

Succession planning discussed at MMPA seminar

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With a large portion of the senior-level municipal workforce on the verge of retirement, communities need to focus efforts on professional development, identifying leaders and supporting leadership development – also known as “investing in people.”

This was the key takeaway from a workshop on succession planning held during the Massachusetts Municipal Personnel Association’s Annual Labor Relations Seminar on Oct. 21 in Boxborough. Workshop panelists urged city and town leaders to prioritize succession planning in both public safety and general government.

Natick Police Chief James Hicks discussed the challenges facing police departments across the country, and how candidates seeking chief positions often lack the full scope of leadership and management skills needed to run a department.

“Chiefs have to be in tune with lots of different issues in a constantly changing world,” Hicks said. “It is complex, and very important to get it right.”

Police chiefs, he said, should make the case to community decision makers that it’s important to hire key assistant positions to build leadership and ensure smooth transitions.

Norwell Fire Chief Andrew Reardon agreed, and stressed the important role that fire chiefs play in the community. Reardon said the position now goes well beyond the fire protection and safety operations. An effective chief, he said, must have leadership skills and a solid understanding of complicated personnel challenges, management and administration.

Reardon urged fire departments to implement training on key leadership and management skills in order to create a qualified bench of candidates prepared to move into leadership positions in the fire service.

Bernie Lynch, principal of Community Paradigm Associates and a former municipal manager, stressed the importance of professional development and investing in people in municipal government.

“It’s important to put people on a career path, and recognize that it’s a process to get people to a place in their career where they are ready to move into leadership positions,” he said.

Both internal and external professional development and learning opportunities are critical for retaining good people and moving them up a career ladder, he said.

Burlington Town Manager John Petrin, the session moderator, urged municipal officials to create an “organizational attitude” of growth, leadership and investment in staff. Succession planning, he said, includes marketing your town and the value of municipal service in order to recruit from outside the organization when necessary.

Attendees said succession planning is a critical topic worthy of further exploration. The MMPA is sponsoring a workshop at MMA’s Annual Meeting in January on the same topic.

Written by
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