually help address problems, conflict can quickly become *dysfunctional* and seriously damage group effectiveness (Adams 2003). Conflict becomes dysfunctional when it ceases to focus on issues and becomes personal; when it is framed solely in win-lose alternatives; and when it becomes an end in itself rather than a means to an end. While not focusing specifically on dysfunctional conflict, other scholars have found a clear association between intra-board conflict (broadly defined) and high turnover among local government managers (Kaatz, French, and Cooper 1999; Whitaker and DeHoog 1991). The fourth hypothesis explores the relationship between council effectiveness and conflict:

H$_4$: Perceived municipal council effectiveness is negatively associated with the

perception of high conflict between council members.

While the extant literature provides useful insights into various strands of council behavior, it is rather limited and does not establish a clear theoretical framework for understanding the behavior within the council as a small work group that must at times engage in a collaborative team partnership with staff. In part, this is because the existing literature on municipal councils does not examine these dynamics through the lens of "small group" behavior, where the council itself is understood as a key structural component embedded within a larger organizational system. Even though municipal councils may occupy the top rung on an organization chart, they are dependent on subordinate units and officers to enforce and carry out their decisions.

Investigating councils through the lenses of interpersonal relationships, staff relations, facilitative leadership, and perceived conflict will provide a practical baseline for measuring perceived performance. The authors argue that these four factors should contribute to overall council effectiveness, and consequently, can serve as diagnostic benchmarks for helping councils improve their overall performance within the larger municipal system. At this point in the research, the data are only able to show how perceived small group variables associate with council effectiveness and are insufficient to determine whether perceived council effectiveness translates into clear increases in organizational performance or productivity.

Research Design and Methodology

Obtaining survey data from municipal council members is challenging. Many elected officials are reticent about filling out survey instruments that probe their perceptions toward other council members and professional staff, worrying that such information may inadvertently

leak out and hurt them politically. To address this concern this study utilized two separate

strategies and two distinct data collection efforts. During the initial iteration, surveys were sent

to city managers and administrators whose local governments agreed to participate in the study[1].

Only International City/County Management Association (ICMA) recognized communities are

included in the study. The sample was drawn from municipalities in northern Illinois. The

managers were asked to hand out the surveys at a council meeting and then collect them when

the respondents finished. This first effort resulted in only 22 municipalities reporting back,

including 79 elected officials, or an average of 3.6 council members per community. To enhance

this data set, a more rigorous second wave of data collection began in the fall 2009 and extended

into the spring of 2010.

The authors asked fourteen additional municipalities to participate and ten agreed to do

so. During the second iteration, a member of the research team personally visited council

members at a regular meeting to explain the survey protocol and collect the data directly from

them. During this second effort, 59 additional elected officials responded, raising the average

number of respondents per municipality to 5.9. Thus, the sample consists of 138 council

members from 32 municipalities within the Chicago suburban metro region. Although this is a

limited set of data, it represents about 40 percent of eligible Chicago metropolitan area

communities. The unit of analysis for this study is the council member, not the municipality.

Dependent Variable

The variables used in this analysis derive from the small group theory highlighted in the

literature review. All were tested for inter-item reliability using Cronbach's alpha. The central

dependent variable for this analysis is perceived **municipal council effectiveness** (MCE). While

group effectiveness may be measured in a variety of plausible ways, this research focuses on how the respondents perceive their councils as effective decision-making groups. A five point Likert Scale measures all attitudinal variables. Municipal council effectiveness is a summative index consisting of seven survey items[2]:

- Council members are productive.
- Council functions well as a team with shared values and culture.
- Council members share a common vision and sense of direction
- Participation on the council has been personally rewarding and satisfying.
- The council has attempted many innovations.
- Attempted policy innovations have been highly effective.
- Council is skeptical of innovation (reverse coded).

The Cronbach's alpha score for inter-item reliability was .761.

Independent Variables

The hypotheses were tested using independent variables that are additive indices composed of multiple survey items each. The first independent variable is the **interpersonal relationships** index composed of six survey items:

- Relationships between council members are founded on mutual respect.
- Council members trust one another.
- Council communications are open, clear, and constructive.
- Members are comfortable stating their opinions on controversial issues.
- Council members really say what they think.
- Council members are willing to take risks.

The alpha for the interpersonal relations index is .809.

The next independent variable measures **perceptions of staff competence.** This additive index is composed of six items with an alpha score of .824.

- Council views its staff as highly competent and trustworthy.
- Council views products of the staff as high in quality.
- Staff anticipates council members' needs well.

- Council considers its staff as an integral part of the municipal team.
- The council regards the CAO as an effective and credible leader.
- Council is dissatisfied with staff work (reverse coded).

The third independent variable in the model involves the perception of **facilitative leadership** practiced by the mayor. There were fewer questions in the survey pertaining to mayoral leadership, so the index has only two items (alpha = .768):

- Mayor maintains the integrity and dignity of the decision-making process.
- Mayor is fair and able to focus attention on specific policy issues.

Finally, a **high perceived conflict** variable was tested containing five items (alpha = .735):

- Conflict over policy issues by council members is frequent.
- Council has rogue members.
- Strong personality differences among some members create conflict.
- Council constantly rehashes the same issues.
- Decisions are based on consensus (reverse-coded).

Control Variables

In addition to the variables used to test the hypotheses, several basic local government variables were entered as controls. The control variables include demographics (population, income, unemployment rate) and institutional variables (home rule status and percent of council members elected by district). Form of government was not included because there is little form of government variability in the sample.

Research Findings and Discussion

Data were analyzed using linear regression to test which variables were related to municipal council effectiveness (MCE). Before determining the model fit, the data were assessed for multi-collinearity among the independent variables. The collinearity diagnostics (VIF and tolerance) were within acceptable limits for all independent variables.

Table 1 reports the results of the model. The results reinforce some initial predictions and call others into question. Interpersonal relations ($p < .001$) and facilitative leadership ($p < .05$) are related to MCE (confirming Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 3). Overall, the model was able to explain 60 percent of perceived municipal council effectiveness, which is quite substantial for an attitudinal study ($F = 20.55$). This suggests that the study's assumptions regarding how organizational behavior affects the council as a small group within a larger system appears to be validated, at least in part.

Surprisingly, perceptions of staff effectiveness and high conflict are not significantly related to perceived MCE ($p > .05$). These two variables should intuitively associate with council effectiveness and therefore require some explanation for not displaying a significant relationship with the dependent variable. In addition, as median household income goes up, council effectiveness goes down, which represents another unexpected finding ($p < .01$).

Place Table 1 about here

As predicted, the association between regenerative interpersonal relations and a higher perceived municipal council effectiveness score is validated. Indeed, interpersonal relations are the strongest predictor of MCE. This association is consistent with what the researchers expected. When council members trust and respect each other, when they openly communicate, when they can disagree but not take it personally, when they perceive low risk and are willing to own their views, they also perceive themselves as a well-functioning group. The same positive association holds for perceived facilitative leadership, although this relationship is not quite as strong. When the mayor demonstrates fairness, integrity in running meetings, and focuses the council's attention on specific issues, the council sees itself as an effective group. These

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findings provide insight where to target interventions to improve council performance. However, there were also some unexpected outcomes.

Perceived of staff effectiveness is not found to associate significantly with MCE. The authors have no clear answer for this finding but can offer several plausible explanations. First, it is conceivable that within-group perceived effectiveness on a council is in fact a separate function from how well council members perceive themselves as working with their staff. Conversely, a council may perceive its staff as effective yet perceive itself as dysfunctional. These patterns may be rare but they can exist. This may explain why the association between MCE and perceptions of staff competence is low.

Alternatively, perceptions of staff competence may be measured incorrectly. There may be elements influencing council member perceptions toward staff that were not captured in the measures, but are important regarding council member opinions of staff competence. Councils, regardless of their own MCE score, rate their staff as highly effective 85 to 90 percent of the time. Finally, because staff members are rated universally high, there is very little variation in this index resulting in a rather low correlation with MCE do to restriction of range of the predictor (staff effectiveness).

The second unexpected outcome involves the conflict index. Intuitively, effective councils should display low conflict because high conflict increases the chances for dysfunction. Although the conflict relationship is in the hypothesized direction, it is not significant. The measure of conflict stresses substantive differences over issues and/or policy and the possibility of personality discord, which according to Brown (1983) are the two primary sources of within-group conflict. It could be that council members assume that conflict is normal, and hence,

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perceptions of conflict are not that troublesome to group effectiveness. Nonetheless, conflict may be measured incorrectly. By analyzing the responses to the conflict variables, some insight for understanding this unexpected finding can be gained. Council members in the sample do not perceive very much policy or personality conflict within their groups and believe that the super-majority of decisions reflect group consensus. This pattern holds for councils regardless of their MCE score, again suggesting that the restriction in the range of the predictor may be too small to serve as a useful explanatory variable.

In summary, the initial review of the data tends to support two major assumptions connected with municipal council effectiveness. Functional councils associate closely with regenerative interpersonal relationships defined as high trust, open communication, low risk, and high owning of members standing up for what they believe (Golembiewski 1977). Functional councils also benefit from facilitative leaders who run meetings with integrity and serve as brokers and linkages to professional staff (Svara 1990; 1994; 2009). Yet the model did not hold up on the variables of perceptions of staff effectiveness or perceived conflict. The authors believe that this study provides a preliminary understanding of municipal council behavior as a small group and that more research and focus needs to be pursued before definitive behaviors are validated.

Understanding how municipal councils behave will continue to be a major strategic question facing academic researchers and administrative practitioners alike, given the centrality of councils to the democratic system of local government in the U.S. How well these councils function in the future, especially in the turbulent environments they must operate in, is likely to influence the quality of future government services. The time has come for better

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comprehending the municipal councils that are at the center of the administrator's professional

life.

Author Biographies

Kimberly L. Nelson is an assistant professor in the Division of Public Administration at Northern Illinois University. Her work has appeared in a number of publications including *Urban Affairs Review* and *The American Review of Public Administration*. She conducts research in local form of government, local government management, and innovation.

Gerald T. Gabris is a distinguished teaching professor in the Division of Public Administration at Northern Illinois University. He has published over 60 journal articles and book chapters on topics involving organization development, leadership, local government administration, and human resources management. Dr. Gabris has consulted widely in government involving strategic planning, team building, organization design, conflict management, compensation, and performance appraisal.

Trenton J. Davis is Assistant Professor of Political Science and Director of the Master of Public Administration (MPA) Program at Georgia Southern University. His primary focus of research involves organizational change, employee motivation, small group behavior, and compensation systems at the local government level.

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[1] The survey is available from the authors upon request.

[2] Index items and descriptive statistics are available from the authors upon request.