

The Secret to Compromise: Learning to Read Others

by Otis White

[Editor's Note: Planners commissioners are often considered community leaders. But just what skills does it take to be a "community leader"? I invite you to read the following column — the first in a series by Otis White on community leadership]

You've thought hard about an important issue dividing your commission, and you have a reasonable compromise. But when you announce it, nothing happens. The other commissioners listen politely, then return to bickering.

What happened?

You've just learned the first law of community leadership: To reason with people, you must understand — and deal with — what motivates them. Put another way, until you satisfy their instincts, you're not likely to reach their intellect.

This is why the best civic leaders — those who consistently find creative solutions and win support for them — spend so much time studying others' motivations. It's the key to getting people to work together.

The same applies to planning commissions. The most respected commissioners are those who can create compromises others will agree to. And the chief skill of compromise is the ability to read your fellow commissioners.

How do you do that?

Start by studying your fellow commissioners with these questions in mind:

- *Why did they accept this job?* Nearly everyone who comes to an unpaid public position does so, in large part, out of civic patriotism. But there are usually other, more personal reasons for public service, and these are the ones you must look for.

Here's why. Public-spiritedness is a good initiator of involvement, but it's not a good sustainer. Public service is such hard work, if you don't find something in it besides service to others, you burn out. To understand why people stay in public life, you must look for the things that sustain them.

I'll suggest a few: A real estate broker might serve on a planning commission to enhance his credentials. An attorney might

be there as a way of promoting his law practice. A business person may seek the job to launch her political career.

If you understand these hidden motivations, you'll see why your compromise was ignored by the others. It didn't satisfy any of their reasons for being on the commission.

- *What's their reward for service?* Understanding motivations is important, but you must also find the things that satisfy those motivations.

Take the business person who wants to enter politics. Her reward is drawing favorable attention to herself. A smart strategy might have been to let her announce the compromise rather than you. You'd have won her vote and given her the thing she most cherished: center stage.

Every commissioner has a reward he or she seeks. The most common is recognition. So consulting the attorney on an aspect of your compromise — then praising his contribution in public — might have added a third vote.

- *What jobs do they want next?* This can be important in a major dispute. It will tell you who can be swayed and who can't. Generally, people who are seeking another position will compromise before those who aren't. The reason: They have something to lose by digging their heels in.

Sometimes the job isn't in the public

sector. Commissioners who are serving as a favor for someone else may have their eye on a business position when their term is ended. If part of the compromise can be tailored to make them look good to their future employers, you may have your fourth vote.

- *What role are they best suited for?* In recent years, team building has become more important in corporations, and there has been much research into what makes effective teams. Planning commissions aren't teams, of course, but if you want to be a leader, you should know some of the principles of team building.

The most important: The best teams are carefully balanced between the impatient and the detail-oriented, the creative and the cautious, the calculating and the cheerleaders. In other words, productive teams need a balance of personalities.

If you're the commission chair — or simply the one who creates compromises — you should know what roles your fellow commissioners like to play and offer them suitable parts. If a commissioner is impatient, don't ask her to wade through details. If he's a cheerleader, don't depend on him to be calculating.

By their nature, leaders have to be both calculating and a little manipulative. But they're vitally important to political bodies and communities, and all too rare. If your commission isn't accomplishing much or finds itself divided, it's awaiting a leader. And it could be you. ♦

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