

Trick Question

Written by Jay Beskin, BT Contributor
November 2017

The winning candidate for city manager of Aventura can manage, but she must also lead



was hit by a truck the other day. The offending driver hit me from behind. His truck was totaled, and my car was totaled. I'm lucky I'm still in one piece. Phew! Apparently God still has some plans for me on this Earth. Let me make the most of it.

Which brings us to Aventura, regrettably, sans automobile. The City of Excellence keeps on trucking. The city manager resigned after many years -- many, many years -- as outlined in our previous column, and a process was put into place to pick a replacement. There were a lot of candidates and then the list was narrowed to five finalists.

The city was transparent enough to share the candidates' names and work histories with residents, which is a good thing. Interviews were conducted on the five left standing, and eventually one candidate was chosen, about which more later.

Sources shared a lot of inside baseball with me, and it would not be appropriate for me to detail the scuttlebutt here. But what I can share is a pattern that, frankly, I found disturbing. On second thought, perhaps "disturbing" is too disturbing an adjective, so I'll replace it, for now, with "disquieting."

Nothing too terrible, you understand, but the type of indicator that foretells exactly what we are likely to get with the new manager. What will we get, in my opinion? Here is a clue: the same as

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we would have gotten with the other four aspirants.

Okay, here is what happened. Each of the five contenders was asked separately, in individual interviews: "What would you do differently than the previous city manager?"

Now, that sounds like a fabulous question. And if I were prepping someone to interview for an important position, I would advise them to jump on that kind of question and use it as an opportunity to espouse a visionary agenda.

I'd say, "You might not want to get too specific in naming projects up front because it would likely be impossible to sell a major undertaking in the time -- and attention span -- allotted by your interlocutors in that setting. But the fact that they are putting this out there tells you they are looking for new blood and are opposed to paralysis.

"So you tell them in broad terms that you do not believe in sitting still, that if a city is to grow, it must be open to new ideas and alert to changing times. That you would view your role as a manager-slash-builder, as a caretaker-slash-entrepreneur, as conservative on the foundation, but progressive on the drawing board. That you would advance your own ideas, turn to citizens for their ideas, and stay in touch with cities across the country to keep our city burgeoning as an engine of growth and expansion."

Well, it turns out that not a single applicant chose this tack. Every single one of them said more or less the same thing -- namely, that there is no need to do anything differently.

The message to the powers that be was clear: "Aventura is wonderful, you are wonderful, the last city manager was wonderful. We are already living happily ever after, we have gone down the yellow brick road, we have arrived in Shangri-La. We are above reproach."

Let me say that the woman who was chosen seems like a lovely person. I heard that she is enthusiastic, likeable, and that she is expecting to move to Aventura to become a resident of the community she will manage. All of this is positive, and I have no reason to criticize or doubt her qualifications. I wish her every success, and I hope for good things. My larger concern is for the

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signal we are sending out.

It seems to me that if five people got that question and every one of them passed on the opportunity to project visionary leadership, it is a strong sign that they were picking up a *vibe* from their questioners.

They were getting a message that everything is fine, that we're looking for status quo, for people who can steer the boat with a steady hand, but who will not rock that boat.

So this is my question to my friends and neighbors: Do you think this is a healthy approach to growth and progress as we near the end of the second decade of the 21st century? Can we afford to be complacent, to sit on the beach chairs of municipal life and look placidly out over the sea, watching lollygaggers treading water?

I believe strongly that there is no such thing in life as standing still. If you are not moving forward, the tide -- or some other equally inexorable force -- will push you backward, or under. Maybe it is a cliché of sorts, but that's how I look at things.

You can go from young buck to old fuddy-duddy without any specific action required. Indeed, inaction is the surest prescription to get you from Point A to Point B, even if Point B isn't your intended destination.

I love Aventura, don't get me wrong. In fact, I am proud of the role I played in my days on the city council to get it to where it is now. But as pleasant, and as vital, as things may seem, I have an uneasy sense that the smugness and complacency can turn poisonous very quickly.

Well, we have hired Susan Grant of Coral Springs, and I welcome her warmly. But it is also very important for me to add this heartfelt appeal: Please do not allow that vibe I mentioned earlier succeed in stultifying your tenure. Take on your new post with vigor. Be bold, be aggressive, be strong.

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Aventura is beautiful now, and you can make it more beautiful, more vibrant still. Make sure we keep up with the times. Make sure we maintain our high energy. Make sure we will always be an exciting destination, both for new residents and for tourists.

In truth, my friends, this advice is good for you and me, too. The city manager is not the only one who can make a difference. We live in a democratic republic, which allows us to have a say -- in fact, it obligates us to have a say.

So let us be heard, and let us be active. We should support the new city manager. We should not sit around griping about petty grievances. Let's send a clear message that she has our support to make this city a place of true Excellence.

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