

Navigating the Mayor/Manager Dynamic: Leadership in Action

City of Lone Tree:

Mayor Marissa Harmon

City Manager Seth Hoffman

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Hey, Dad!

Seth Hoffman, above, 22-month-old son of Mayor Rodney Hoffman, tries to catch his father's attention during 4th of July celebrations Wednesday at Stevens Park. Dad is a bit preoccupied, however, as he delivers the Declaration of Independence to the crowd gathered in downtown Garden City, right.

Don Bigler



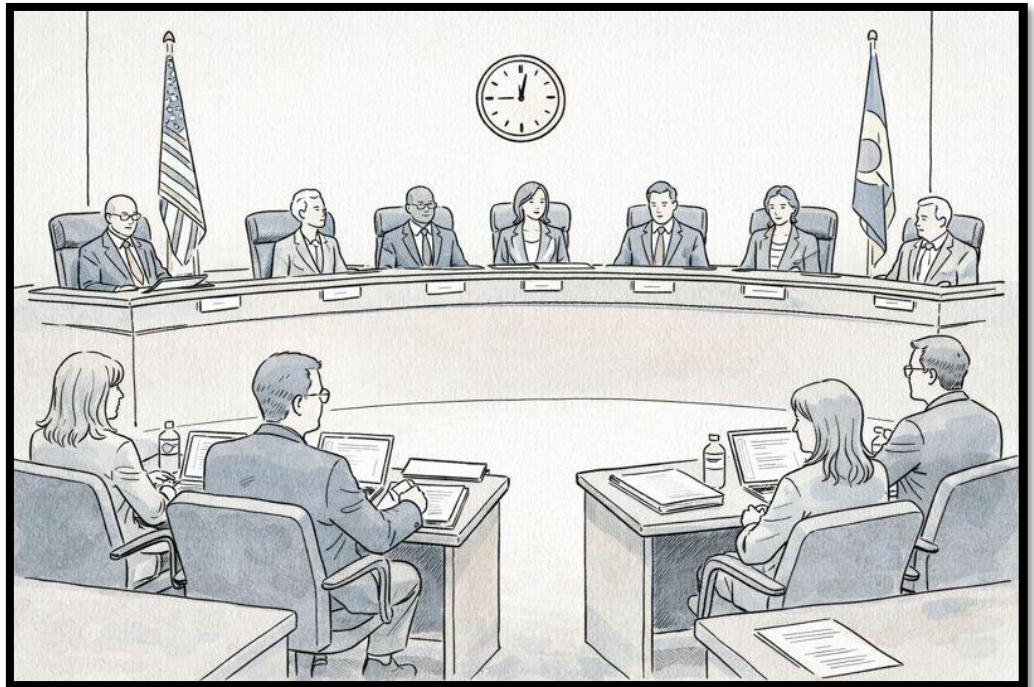
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Why this session?

- The mayor-manager relationship is the hinge on which council-manager government swings
- When it works: seamless governance, clear accountability, community trust
- When it fails: paralysis, infighting, staff turnover, public cynicism
- Today: practical tools for navigating the gray zones



Who needs a City Manager, anyway?

Professional administration - Policy, finance, operations, risk, and personnel handled by someone trained to manage all five at once

Continuity - Elections change leadership; the organization still has to function every day

Clear accountability - One person responsible for execution when policy is set

Institutional memory - What's been tried, what failed, what worked - and why

Boundary protection - Shielding staff from political pressure and elected officials from operational entanglement

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The Professional City Manager

Professional Organizations

- ICMA - International City/County Management Association
- CCCMA - Colorado City & County Management Association

ICMA Code of Ethics – Adopted in 1924

- Integrity in all relationships
- Submit policy proposals & provide advice
- Respect Council decisions
- Political neutrality
- Commitment to Community



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What your Charter (probably) says...

- Establishes a council–manager form of government
- Separates policy direction from day-to-day administration
- Assigns:
 - Political authority to the Council (including the Mayor)
 - Administrative responsibility to the City Manager
 - Draws a line between elected officials and staff direction

What your Charter (definitely) doesn't say...

- Define how the mayor and manager work together day to day
- Explain how disagreements between mayor and manager are resolved
- Specify who speaks when controversy erupts
- Clarify how much operational detail the mayor should receive
- Draw a clean line between inquiry and interference
- Describe what “ceremonial head of the City” means in practice

“The Mayor shall also perform such other duties as may be provided by ordinance which are not inconsistent with the provisions of this Charter.”

— Article II, Section 8

“Perform such other duties as may be prescribed by this Charter or required of the City Manager by the Council not inconsistent with this Charter.”

— Article VI, Section 3

Where the Charter Stops, and Partnership Begins...

- Most failures occur in the gray space, not because the Charter was violated
- Leadership behavior determines whether the system functions or fractures
- This is where trust, discipline, and judgment matter most



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4th of July!

Staff selected a local country band for the city's Independence Day celebration. The mayor's neighbor—who donated to her campaign—leads a competing band and calls the mayor asking why they weren't chosen.

1. Mayor calls Parks Director and says, “Please reconsider...”
2. Mayor tells neighbor she'll ‘look into it’, then does nothing
3. Mayor explains to neighbor that staff makes operational decisions, offers to connect them with Parks for future opportunities, and informs Manager of the conversation

Please don't do this...

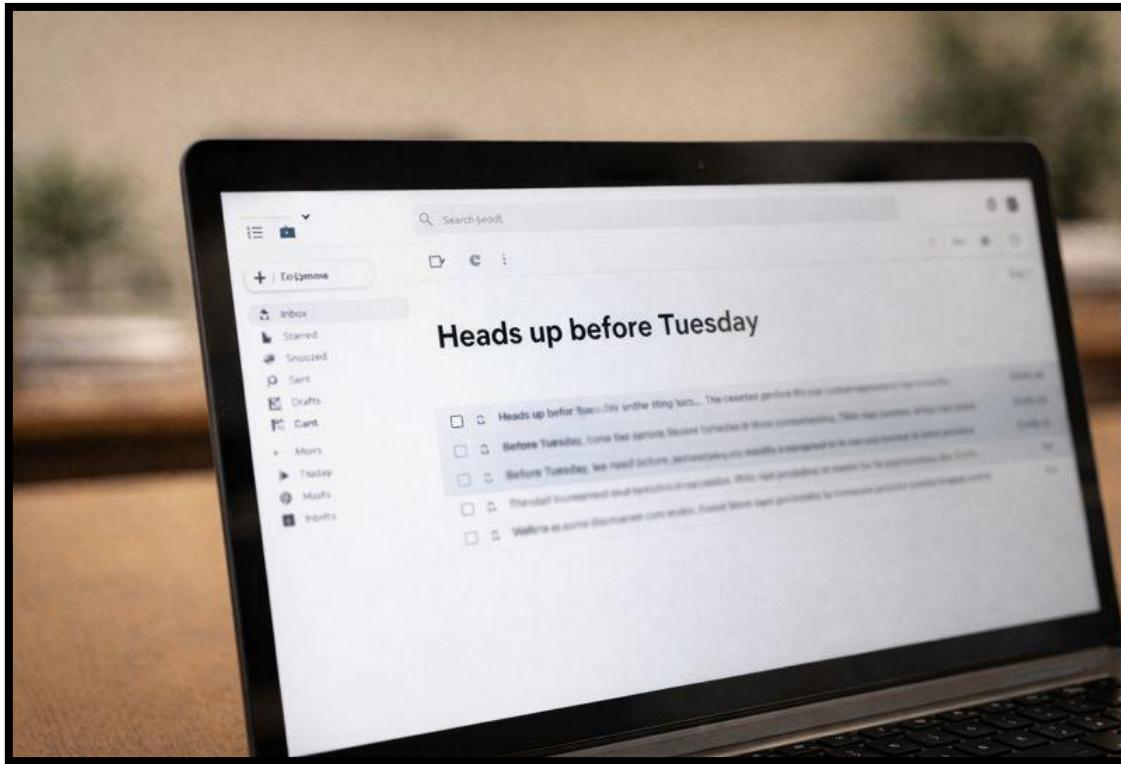
Things Mayors Hate

1. Surprises
2. Getting calls they weren't prepared for. (Aka, surprises)
3. Mayors don't let Mayors Nextdoor
4. "The Charter won't allow it" as a conversation-ender
5. Being asked "Why don't we have a Trader Joe's?"

Things Managers Hate

1. Politics
2. Surprises
3. Urgency without prioritization
4. Being asked to bend rules 'just this once'
5. Learning political reality too late

Mayor-Manager Reality Check



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Charter, Leadership, Failure

Charter Baseline	Leadership Practice	Common Failure Modes
All powers vested in the City Council	Mayor functions as convener and directional leader	Mayor assumes unilateral authority; manager politicized
Mayor presides; ceremonial head; one vote	Influence through persuasion and agenda shaping	Confusion about gives direction, which to listen to
Manager administers all City affairs	Interprets policy intent; manages execution risk	Seen as blocking rather than advising
Manager serves in an advisory capacity	Frames options, timing, and tradeoffs	Advice becomes advocacy; trust erodes

Charter, Leadership, Failure

Mayor/Council do not direct staff	Boundaries enforced through discipline	End-runs to staff; staff whiplash
Interaction goes through City Manager	Filters and translates politics to operations	Staff triangulation
Emergency authority shared	Coordinated crisis leadership	Crisis posture never resets
Charter silent on working relationship	Norms and expectations fill the gap	Unspoken assumptions harden into conflict

Weekly Discipline

- Standing check-in with protected time
- Focus on what's coming, not routine updates, not just the Council agenda
- Purpose: surface issues before they become crises

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How you show up together:

- No public surprises — contentious items discussed privately first
- Unified front — disagree in private, support in public, or change the decision
- Clear channels — staff can answer questions; only the manager gives direction

The New Councilmember

A newly elected councilmember, eager to deliver results, starts emailing department heads directly with constituent requests and cc'ing the constituents to show responsiveness.

1. Manager ignores it, hopes it will stop.
2. Manager sends a reply-all message, citing the charter
3. Mayor has a private conversation explaining protocol, manager meets with new councilmember to talk about partnership

Lessons from the Manager's Chair

- Transparency is not optional
- Authority without trust is brittle
- Political mistakes are harder to fix than schedule delays

Lessons from the Mayor's Perspective

- You hire, evaluate, and fire — you don't supervise
- Questions have weight
- Public criticism of your manager damages the institution

Maybe Someday...



Thank You!



Marissa.Harmon@cityoflonetree.com

303-503-1621

Seth.Hoffman@cityoflonetree.com

303-301-5044



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