Building a Constructive Partnership Between Board and Administrator

Eric Walcott, Government and Community Vitality Specialist

A constructive partnership between a county commission and the county administrator (or department heads in counties without an administrator) is an essential factor to an effective county government. Effective county governments are key to supporting a thriving community. If the board of commissioners and administrator do not have a productive relationship, the work of the whole county suffers, and its residents are worse off. Without a strong relationship between the board and administrator, the county will not likely fulfill the mission it set and meet the needs of its residents.

The focus of this article is on core principles of constructive partnerships between administrators and board members, common obstacles, and practices that support effective governance. While this article will reference various resources that discuss common problems that disrupt a productive governing body and identify practices that support effective governance and productive partnerships, it uses the MSU Extension Components of Extraordinary Governance as the foundation. The focus here will be on how roles are defined and how administrators and board members build productive relationships and avoid some common obstacles.

Core Principles That Are the Foundation of a Constructive Partnership

The phrase constructive partnership comes from the MSU Extension *Components of Extraordinary Governance*. One of the components is "A constructive partnership between board and staff with clearly defined roles." In this case, we use staff to refer to the county administrator, though the discussion extends to department heads and other county staff as well.

Based on research and on observations of county government in Michigan[1], here are key principles that are the foundation of a constructive partnership. Regardless of the local specifics of defined roles and what the partnership looks like, these are elements that support such a partnership:

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[1] Amrhein, J. (2014). *Components of extraordinary governance: Background and development*. Michigan State University Extension.
Neu, C.H., Jr. (2003) *10 Habits of Highly-Effective Governing Bodies*
Stenberg, C. W. (2015). County and City Managers. In *County and Municipal Government in North Carolina* (pp. 53–77). UNC School of Government.

Collaborative Approach: Productive relationships start with the assumption that the board and administrator are working together towards common goals. This encourages curiosity rather than judgement, honesty and openness towards collaborative problem solving, and engagement in decision-making processes that align with defined roles.

Trust and Respect: The board and administrator should work to cultivate a relationship built on trust and respect. This will enable open dialogue and effective collaboration.

Effective and Consistent Communication: Regular communication keeps everyone on the same page, ensuring that commissioners have the information they need to fulfill their roles, and that administrators understand commissioners' priorities individually and collectively.

Common Obstacles to Constructive Partnerships

Some behaviors frequently get in the way of the elements listed above. These are based on research[2] and on observations of county government in Michigan

Overstepping boundaries erodes respect and creates tension between commissioners and administrators, as well as often complicating the work of department heads and staff.

Pursuing personal agendas above common goals and public good damages trust in the decision-making process. This includes Conflicts between personal political goals and community priorities that can limit the ability of everyone to pursue common goals.

Disengaging or showing up unprepared to meetings limit meaningful discussion and decision-making. Those who are disengaged may also miss opportunities to develop shared understanding with other board members or the administrator and staff on key priorities.

Making assumptions rather than communicating leads to misunderstanding, misaligned goals, and disrupts effective communication.

Micromanaging prevents the administrator from leading departments effectively, undermining a collaborative approach.

Practices That Support Constructive Partnerships

In many Michigan counties, administrators and commissioners have very productive relationships. This does not mean the work is easy or that they always agree, but that they work together to maintain a trusting, communicative, and collaborative partnership that enables each to carry out their responsibilities. Here are some practices identified in group interviews with County Administrators in Michigan that support these effective partnerships:

Communicating early and often is vital to having effective communication and can help build trust between commissioners and the administrator. Bringing up a question or potentially controversial topic sooner can help navigate complex issues and avoid surprises.

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[2] Nelson, K. L., & Stenberg, C. W. (2017). *Managing Local Government: An essential guide for municipal and county managers*. CQ Press.

Getting to know the commissioners can help each other better understand the perspectives and approaches everyone brings to the table.

Addressing commissioners concerns directly builds trust and an environment where commissioners will continue to bring concerns forward.

Building boundaries throughout the organization helps a county clearly define the roles at the commission level and prevents micromanaging.

Some of the practices identified deal specifically with ensuring productive interactions between commissioners and departments or staff. One common theme is clear lines of communication. Clear understanding of boundaries and practices in this area is essential because some departments are led by elected officials and not directly managed by the administrator. The elected officials (Sheriff, Clerk, Register of Deeds, etc.) and commissioners are co-employers of the staff in these departments, so extra care must be given to these interactions.

Through decades of partnering with Michigan counties, MSU Extension has observed the following common practices related to interactions between commissioners and departments and staff:

- Including the administrator in all communications between commissioners and departments
- Having departments report to administrators on communication with commissioners.
- Maintaining consistent messaging with department heads and informing the department head prior to communicating with a commissioner regarding the department.

Defininig Roles and Boundaries

There are a variety of ways administrators and the board of commissioners may choose to define their roles and the commitments each make to maintaining a constructive partnership.

Most counties have some standards outlined in their board bylaws and policies. A good practice to review these annually, or at least when there is turnover (whether of board members or a new administrator) to ensure everyone is familiar with them and discuss whether updates need to be made.

Many counties conduct orientation for new commissioners, or for the commission as a whole at the start of a new term. This is a prime opportunity to ensure everyone is aware of policies and practices. It is also a chance to begin the practice of open communication and trust building. This orientation can be used to build personal connections and begin to better understand each other. Some administrators also build on this with regular one-on-one meetings with commissioners as the foundation of those connections.

Other forms of officially establishing guidelines for the board-administrator relationship include agreeing to a contract or set of commitments. This could be done through individual agreement, or a board resolution committing to a set of practices. Where state statute defines the boundaries, corporation counsel may offer guidance. A sample of one of these agreements is below for counties to use as a starting point with questions for discussion.

Throughout the partnership, it is essential that the board and administrator hold each other mutually accountable to the agreed practices. On the administrator side, regular reports on the board's priorities demonstrate accountability and keeps the board up to date on issues they care about. For the board, the board chair (and other members) should reinforce productive practices among the commissioners. Collectively, regular review and evaluation of the partnership can ensure that trust is maintained, and a constructive partnership continues.

Sample Governing Commitments for Administrators and Commissioners with Discussion Questions

Cultivate Trust and Respect - Build and maintain a relationship founded on mutual trust and respect.

- **Questions**:

    1. What specific actions can we take to build and maintain trust between the board and the administrator?

    2. How do we demonstrate respect in our regular interactions and decision-making processes?

Adopt a Collaborative Approach - Work together towards common goals with curiosity, honesty, and openness, fostering a culture of collaborative problem-solving.

- **Questions**:

    1. What are our shared goals, and how can we work together to achieve them?

    2. What processes can we implement to ensure decisions reflect the county's priorities?

Hold Each Other Accountable - Maintain mutual accountability to agreed practices and standards, with regular evaluations to ensure the partnership remains productive and trustworthy.

- **Questions**:

    1. What will it look like to hold each other accountable?

    2. How often should we evaluate our partnership to ensure it remains productive and trustworthy?

Ensure Effective and Consistent Communication - Maintain regular and transparent communication to keep everyone informed and aligned with the county's priorities and goals.

- **Questions**:

    1. What communication channels should we use to ensure all parties are informed and aligned?

    2. What regular updates does the board need from the administrator or departments?

Promote Active Engagement and Preparedness - Encourage active participation and preparedness for meetings to facilitate meaningful discussions and informed decision-making.

- **Questions**:

    1. What strategies can we use to encourage active participation from all members?

    2. How can we ensure that everyone is prepared for meetings and discussions?

    3. What are the potential consequences of disengagement, and how can we mitigate them?

Address Concerns Directly and Constructively - Tackle issues head-on with a constructive approach, ensuring concerns are addressed promptly and effectively.

- **Questions**:

    1. What does follow up on concerns that have been raised look like?

    2. How can we ensure that concerns are handled in a constructive manner?

Establish Formal Lines of Communication - Develop and adhere to formal communication protocols between commissioners, administrators, departments, and the public to ensure clarity and consistency.

- **Questions**:

    1. What formal communication protocols should we establish between commissioners, administrators, departments, and the public?

    2. What should be the role of the administrator in communications between commissioners and departments or staff?

Respect Defined Roles and Boundaries - Clearly define and respect the roles and boundaries of commissioners and administrators to prevent overstepping and ensure smooth operations.

- **Questions**:

    1. What are the specific roles and responsibilities of commissioners and the administrator?

    2. What processes do we need to have in place to support these roles and boundaries?

Regularly Review and Update Governing Documents - Conduct periodic reviews of bylaws, policies, and other governing documents to ensure they remain relevant and effective.

- **Questions**:

    1. How often should we review our bylaws, policies, and other governing documents?

    2. What criteria should we use to determine if updates are needed?

    3. How can we ensure that all members are familiar with and adhere to these documents?

Resources:

"How are we doing?" Evaluating the performance of the chief administrator. Center for Public Leadership and Governance. https://cplg.sog.unc.edu/publication/how-are-we-doing-evaluating-the-performance-of-the-chief-administrator/

Communicating effectively with elected officials. ICMA https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/communicating-effectively-elected-officials