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Author(s): Wallace S. Sayre

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# The General Manager Idea for Large Cities

By WALLACE S. SAYRE

*Professor of Public Administration  
Columbia University*

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A NEW managerial idea is taking hold in the large cities of the United States. This idea is that the administration of large city governments requires general managerial direction and that this requirement can best be met by establishing under the mayor a general manager who will, in greater or less degree, be the city government's second in administrative command. The general manager plan thus builds upon the strong-mayor tradition as the most widespread form of city government in the United States. By marrying the manager idea with the idea of the elected chief executive, the general manager plan preserves the office of mayor as the center of political leadership and responsibility. In large cities this center is widely regarded as indispensable to effective government.

The general manager plan may be regarded either as a competitor of the council manager idea or as a more mature form of the manager idea, reflecting the judgment in the large cities that the council manager plan represents an unnecessary surrender of the values of leadership and accountability found in the institution of the elected chief executive. The general manager or mayor manager plan, its proponents emphasize, captures the advantages of the council manager plan without the risks of abandoning the elected chief executive. An effective manager, they believe, is no less likely to be chosen by a mayor than by a city council.

The council manager plan has not found acceptance in the large cities of the United States. Cincinnati, the largest city using the plan, has a population of a half million. Of the seventeen other cities having a population of a half

NOTE: This article is based upon a panel paper presented at the annual meeting, American Political Science Association, September, 1954.

million or more, only one city—Cleveland—has ever adopted the plan, and it was abandoned there more than twenty years ago. In the last decade (perhaps even longer), no large city has given serious consideration to the adoption of the council manager plan.

The literature of the council manager movement does not provide an answer to the question: why has the plan failed to find support in large cities? In fact, the literature does not tell us much about the ecology of the council manager plan in adoptions and operations. Why, for example, are half of all the council manager cities to be found in six states (California, Florida, Maine, Michigan, Texas, and Virginia)? Does the council manager plan find acceptance primarily in particular social, economic, and political environments? Does it, for example, find greatest acceptance and operate most successfully in one-party or in "non-partisan" constituencies? Is the affinity between the council manager plan and small and middle-sized cities the result of the plan's suitability for the management of the particular governmental problems to be found in cities of such size? Is the council manager plan particularly attractive to cities which are growing rapidly in size or to those which are declining in population and resources? To these and other questions about the council manager plan we do not yet have the answers.<sup>1</sup>

## *The Large Cities Turn toward the Mayor Manager Plan*

EIGHT large cities (Boston, Los Angeles, Louisville, Newark, New Orleans, New

<sup>1</sup> For a program of research in this field, see "Party and Administrative Responsibility: Council-Manager Government," in Interuniversity Summer Seminar on Political Behavior, Social Science Research Council, "Research in Political Behavior," 46 *American Political Science Review* 1009-15 (December, 1952).

York City, Philadelphia, and San Francisco) have now established some kind of general managerial assistance for the mayor. In two others (Chicago and Detroit) proposals for such general managerial arrangements have been made.

This new managerial trend in large cities has not resulted from an organized effort by municipal reformers with a symmetrical design for the improvement of city government. In fact, this new form of the manager idea in city government has not yet acquired a distinctive label. Some observers call it the mayor manager plan, to emphasize its contrast with the council manager plan; others call it the mayor administrator plan; and still others name it the general manager plan.

The general manager idea for cities began its governmental history in San Francisco in 1932, when charter revision movement established the office of chief administrative officer. This office represented a compromise solution between those who urged a council manager form and those who supported the retention of the strong mayor form. The plan was not widely noticed, but it has prevailed to the general satisfaction of the electorate. In 1938 New York City's new charter established the office of deputy mayor, an office which developed more as a center of legislative and political assistance to the mayor than as a center of managerial aid. In 1941, Lent D. Upson proposed a general manager under the mayor for the city of Detroit, but the proposal was not accepted. In 1948, Louisville began a related experiment with the appointment of a city consultant-administrator who serves as general managerial assistant to the mayor. In 1951, Los Angeles established a city administrative officer. In the same year, Philadelphia's new charter took a long step forward in developing the general manager idea by establishing the office of managing director with substantial powers. In 1953, New Orleans adopted a new charter which established the office of chief administrative officer, with powers similar to but greater than those of Philadelphia's managing director. In the same year, Boston established a director of administrative services and Newark adopted a new charter which established the office of business administrator under the mayor, the option under the New Jersey

statutes closest to the general manager idea. In 1954, New York City established the office of city administrator, with Luther Gulick the first incumbent. And in September, 1954, the staff report to the Chicago Charter Revision Commission recommended the adoption of the general manager plan for that city.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the experiment begun in San Francisco over twenty years ago has captured civic interest and has led to official action in an impressive portion of the large cities. Why has this happened? Several explanations may be suggested:

1. The council manager plan had proved to be unacceptable in large city environments, but the values of the managerial idea were still sought in some more attractive structural form.
2. The office of mayor—an elected chief executive who is the center of energy and of public leadership and the focus of responsibility for policy and performance—had become too important an asset in large cities to be exchanged for the speculative values of legislative supremacy and a city manager as represented in the council manager plan.
3. The mayor manager plan fits comfortably and easily into the American political system: it preserves the elected chief executive; it keeps the mayoralty as the focus of the party battle; it emphasizes the values of integration, hierarchy, and professional management, all made familiar doctrine by a half-century of adminis-

<sup>2</sup>Accounts of these developments are scattered and fragmentary. In addition to the charters of the several cities, see Richard S. Childs, *Appointive Municipal Administrators under Mayors; A Review of the Precedents* (Citizens Union Research Foundation, Inc., 5 Beekman St., New York City 38, 1953), 10 pp.; Boston Municipal Research Bureau, *Highlights of the Reorganization Ordinance* (Bulletin No. 180, Dec. 29, 1953); Charles P. Farnsley, "Louisville's Mayor-Administrator Plan," 68 *American City* 116-17 (Jan., 1953); Bert W. Levit, "San Francisco's Unique Charter," 34 *National Municipal Review* 273-77, 286 (June, 1945); Los Angeles Commission for Reorganization of the City Government, *Final Report* (April, 1953), 21 pp.; Temporary State Commission to Study the Organizational Structure of the Government of the City of New York, *Four Steps to Better Government of New York City: A Plan for Action*, Part 1 (Sept. 28, 1953), 136 pp.; Part 2 (Feb. 1, 1954), 102 pp. Charlton F. Chute prepared a useful survey of these developments, "Modern Ideas on Administrative Assistants for the Mayor in Large American Cities," for the Chicago Charter Revision Commission which will be summarized in a forthcoming report of that commission.

trative reorganizations in national, state, and municipal governments and by the doctrine of the council manager movement itself.

*Emerging Elements of the  
General Manager Idea*

THE idea of a general manager serving under the mayor has not been a pre-packaged solution developed as finished doctrine by municipal reformers. Rather, its evolution has been experimental, each application being worked out in relation to local experience and governmental conditions, and varying with the boldness or caution of local leadership. There are several discernible trends in the successive adoptions, however. These can be briefly stated as follows:

1. The general manager is increasingly made more clearly the managerial agent of the mayor, "The mayor's man." In San Francisco in 1932 the manager was made virtually irremovable, but under 1953-54 provisions in New Orleans and New York City the manager holds office at the pleasure of the mayor.

2. As the manager is made more responsible to the mayor, he tends to be given more power—to approach more nearly the status of second in administrative command. In New Orleans and Philadelphia, the cities which represent the most full-bodied application of the general manager idea, the manager is given, for example, the power to appoint and remove the heads of most of the city departments with the approval of the mayor.

3. There is a continued ambivalence in deciding whether the general manager's authority and responsibility should center upon the "staff" or upon the "line" agencies and activities of the city government.

In almost every instance the manager is given primary responsibility for administrative planning and for other organization and methods work. In Los Angeles and New Orleans he has responsibility for budget preparation and execution; in Philadelphia and New York these activities are not under the manager's jurisdiction. In no city does the manager directly supervise the personnel agency. In New Orleans, New York, and Philadelphia the "line" agencies are the manager's

major responsibility. The two extremes are represented by Los Angeles, where the manager's responsibilities are focused upon the management functions (except personnel), and by Philadelphia, where the manager's powers are centered upon the "line" agencies.

4. There is some tendency to create a new and smaller cabinet institution under the mayor, consisting of the general manager and the heads of the "staff" agencies. This is particularly the case in Philadelphia and New York. The heads of the "line" agencies, when they function as a cabinet (as they do in Philadelphia), do so in a meeting presided over by the manager.

*Variations in the Office and Powers of the  
General Manager in Five Large Cities*

THE variety as well as the trends in the development of the general manager idea in the large cities of the United States may perhaps best be seen through a more specific description of the office and the powers conferred upon it in Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia, and San Francisco.

*Title:* In San Francisco and New Orleans the manager is called chief administrative officer; in Los Angeles, city administrative officer; in Philadelphia, managing director; in New York, city administrator.

*Appointment:* In every instance, the manager is appointed by the mayor. Only in Los Angeles is council approval required.

*Term:* In San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and New York, no term is specified. In Philadelphia the term of the manager is four years, corresponding to the term of the mayor appointing him.

*Removal:* In New Orleans and New York the mayor may remove the manager. In Los Angeles, the mayor may remove the manager, but the approval of the council is required. In Philadelphia the mayor must prefer charges; the manager may appeal his removal to the Civil Service Commission which may award him compensation but may not restore him. In San Francisco the mayor may not remove; the manager is subject to recall in an election, or the legislative body may remove him by a two-thirds vote. In Los Angeles and New Orleans the council may also remove the man-

ager—in Los Angeles by a two-thirds vote and in New Orleans by a majority vote of all members.

*Powers of the Manager:* The powers of the managers may be described in three categories: (1) the power to appoint and remove heads of city agencies; (2) the power to supervise city administrative operations; (3) the power to provide general advice and assistance to the mayor.

1. *To appoint and remove heads of agencies:* In Philadelphia, New Orleans, and San Francisco, the managers appoint and remove the heads of specified city departments and agencies. In San Francisco the manager does not need the mayor's approval for such appointments or removals; in Philadelphia and New Orleans the mayor's approval is required. In New Orleans the manager's power to appoint and remove extends to the heads of all but two city departments (law and civil service); in Philadelphia it includes all but finance, law, and personnel. In neither of these two cities does the power to appoint and remove include members of boards or commissions. In San Francisco, the power extends to departments specified by name in the charter; such departments constitute about half of the city agencies.

In neither Los Angeles nor New York does the manager have the power to appoint or remove heads of departments.

2. *To supervise city administrative operations:* In San Francisco the power of the manager to supervise is confined to the departments specifically assigned to him by the charter. In Los Angeles the manager's opportunities for supervision flow solely from his role as city budget officer. In Philadelphia the manager's power to supervise is largely confined to the departments whose heads he appoints, but some more general supervision flows from his powers to perform the administrative analysis function in all city agencies.

In New Orleans the manager has more general supervisory authority. He supervises not only his own subordinate agencies (which include most of the city agencies), but he also gives "general oversight" to law, civil service, and the City Planning Commission (which are outside his appointing and removal authority), prescribes standards of administrative practice

to be followed by all agencies and boards, prepares and supervises the operating and capital budgets, surveys the organization and procedures of all agencies and boards, and may require reports from any or all of them.

In New York City the city administrator, although lacking any power to appoint or remove, has a broad supervisory assignment. Under the direction of the mayor, he "shall supervise and coordinate the work of all agencies under the jurisdiction of the mayor" except law, investigation, budget, the construction coordinator, and boards, commissions (which include personnel), and authorities. He may convene heads of agencies singly or collectively, procure information and reports, require the keeping of management records, conduct work studies, and establish management standards for most, if not all, city agencies.

3. *The power to provide general advice and assistance to the mayor:* In Philadelphia and New York the manager is under a special obligation to serve as general management adviser to the mayor. In Philadelphia the managing director is required to report periodically to the mayor concerning the affairs of the city government (not merely the affairs of his own departments), and he is authorized to make recommendations on matters concerning the affairs of the whole city government. In New York the city administrator is required to "prepare annual and all such other reports as the mayor shall require," and to "analyze and report to the mayor concerning impending policy decisions affecting the management of the city and the agencies." He is also directed to "maintain liaison with civic and community groups on matters of governmental management."

In both Philadelphia and New York the manager derives special status from cabinet arrangements, established by the charter in Philadelphia and by the mayor's action in New York. In each city there is a small top-level cabinet group meeting weekly with the mayor, in which the manager plays a central role.

The managers in the other three cities have no explicit responsibility to serve as the general adviser to the mayor on management matters. In these cities, the manager's role in this respect is implicit, if it exists at all. In San Francisco it would seem difficult to join such a

role with that of an almost autonomous manager. In New Orleans it would seem to be a logical and natural development. In Los Angeles, it would appear to be a more confined but possible development.

*The Future Course of the  
Mayor Manager Plan*

THE invention and recent growth of the general manager idea in large cities is a product of many influences. Some of these influences would seem to be of reasonably permanent rather than transient character. The larger cities of the United States have developed complex administrative establishments which require strengthened central managerial leadership, direction, and coordination. These cities have also, almost without exception, developed an increasing reliance upon the elected chief executive—a mayor with extensive powers to appoint, to remove, and to direct the heads of administrative agencies—as the main institution of governmental leadership and accountability. The electoral contest for this office has become the primary instrument of popular control of the city government and the main occasion for public education and participation in city affairs. The office of mayor in large cities has, in addition, become more important as a prize in the party battle, its possession one of the significant keys to state and even national party power. It would seem unlikely that any large city would abandon such a governmental and political asset.

But if the institution of the “strong” mayor in large cities has come to stay, then it would also seem that such mayors, no less than the President, need managerial help. The mayor manager idea is a response to this felt need in the large cities. In this sense, the mayor manager plan is in the mainstream of the administrative doctrine heralded by the President’s Committee on Administrative Management in 1937, and reaffirmed by the Hoover Commission’s later studies of the national government. The central idea of these studies, and dozens of their counterparts in the states, has been to strengthen the position of the elected chief executive in his political and administrative leadership.

The mayor manager plan is likely to dominate the course of large city administrative reorganizations for the next several years. The council manager plan is not likely to break into the large city league, because this plan does not represent an accommodation to either the political or the managerial requirements of the large cities. The emergence of the mayor manager plan has breached the monopolistic claim of the council manager plan to the managerial virtues by presenting the new and strong competition of an alternative manager plan.

Not only is the mayor manager plan likely to hold its own and to extend its scope to most of the largest cities, but it is also probable that it will become an attractive solution for many (perhaps most) of the one hundred and five cities with 100,000 population or more. In contrast with the council manager plan, the mayor manager plan is elastic in its formal arrangements, and it can thus respond more easily to local priorities, customs, and personalities. To the strong mayor cities, it offers an evolutionary transition, buttressing rather than discarding the values which have been built up around the leadership of the elected chief executive. To these cities, the mayor manager plan offers the same managerial gains as does the council manager plan, but at much less risk. The strategic and tactical advantages of such an offer in the political world can hardly be exaggerated.

The mayor manager plan will, as it evolves toward its own institutionalization, be confronted with dilemmas which can now be only partially anticipated. The plan may ultimately acquire its own protective guild of practitioners and advocates, transforming it into an inelastic plan unresponsive to the changing needs of the cities. It may be drowned in a few dramatic “failures.”

The mayor manager idea will probably encounter its severest test in the effort to give the manager sufficient power to provide him with adequate leverage to infuse the values of professional management into the administration of a large city government. Philadelphia and New Orleans have made the clearest and strongest effort to insure this result. The Devreux Josephs Commission, in the most complete formulation of the mayor manager plan

(*Four Steps to Better Government of New York City, 1953-54*), proposed still greater strength for the manager while making him also more clearly the mayor's administrative agent. The range of variation in managerial power is wide among the cities using the mayor manager idea. The trend in official action and civic opinion—particularly on the manager's appointing power—is not conclusive, but it seems to run toward the grant of greater managerial leverage.

The mayor manager plan will also encounter, perhaps early in its development, the politics-administration dilemma which increasingly bedevils the council manager plan in operation. Can the general manager be at once both a professional administrator and the mayor's second in administrative command? That is, can he be (with the mayor) the effective maker and protagonist of policy proposals which are certain to be controversial without sacrificing his professional managerial status? This dilemma plagues the council manager plan even more deeply (because council manager doctrine emphasizes council monopoly over policy while practice underscores the necessity for policy leadership by the manager), but this fact provides merely an advantage

rather than a solution for the mayor manager advocates. The trend in mayor manager cities is not yet clear, but the general manager in a large city seems at this stage no more likely to become a career manager in that city than has the city manager in his.

Some observers profess to see in the mayor manager plan merely a compromise step toward the council manager plan. The reverse would seem to be the more likely development, if any such transference is to occur. The essential ingredient of the mayor manager plan is the appointment and removal of the manager by the mayor as the elected chief executive. The distinctive contrasting feature of the council manager plan—the selection of the chief administrator by the city council—was not only something of an historical accident in the United States; it was also a striking anomaly in a country in which the most distinctive political institution is the elected chief executive as the keystone of political, governmental, and managerial progress. The mayor manager idea has the great and lasting value that it brings the reorganization of our city governments back into a familiar focus, consistent with our efforts in the national and state governments. In this respect it is an indigenous political idea.

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#### The Little Cabinet

. . . the second team of any Administration is as important in its way to the business of government as the first. Here, on the next-to-highest rung of Washington officialdom, a group of men—a "Little Cabinet," it might be called—performs the administrative functions of governing. For it is a Washington truism that when the high brass decides what to do, the low brass gets it done.

Little Cabinets are no novelty to the United States. . . . Under President Eisenhower, however, this sub-Cabinet group has been endowed with semi-official status and incorporated into the chain-of-command system that now prevails at the White House. Its membership is composed of the top deputy from each of the ten departments, plus the Bureau of the Budget, the Office of Defense Mobilization, the Foreign Operations Administration and the Civil Service Commission (which is represented by its chairman rather than a deputy).

The Little Cabinet meets formally on every other Tuesday in the Cabinet room at the White House. Its agenda is only slightly less formidable than that of the Cabinet itself. But between these sessions the members meet informally among themselves—and that is where most of their work is done. . . .

—Cabell Phillips, "The President's 'Little Cabinet,'" *The New York Times Magazine*, August 8, 1954, p. 6.