At a recent department head meeting, we read and discussed an article by Bob O'Neill, Executive Director of the International City/County Management Association. The first comment about "Leadership and the Profession: Where to from here? Be reformers or be reformed?" was that the article mirrored much of our Committee of the Whole discussions.

The premise of the article is that we face complex and critical issues such as jobs and the economy, safety, environment, and infrastructure. The article recommends several actions to ensure a successful community in the midst of these complex times. Though always room for improvement, I think we do pretty well with Mr. O'Neill's recommendations.

Add value to the quality of public policy and produce results that matter to their communities.
I know department heads and the city council listen to questions and concerns from the public. But this is an area I always wish we did better.

We are about to begin the ten-year update of the city's Smart Growth Plan. Public input is vital to the plan. Some of this will be through public meetings, and some of it will be with a survey. The city council has discussed getting a "two-for" out of the survey, using it for the Smart Growth Plan and as a report card on city services. We are hiring UW-Oshkosh for development and analysis of a six-page survey to be mailed to all residences in early 2014. The survey we did ten years ago had a remarkable response rate of 75%, and we hope for similar advice with this one.

Take a long-term and communitywide perspective.
The city council just adopted its annual budget. Despite calling it an "annual" budget, it was really developed with a long-term view. The budget starts with revenues to ensure we spend within our means. We maintain a structural balance in our budget. We have emphasized maintenance of our infrastructure. We have adopted purchasing, fund balance, and debt policies to assure long-term stability. And the budget is used as a management tool throughout the year.

One of the responsibilities of public leadership is taking a communitywide perspective. It may seem obvious, but it is so important it needs to be repeated with emphasis. The city council needs to take a communitywide perspective. It can be hard to maintain a broad perspective, especially when an upset resident is vocal about a personal beef. But policy decisions should be guided by what is best for the entire community, not one interest group or segment of our constituency. We have emphasized this during strategic planning at the Committee of the Whole, noted it in city council reference books, and even vocalized the importance of the overall community when voting decisions.

Commit themselves to ethical practices in the service of public values.
In our city council reference book we have information on the state ethics laws, which basically comes down to not voting on matters of personal financial interest. And we go beyond the legal definition with information on the perception or appearance of a conflict of interest. But I think here, the issue is really one of trust.

O'Neill proposes a formula: Transparency plus Engagement plus Performance plus Accountability equals Trust. And he elaborates on the idea of trust because of the polarized politics at the state and federal levels.

From public meetings, to the city website, to sharing information in articles such as this, we try daily to be as transparent in the city's operations as we can. We do have some very engaged residents and volunteers in the community, but as I said earlier I worry that we don't know the thoughts of the silent majority. In staff meetings, one-on-one, at the individual department level, and with all department heads, we regularly emphasize performance and results. And performance carries through to accountability, particularly with our focus on continuous improvement (discussed later in this column). I think these contribute to public trust in our provision of public services.

Promote equitable, fair outcomes and processes.
I think this is related to the point about taking a communitywide perspective. Each city council member brings a different set of background experiences and perspective and different contacts with constituents. With more rounded discussions, we tend to find that the group's decision is better than could have been made by any one individual. These decisions also tend to be better when they take into account other aspects of this column: communitywide perspective, transparency, ethics and trust, and excellence.

Develop and sustain organizational excellence and promote innovation.
We have been using the terms Top-Notch Service and Drive for Excellence.

By Top-Notch Service we mean providing basic services at a high level. This includes best management practices and professionalism. Closely related to Top-Notch Service is a Drive for Excellence. It takes a long-view with an emphasis on improving operations and service. It is a commitment for improvement and looking past the status quo.

An example that reflects both of these is at city hall. We used to have a split "finance department" with some responsibilities vesting with the Clerk/Treasurer and other responsibilities vesting with the Finance Director. It resulted in an artificial division between the office employees – depending on which supervisor they reported to, they were either City or Water & Light.

I did not overhear it directly, but I heard about an exchange several years ago. A resident came to the front counter at city hall to inquire about a dog license. The staff response was, "Well, you need to talk with someone from the city." Shame on us. Our residents deserve and should expect better service.

Since then, we have worked hard to get past such a silo mentality. At city hall we have done cross training, so several employees are familiar and able to help with a particular request or task. And we've done some customer service training. We have also formally eliminated the split department, aligning all the fiscal duties under the Finance Director position. We communicate freely and hold regular staff meetings to make sure staff are working together on issues.

And in our staff meetings, we've come up with other ideas to improve our service. For example, something as small as keeping notes in the billing system to have a history goes a great ways toward resolving future issues or questions with a customer. Or, for example, with an upgrade to our accounting software, we also consolidated our accounting systems to streamline operations and eliminate duplicative effort.

In conclusion, the staff and city council pay deliberate attention to taking a long-view of the city's operations. This is a continuous process, with regular assessment and improvement, to ensure Evansville remains a successful community even with the complexities of our social, financial, and political environments.