

Ten Traits of an Effective Councilmember

January 2, 2018 by [Jon Mutchler](#)

Category: [Legislative Body](#), [Administrative and Elected Officials](#)



More than books, classes, videos, and seminars (as vital as they are), it's been the critical and thoughtful observation of others that has helped me mature the most in my professional life as a public servant. Some are mentors and others are just people I've admired from a distance.

Following eight years of serving the citizens of Ferndale, including six years as a city councilmember and two as mayor, I've observed ten traits that define truly effective councilmembers.

Here they are.

Self-care

Council work is uniquely difficult and it is easy for elected officials to neglect themselves physically, emotionally, relationally. Public life can be taxing and one can't be effective and make good community decisions when self-care is absent. Sure, you want to take care of your city: take care of yourself first!

Know-it-alls (NOT!)

There is an ego boost when elected that brings a misguided sense of "I should know it all." Well, we don't, and six of the smartest words an elected official can use are: "I don't understand, can you help?" We call it teachability, openness, and a willingness to learn.

A good councilmember studies, listens, and is willing to have preconceived ideas challenged. He's open to staff, the public, even that councilmember he dislikes! He recognizes his own biases, prejudices, and values.

Smooth talker

An effective councilmember communicates intelligently, articulately, and thoughtfully. She's able to persuade and change opinions without bullying or manipulating. She builds consensus and pulls a council together. She shows her colleagues that she understands the issues and is able to logically explain how her decisions are made.

R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

More than “just a little bit,” an effective councilmember is respectful, polite, and deferential toward all: to fellow councilmembers, staff, and the public—regardless of likes, dislikes, friendships, politics. He doesn’t insult, attack, or demand.

Good loser

Our true character emerges when things don’t go our way. An effective public servant is emotionally and relationally mature and shows it when losing. She stays calm when a vote goes the ‘wrong’ way. She respects voters and the process, even when she is on the minority side of a heartfelt issue. She remains statesmanlike in defeat.

“Do you swear?”

An effective councilmember puts the law, code, and citizens first, regardless of personal benefit or bias. He chooses to set aside preconceived ideas and personal likes/dislikes, and he consistently achieves the highest level of adherence to his oath of office. He respects state law, city bylaws, council rules, and parliamentary procedures. He knows when to recuse himself from the process to protect his integrity and that of the council.

Pitchforks and torches

A good councilmember emerges when she votes for something she knows is in the best interests of the city while public outcry demands the opposite. Some of the most important decisions an elected official makes may be counter to a barrage of angry emails and public comment.

A good councilmember also recognizes that an angry mob does not necessarily reflect the view of a quiet majority. She knows that a flood of emails does not necessarily confirm public opinion in general and makes her decisions based on merit, not emotion.

Separation of powers

An effective councilmember respects the role and function of the public, city staff, and the city’s executive. Most council/mayor/staff problems occur when those boundaries are not honored. He knows the limits to his authority (for more on this, see the current [Mayor & Councilmember Handbook](#)).

High personal standards of character and ethics

An effective councilmember doesn’t embarrass fellow colleagues with inappropriate conduct or activities. She exercises personal self-discipline to never bring dishonor to her office.

Picks up the phone

He responds to citizens politely and promptly and remembers that “they” are the boss. He values their contributions, comments, and concerns and responds accordingly.

Questions? Comments?

If you have questions about this topic or other local government issues, please use our [Ask MRSC form](#) or call us at (206) 625-1300 or (800) 933-6772. If you have questions or comments about this blog post, please email the [MRSC Insight Editors](#).

MRSC is a private nonprofit organization serving local governments in Washington State. Eligible government agencies in Washington State may use our free, one-on-one [Ask MRSC service](#) to get answers to legal, policy, or financial questions.



About Jon Mutchler

Jon Mutchler currently serves as the Mayor of Ferndale, an office he has held since January, 2016. As mayor, Jon is responsible for providing direction in the development of the annual city budget; supporting the City Council and keeping it advised of city needs and activities; coordinating efforts between the city and other entities; educating/informing the public on city issues, affairs, and programs; representing the city on various boards and committees; managing city contracts for special services; and supervising the efforts of city departments.

Prior to serving as mayor, Jon was elected to the Ferndale City Council in 2009 and reelected in 2013. Jon was also elected to and served on the 2015 Whatcom County Charter Review Commission. Jon is a WWU graduate, a local pastor, and professional pianist, and the father of seven.

The views expressed in guest columns represent the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of MRSC.

[VIEW ALL POSTS BY JON MUTCHLER](#) ▶