

# What If...BOARDS MANAGING MANAGERS

## A White Paper For Conservation Districts

*Facilitated by:*

Mike Lovegreen, Bradford County Conservation District  
Joanne Nardone, PA Dept. of Environmental Protection

*District Authorities:*

John Sughrue, Director, Clearfield County Conservation District  
Bruce Chase, Director, Bradford County Conservation District  
Jim Biddle and Blaine Smith, Directors, Blair County Conservation District

Facilitator notes:

*This outline and attendant case studies capture the thoughts and feelings of four dedicated district directors on a topic with which they all have experience. The record herein is meant to set the stage for “What if... Boards Managing Managers”*

*The format of this white paper is meant first to be broad brush and then to delve into more complex and dynamic issues. This is not an exhaustive analysis, but merely an attempt to outline some of the implications of taking on the task of hiring, supporting and managing an effective conservation district manager.*

Disclaimer:

*The views expressed here are the result of input from four people with experience in board management of a Conservation District Manager. They are by no means the final word on the subject. We have made every effort to be as thorough as possible but make no claim as to the completeness of this checklist. We offer these observations as a starting point for your own discussion and exploration. Hopefully it will help in your navigation of the challenges of “Managing a Manager....”*

## **Overview --The WHY**

The position of Conservation District Manager has evolved considerably over the past 20 years. Prior to the evolution to today’s manager, the “executive assistant” position was often filled by an individual who moved up from a clerical position or was specifically hired to carry out the “business of the Board”.

An individual in today’s District Manager position is responsible for an increasingly complex workload that includes: personnel management; agency liaison; budget management; multiple project management; legislative liaison; authority in a delegated program; contract management; public education and outreach; policy development and needs identification; fund raising; facility management; volunteer recruitment and coordination; and, most important of all, facilitation of board member communications and needs fulfillment.

In both informal surveys and during the “District Visits” special project, the position of District Manager is consistently identified as the most critical position to making or breaking a District program. They are the “face of the District” in the public, political and office environments. The skill set, knowledge and training required in today’s Manager must be incorporated into the selection and development of the position.

**“Managing the Manager” is a responsibility that solely rests on the shoulders of the Board.**

Board members need to have consensus on how the position is designed, filled and managed. The Board’s ability to have open, honest, and ongoing discussions on the needs and expectations of the district manager position is the foundation for the successful future of both the position and of the conservation district itself.

## **ROLES OF THE CONSERVATION DISTRICT MANAGER**

### **1. Related to Board Functions**

- ✓ Set an example regarding “conservation ethic”
- ✓ Inform / communicate with Board
- ✓ Structure development – office, board functions, staff
- ✓ Needs identification – resource, personnel, issues
- ✓ Board training
- ✓ Board policy implementation – legality, consistent delivery by staff and others
- ✓ Fill in the blanks of information needed by the Board
- ✓ Analyze / interpret information and programs
  - Be able to elaborate on technical reports to the Board by staff and agencies
  - Be able to interpret “what does this mean” and “how does it affect” .....
- ✓ Add reality to discussions and deliberations of Board
  - What resources are available?
  - Evaluate both current and future impacts of decision options
  - Answer the questions of “do we have enough staff and dollars to accomplish”?
  - What is the balance and practicality of options being considered?
  - What can or can not work?
- ✓ Identify and bring in new program opportunities for Board consideration
- ✓ Expediter / Facilitator / Planner – makes things happen

### **2. Related to Staff Functions**

- ✓ Set an example regarding “conservation ethic”
- ✓ Personnel management
- ✓ Provide continuity among staff and programs
- ✓ Have management skills (not necessarily program) that involve financial, people and team building abilities)
- ✓ Structure development – office, board functions, staff
- ✓ Needs identification – resource, personnel, issues
- ✓ Expediter / Facilitator / Planner – makes things happen
- ✓ Employee evaluator

### **3. Related to County, State and Agency Functions**

- ✓ Analyze / interpret information and programs
  - Be able to elaborate on technical reports to the Board by staff and agencies
  - Be able to elaborate on local conservation issues and solutions
  - Be able to interpret “what does this mean” and “how does it affect” .....
- ✓ Liaison with the Legislators and County through regular communications and reports
- ✓ Provide accountability to public and legislators
- ✓ Partnership developer

#### **4. Related to District Programming**

- ✓ Keep current on programs in order to facilitate their delivery
- ✓ Structure development – office, board functions, staff
- ✓ Needs identification – resource, personnel, issues
- ✓ Analyze / interpret information and programs
  - Be able to elaborate on technical reports to the Board by staff and agencies
  - Be able to interpret “what does this mean” and “how does it affect” .....
- ✓ Expediter / Facilitator / Planner – makes things happen
- ✓ Fund raiser

#### **5. Related to General Public Relations**

- ✓ Public liaison – “face of the district”
- ✓ Public relations director (consistent message)
- ✓ Provide accountability to public and legislators

### **EXPECTATIONS OF MANAGERS**

- ✓ Manager needs to be “humble, hungry and smart.”
- ✓ Facilitate the process of staff management, feedback and grievance resolution
- ✓ Facilitate communications with, and for, the Board, including e-mail
- ✓ Have management skills (not necessarily program) that involve financial, people and team building abilities)
- ✓ Be politically astute/confident
- ✓ Critical to have the right structure in place for management

### **CHANGING ROLE OF MANAGER**

- ✓ Long-term evolution into the person who manages the conservation district, makes it easier on Directors to govern
- ✓ Moving away from program implementation to being aware of programs and program implications and being a liaison with the Board regarding programs. This increases Board comfort by helping them understand the programs.
- ✓ Decreasing involvement with program paperwork (ex. Grant applications) and increasing management and oversight of program/project completion
- ✓ Changing resource issues, programs and authorities in which the District participates in (ex. agriculture to development and urban issues)
  - Requires new relationships, new partners (ex. townships), and new skills (ex GIS)
  - Changing face of agriculture - small to larger, different types of farming operations
  - Changing face of rural areas to suburban/urban
  - Changing roles with agriculture – nutrient management program, agricultural compliance
- ✓ Changing constituents

## **COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS BETWEEN BOARDS AND MANAGERS**

- ✓ Manager provides financial options / impacts for board decisions (reality checks)
- ✓ Personal contacts between Board members and the Manager are important
  - Done by/with individual board members in response to specific program activities or issues
  - Entire Board (not just Chair) should strive for personal contacts with the Manager
- ✓ Manager follows up and plans meetings with Board Chair
- ✓ Inverted Triangle – The Board (as the base of the district triangle) needs to communicate with and solicit feedback from the district manager, staff and partners
- ✓ Opportunities for communications during travel to and from meetings
- ✓ Opportunities for Board and Manager to work together on projects, meetings, etc.
- ✓ Board needs to conscientiously make the decision to make time to work together with the manager
- ✓ Directors need to get involved according to both their interests and their expertise

## **MANAGER EVALUATION**

- ✓ Evaluation is part of the regular communication package
- ✓ Customer / employee / agency feedback is valuable evaluation information
- ✓ Problems usually go to the Board Chair
- ✓ Typically it is thought that if there is no communication of problems – things must be OK (i.e. “no news is good news”). In reality, the Board needs to communicate all feedback - good and bad – to the District Manager
- ✓ Evaluation should be a collective opinion and not an individual board member evaluation
- ✓ Performance review should be part of the annual salary process

## **CONSIDERATIONS IN MANAGER REPLACEMENT**

- ✓ Districts need a manager, not necessarily a promoted technician. Management skills are critical for the position.
- ✓ A combination of management experience, skills and knowledge and resource management experience and knowledge would be ideal
- ✓ Consider upward mobility internally only if necessary skills and knowledge are demonstrated
- ✓ Grow a replacement (if qualified individual exists) – plan ahead
- ✓ Process is complicated if questions on County versus Independent issue not resolved well before manager replacement is needed – have a plan in place

## **CHALLENGES FOR BOARD CONSIDERATION**

- ✓ Offering adequate salaries to retain good managers and attract qualified replacements
- ✓ How to keep the right person (manager) in the right seat on the bus (district) and not give the seat to the wrong person for the wrong reasons

- ✓ Aligned versus independent relationship with County Government regarding salary levels can be an issue
- ✓ Addressing changing roles and resulting skill sets needed for manager
- ✓ Developing an agreed to job description (by Board) for manager that includes expectations and skills
- ✓ Finding an MBA manager (management skills) who also has resource management knowledge versus a Technician (technical skills)
- ✓ Development of “comfortable” communications between each Board member (with diverse personalities/styles) and the manager
- ✓ Providing clear definitions of the limits of management authority
- ✓ Defining who supervises the manager – the Board? the County?

## **Managing the Manager Case Study - Blair County Conservation District**

The District Manager for the Blair County Conservation District is a full time employee of the County of Blair. In Blair County, only the manager and one clerical staff member are “County” employees. The remaining employees are grant funded “District” employees.

The District Manager is considered as a Department Head within the County System and therefore under the umbrella of the Commissioner’s Office. The District initiated an MOU with the County Commissioners in 1988, shortly after hiring the District’s first full-time manager as a “County” employee. The MOU documents agreed to items relating to job descriptions, supervision, candidate selection, continuation/separation of employment, and position funding. The MOU also addresses the desire of the district to work with and through the Blair County Salary Board for issues pertaining to salary scales and promotions. All salary items must have the approval of the county salary board to be instituted. Annual employee evaluations of the manager are completed by the Commissioner serving as the District Board Representative.

Because the Commissioner/District Relationship has been and continues to be strong in Blair County, insurmountable issues have not arisen. We believe that it is advantageous if not imperative that an MOU be in place to allow for continuity between changing district boards and County Commissioners. Having the MOU in place and a strong manager has enabled the district to operate almost entirely independent of the County of Blair.

It is the belief of this board that the manager was hired to manage. We work in conjunction with the manager providing board governance but do not get involved in the day-to-day operation of the office unless asked. Lines of communication are kept open between each director and the manager with the primary direction being provided by the board through the Chairperson. Over the years, this has evolved into a harmonious relationship of mutual trust and respect.

As time went on, it was imperative that the manager transition from a hands-on “staff” to a manager. In the past 10 years, the office staff has grown from three full-time employees (FTEs) to a current contingent of seven FTEs and an Americorps member. Program responsibilities have quadrupled over the same period of time and the office budget has increased nearly eight-fold. As previously indicated, positions were approved through the County salary board. Over the years, the board has participated in the interview process but has left the hiring decisions up to the manager. The trust that has been established has been rewarded through the quality of staff that our manager has hired.

In conclusion, having a manager with strong managerial, financial, organizational and human resource skills has allowed this district to operate in the best of both worlds. We have the independence to operate our programs with the backing of the County of Blair.

### **Blair County Contact**

John Biddle and Blaine Smith - Directors (814) 696-0877 ext.5  
c/o Blair County Conservation District, 1407 Blair St., Hollidaysburg, PA 16648

## **Managing the Manager**

### **Case Study - Bradford County Conservation District**

#### **Overview**

The manager position in any conservation district is key to the level of success of that district. The manager is in the position to have the most influence on the level and priority of actions of the entire staff, and to some degree the board (though it is clearly the boards responsibility to set priorities). It is also the responsibility of the board to manage the manager to ensure the districts' efforts and resources are satisfactorily directed toward the priorities established for the County, by the Conservation district board of directors. So how do we as board members **communicate expectations, evaluate manager performance, and when necessary replace a manager?**

**Communicating expectations** sounds quite simple, but in reality it is more a continuous process between board members and the manager. There are many decisions made over the month between meetings that require the manager to act on his best judgment. The manager may stop to think what the boards' desire might be in this case, and must draw from past communications with board members to determine expectations. To facilitate this process, it is in the best interest of the board, and the district, for the board to clearly communicate their expectations of the manager. This can be accomplished over time at monthly meetings, but should also include some one-on-one discussion. Each board member spending one-on-one time with the manager would go a long way in helping the manager understand board member expectations. I happen to find it most suitable to have uninterrupted conversations with our manager when we carpool to various district activities. These occasions provide a great opportunity to have more in-depth discussions than is often afforded at a board meeting.

**Evaluating manager performance** can be done in many ways. I'm sure all board members have an opinion on their district manager, but when faced with this paper, I had to stop and think on how I arrived at that position. Books have been written on good manager traits, and we all have our favorites. There is a good list of the desired manager skills in the white paper. It would be unrealistic to expect any manager to be an expert on all those areas, but they should be satisfactory in all those areas. I personally am looking for character traits of integrity, commitment, and accomplishment of the objectives (this covers all the white paper listed skills). There are a host of other good qualities that can add to these, and they vary from manager to manager, and in importance to each director. Evaluating the manager becomes a little more difficult when observation time is limited to monthly meetings. Like communicating expectations, any time spent with the manager in addition to board meetings, helps in understanding the manager's actions and performance. Feedback from sources outside the county also assists me in evaluating our manager. Attendance at state meetings is an opportunity to talk with other managers and district representatives and I often receive comments that help form my opinion of our manager. I am not directly involved with our manager's written evaluation report, although I feel confident that our Chairman would be receptive to any comments I wish to make.

#### **A new manager**

Bradford County has not had to face this challenge for quite some time. Mike Lovegreen has been with the Bradford County Conservation District for over 20 years. There will be times



however, at least in some districts, that it will be necessary to replace a manager. Those of us who have great managers certainly don't look forward to such a potential upheaval. A manager planning a departure such as retirement or even taking another job could include preparing another person from within to take over. This assumes there is someone available and willing, and the district board has complete control in making the selection. In any event, the selection of a new manager seems to involve the discussion on technical skills versus manager skills. Coming from a management background I am probably biased, but I would have to say that management skills have the priority in my opinion. Technical skills would be a great plus, but it would make little sense to have 16 of our staff members working less efficiently, and one good technical manager working around the clock. It would not make sense if there were only 3 or 4 other staff members. Finding the right person having the skills necessary of a district manager is every bit as challenging as finding the right person for any position. A thorough search and dedicated effort on the part of the board is required for this event. Our experiences in hiring other staff have had a few surprises, in spite of a dedicated group effort, so I would approach the hiring for a new manager with great care.

**Bradford County Contact**

Bruce Chase, Public Director  
RR 2 Box 141  
New Albany, PA 18833  
570 363-2388  
bchasema@epix.net

## **Managing the Manager Case Study - Clearfield County Conservation District**

The Clearfield County Conservation District was formed in 1962 as an independent district. We have a staff of five full time employees, as well as seasonal interns. The County Commissioners contribute monthly allocations, and provide housing for the District.

In the late 1990's, the Clearfield County Conservation District was struggling with a number of challenges. We were experiencing grave financial problems, and had a huge problem with employee turnover. Within a five-year period, we employed four different individuals in the position of manager. This lack of continuity created a morale problem with the rest of our staff.

In early 2000, the Board was assigned a Commissioner Representative who had a background in business management. The hiring procedures of the District were reviewed, and it was determined that we were employing folks as our District Manager who came from a technical background. As is so often the case in Conservation Districts, promotions came from within our organization. While these individuals were very qualified in their individual fields, they had no background in business or management

It was decided at that time that we would look for a manager who had experience in organization, management, and financial control. The Board felt that we had a well-trained staff of technicians who understood their programs very well. If we could hire a manager that would work with the staff to combine talents, our District may be able to move forward.

This plan worked for Clearfield County, but only because the current staff of technicians were open and helpful in educating the new manager in the details of their programs. The staff helped the new manager learn the various programs, and they were rewarded with a more comfortable working environment. Better financial control resulted in higher wages and a better benefit package.

As our Board of Directors saw that their hiring plan was successful, they allowed the manager to manage the district. Close communication exists between the Board and the manager, but the day-to-day operations of the district is the responsibility of the District Manager.

It is important to note that Clearfield County continues to use the Team Approach. Our staff works together as a group, and combine their individual skills on special projects for a successful outcome. We also have the support and encouragement of our Board of Directors and County Commissioners. We feel that together we can make a difference in Clearfield County!

### **Clearfield County Contact**

John Sughrue, Clearfield County Conservation District  
23 N. Second St.  
Clearfield, PA 16830  
(814) 765-1704