

The Trail to Success:  
A City Manager on Leadership,  
Management, and Civic Empowerment

Prologue

To the surprise of many, my journey to becoming one of the youngest and few Black city managers has deep historical roots, tracing back to the Muscogee people and the rise of the Seminole tribe. Their fierce resistance to territorial encroachment in Florida, coupled with their alliance with the Black Seminoles, has inspired me since my childhood in Pensacola. The Seminoles and their African American allies faced down slaveholders and military forces through three grueling wars, marking the longest Native American conflicts in U.S. history. Their unyielding defense of their lands resonates with me.

At my alma mater, Florida State University, I channeled the Seminole spirit into my public administration studies, aiming to make a societal impact. My career took off in Escambia County, a region marked by Andrew Jackson's conquest and the remnants of Seminole settlements.

The biggest milestone in my career came in Oklahoma, when I was hired to lead a city named after Muscogee survivors of the Trail of Tears. That brutal chapter in American history bore witness to the suffering and deaths of thousands of Native Americans and African Creeks who would

join with Black Muskogean to make significant contributions to the civil rights movement.

Understanding the history and culture of the places I've served is crucial to my approach, even learning Spanish to better connect with the communities. My appointment as Muskogee's youngest and first Black city manager is a testament to the progressive mindset of the predominantly white elected officials. This same spirit of inclusivity and advancement paved the way for my groundbreaking roles as the first Black city manager in Bell, California, and as the pioneering city manager in Indiantown, Florida.

While studying at the Harvard Kennedy School, I had the opportunity to reflect on the evolution of city management. I'm struck by its transformation since the early 1900s. The profession has come a long way since the earliest city managers were hired during the era of women's suffrage and Jim Crow. Despite progress, African American representation in this field remains low, highlighting the ongoing need for change.

My path through management was marked by financial constraints and learning on the job, rather than through formal training. Discovering the International City/County Management Association later provided much-needed guidance. I share my story to illuminate the path for civil service managers and to help citizens understand the lives of public servants.

Personal and professional challenges have shaped my career. The end of my marriage and financial struggles early on, criticism in the media, and being blamed for policies beyond my control have tested me. Yet, like the Muskogee, I've remained resolute and hopeful. It's my desire that my story will inspire the same resilience in others.

## Career Launch

In the summer of 1995, I found myself on the cusp of a significant milestone: graduation from the University of West Florida's MBA program. The faculty and staff there had been incredibly supportive, enabling me to work full-time in the Department of Student Affairs, where I provided academic counseling, and on weekends, I administered standardized tests like the SAT and LSAT. This arrangement also afforded my family the convenience of living in graduate housing on campus.

I needed to earn six internship credit hours to complete my degree. About twenty of us who'd formed a tight-knit academic community and were now, poised to graduate, competed for just three internships. Dr. Larry Walker, the internship coordinator, who played a pivotal role in guiding me through this process.

As part of the preparation for my interviews, Dr. Walker briefed me on the expected dress code, a crucial aspect of making a good first impression. Of course, I knew from my previous jobs at the employment office and as a National Guard reservist, how to dress, but Dr. Walker, one of those lovable, bleeding heart liberals, was concerned about something else.

He delicately said to me, “Howard, do you mind if I offer you a bit of advice that might be a little upsetting?”

I said sure, and he went on to ask nervously, “Can you cut your hair and take those earrings out?”

At the time, I wore a giant cubic zirconia in each ear lobe and walked around with my hair in a five inch high top fade like I was auditioning to be the third member of Kid ‘n Play.

Dr. Walker’s comments came during a particularly fraught era in which the hot topics of the day were the efforts to outlaw affirmative action in California college admissions and "The Bell Curve," a controversial book that insinuated the intellectual inferiority of certain racial groups. These circumstances heightened my sensitivity regarding my Black identity, and I didn’t want to allow my fashion choices to become another arena for judgment or stereotype.

I took youthful offense at Dr. Walker’s request and insisted my outside appearance has nothing to do with my intellect. I tactfully let him know I thought he was on some nonsense; however, circumstances being what they were, I then acquiesced.

On the day of my interviews, I first visited the City of Pensacola City Manager's office. Because I didn’t want to risk the bus being late, I arrived exceedingly early and was able to observe my peers, John Epstein and Tamara, as each exited their interview. Both had an easy rapport with the manager leading me to feel uncertain about my chances, especially considering Tamara's striking appearance and academic excellence.

Next, I faced the challenge of getting to my interview with the Escambia County Department of Planning and Zoning amid a torrential downpour. By the time I arrived, I was soaked to the bone. My clothes were clinging to me, and the squelching of water in my shoes was audible

with every step. As I waited, the dampness began to take its toll. My clothes started to smell sour as my deodorant disintegrated under my arms. I was a mess!

Despite these setbacks, I found glimmers of hope. A black woman senior planner was present alongside the department director. My academic focus on growth management, which is closely related to urban planning, seemed to resonate with the department's objectives, and I felt a connection with the senior planner that made me think I might just have a chance.

Weeks later, I returned to Dr. Walker to discuss the interviews and my concerns about not being selected. I candidly shared my fears that racial bias might have influenced the selection decisions. This suggestion visibly unsettled Dr. Walker.

He said, "Howard, that's not fair and not true. You haven't heard from them because they contacted the university. I've spoken with both Pensacola City and Escambia County and both want you as their intern.

I said, "Stop playing, Dr. Walker!"

I was stunned because this felt like such a lucky break. I had never before been on the receiving end of such advocacy and support. I nearly cried with gratefulness, pride, and relief.

Dr. Walker recommended that I accept the internship with Escambia County Planning and Zoning, citing their track record of offering permanent positions to their interns. I accepted the offer, grateful for the wage of \$7 an hour, and embarked on what would be the first step in my professional journey. I'd already had my first big epiphany: the challenge of overcoming preconceived notions.

This ground-floor opportunity at the Escambia County Planning and Zoning Department was a stepping stone to serving the public interest. Balancing the need to support my family with the desire to work in my field of study, I recognized the dual benefit of this role. It was here

that I honed the skills of inquiry, analysis, and reporting—skills that would serve the community and shape my professional journey.

Understanding the importance of first impressions has been a cornerstone of my professional development. With a history of short-term jobs and military service, I was well aware of their significance. However, this internship represented more than just another job; it was the gateway to my career. The stakes were higher, the expectations more stringent, and my new boss would likely be less forgiving. This demanded a heightened level of dedication and performance from the outset.

Today, I advise young professionals to do their due diligence before starting a job, but in the mid-90s, thorough company research prior to interviews or job commencement was a challenge. The internet was not yet the ubiquitous resource it is today. Despite growing up a mere ten blocks from the Escambia County offices, I had never set foot inside. This underscored the importance of putting my best foot forward.

As a graduate intern, my first month was a deep dive into the organization's culture. Building relationships in the workplace is a multifaceted endeavor, essential for career growth. While some may opt for social lunches to foster these connections, my financial limitations meant that lunch hours were spent working at my desk rather than dining out. Fortunately, I was assigned an office where interactions with colleagues were frequent and revealing. Casual conversations often veered into personal territory, with inquiries about my educational background and other details. These exchanges were not just pleasantries; they were opportunities to learn about the interpersonal dynamics within the department.

It quickly became apparent that opinions about my boss were polarized. While some colleagues expressed their dislike and skepticism, others were positive about her. These differing perspectives painted a

complex picture of the leadership and the tasks at hand. Heeding my grandmother's advice—that with two ears and one mouth, I should listen more than speak—I adopted a posture of observation and attentiveness.

This posture allowed me to be privy to the undercurrents of office politics. Disagreements between coworkers were not just noise; they were insights into the challenges and alliances within the organization. This information was invaluable, teaching me the delicate art of navigating workplace relationships while remaining neutral.

My strategy was clear: avoid office cliques, focus on my assignments, and seek constructive feedback. By demonstrating reliability and a strong work ethic, I aimed to transcend my entry-level status and secure a permanent position. I understood that success in this environment was not just about completing tasks but also about understanding the nuanced opinions on how things should be done. This lowly internship turned into a masterclass in professional acumen.

I had the great fortune to be assigned to a senior manager named Michelle Andrewein, who had worked in New York. She was professional, sharp, and well-educated, and I was fortunate to be guided by her expertise. Our one-on-one time was not merely supervisory; it was an intellectual partnership. Together, we engaged in deep thought and strategic planning, akin to the rigorous analysis one undertakes when crafting a thesis. She oversaw long-range city planning, which required a methodical approach, setting us apart from the more immediate, hands-on tasks of departments like building inspections or law enforcement.

My initial project was instrumental in the creation of the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), which intended to utilize alternative financing methods to fund the revitalization of existing housing stock, the creation of new affordable housing options, and the promotion of mixed-use developments, in addition to fostering new commercial ventures.

The first big step in this endeavor was to survey housing conditions in the designated area that was plagued by neglect. Michelle and I ventured out into the community with tax maps in hand, developing a ranking system for the houses we assessed—ranging from one for the best conditions to five for the worst.

The raw data we collected from the field needed to be transformed into meaningful statistics. One area in which recent college graduates often have an advantage is in understanding new technologies. I did this here. Leveraging my proficiency with Quattro Pro, a precursor to Excel, I analyzed and presented the data, which culminated in a comprehensive report. This report was later reviewed and approved by the county's governing body, marking the successful completion of the project.

Throughout this process, the importance of asking the right questions and seeking clarity, a lesson ingrained in me from working with my grandmother as a teenager, was reinforced. Getting feedback is crucial to avoiding the pitfalls of rework. In those early days, when computers were not as prevalent, this meticulous approach was even more critical.

The report I helped produce was crucial to fulfilling the agency's mandate. The fruits of our labor are evident today in the enhanced infrastructure and commercial growth within the area now known as The Warrington Revitalization Area. Residents can now observe new sidewalks, the arrival of popular establishments like Chick-fil-A, Lowe's, and Target, and other visible improvements. These developments are a direct consequence of the groundwork laid by the CRA at its inception in 1995 and showcases the lasting benefits of strategic urban redevelopment.

In line with Dr. Walker's foresight, my internship evolved into an opportunity for a permanent role. A vacancy emerged for a zoning inspector, a title subsequently upgraded to Code Enforcement Officer II.



I was set to start after my internship ended in August of 1995; however, my National Guard unit was activated after Hurricane Erin struck Florida. I was deployed for several months but made it home in October. I was relieved because it allowed me to be at the birth of my daughter, Cierra, the following month.

Interestingly, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that government employees tend to be more educated than their private sector counterparts, often possessing qualifications that exceed the requirements of their roles. This was certainly true in my case, as the position did not necessitate a college degree, yet I held a Master's. Despite this apparent overqualification, the role offered a tangible benefit: it included a company car. Given that our family was managing with just one vehicle, the addition of a second car promised considerable convenience.

My tenure as a Code Enforcement Officer was immensely fulfilling. My responsibilities included verifying that citizens' actions aligned with their applications, ensuring property maintenance, and enforcing zoning laws. My job's impact was evident—the community was cleaner, safer, more orderly, and aesthetically more appealing. From instructing someone to mow their lawn or dispose of inoperative vehicles to shutting down businesses operating in prohibited areas, I found myself naturally adept at encouraging property owners to adhere to local codes and ordinances.

The entire code enforcement department was led by Donald, who had a reputation for exceptional leadership and expertise. In addition to being a good leader, he was a beacon of knowledge, holding certifications in every inspection trade within the state. At first, I didn't understand the significance of such extensive qualifications, but a glimpse into his office, a veritable shrine to his achievements, revealed the depth of his commitment and proficiency. His colleagues affectionately dubbed him "Mayo with nine lives," a moniker that spoke to his resilience and indispensability.

My immediate supervisor was Chuck Wall. He required all of his reports to meet daily at Smokey's for lunch, where we bonded over half-priced pork sandwiches, fries, and sweet tea that only cost \$2.50, which I could now afford. This was part of Chuck's strategy to foster team unity.

Chuck was easy to work with; however, in contrast to Donald, his knowledge of the procedural processes of the department were limited. His background as an environmental enforcement officer, with roots in law enforcement, meant he lacked Donald's comprehensive understanding of the statutes that governed code enforcement. He was not adept at showing me the ropes of administrative tasks like writing citations.

As a consequence of Chuck ineptitude, I faced a steep learning curve with the establishment of the code enforcement department. Before its establishment, code enforcement was handled haphazardly by either the billing department or the police department, with the latter sometimes arresting individuals for severe violations. Consequently, I found myself having to learn the nuances of my role independently, navigating the complexities of code enforcement without the full guidance I had anticipated. The problem was exacerbated because our office lacked written policies and procedures related to code enforcement.

Rather than complain, I took the initiative and spearheaded the creation of a citation program, strictly adhering to state law and county ordinances—a first of its kind. Before this, interpretations of statutes and codes varied widely, leading to stagnation. My policy and procedure for issuing citations became the standard that is still followed today. My understanding is the manuals I created 25 years ago are still being used.

Moreover, I was the pioneer in obtaining inspection warrants, a task that others found daunting. I vividly recall preparing my first inspection order, presenting it to the duty judge, and being sworn in. My

documentation was thorough, citing reasonable cause based on observed violations and interactions with property owners. This diligence paid off when, despite a homeowner's refusal, we were able to execute the warrant with the sheriff's assistance, even in the face of resistance.

That day, as I stood with the sheriff while he handcuffed a defiant homeowner, over two dozen of my colleagues witnessed the enforcement of the law, a moment that underscored my leadership. It was clear that leadership is not just about holding a position; it's about setting an example, pioneering new paths, and earning the respect and endorsement of your peers. This experience was a defining moment for me, solidifying my understanding of what it truly means to be a leader.

As my comfort and confidence grew, I consciously embraced a growth mindset and took a proactive stance in my professional role. This led me to achieve certification across three levels of formal training offered by the Florida Organization of Code Enforcement. The knowledge and skills I acquired allowed me to settle into my daily routine with ease, and I began seeking opportunities to enhance my contributions. I actively assisted my colleagues and eagerly volunteered for key projects, demonstrating my commitment to the team's success.

One area in which I did not excel was in setting boundaries. This is something that, in hindsight, I realize is crucial in preventing burnout and preserving a healthy balance between my work and personal life. As it was, my service-oriented mindset intensified, I forced my self to give more and more to our citizen customers, my superiors, and my peers alike.

Eventually, this backfired.

As I settled into my role, it was clear that my proactive approach and initiative did not sit well with everyone.

On one occasion, during one of our quarterly staff meetings that had to be held in an auditorium, I overheard an argument between two people who were senior to me. Initially, I was unable to hear the details but

could clearly see some intense finger-pointing and shouting going on. Curiosity piqued, I strained to listen and managed to catch a pivotal moment in the argument. When one said to the other, "You're just pissed because Howard Brown is a whiz kid."

I was shocked. I couldn't believe these two very grown people were having an argument about my low-level self. The incident would portend the rough waters to come. For the time being, however, I just felt a little puffed up as I made the transition from code enforcement to the demolition team.

In this capacity, my colleagues in code enforcement would refer cases to me, indicating properties ready for demolition due to non-compliance by the owners. Collaborating closely with the attorney, we would present these cases to the Unsafe Structures Board to secure demolition orders. My role was comprehensive: coordinating with road crews for the physical demolition, liaising with utility companies to disconnect services, ensuring proper disposal of debris with the landfill, and meticulously inventorying the contents of each house to safeguard against future claims. This attention to detail was crucial, as it protected us from potential disputes, such as claims of valuable items like a \$5,000 baby grand piano being destroyed without record.

I found a great deal of satisfaction in my demolition job, particularly because it offered the benefit of unlimited overtime, and I was fortunate to have colleagues who were remarkably easygoing. However, the work environment was not without its challenges; the supervisors could be unpredictable, and job security was tenuous, as dismissals were not uncommon.

During my initial years on the job, I navigated these challenges without incident. But in 1999, my circumstances took a turn for the worse when I fell out of favor with one of my superiors. As a form of retribution,

I was transferred to a project located in the most remote part of the county. This reassignment added a burdensome 45-minute commute each way to my daily routine and, in retrospect, signaled the onset of a downward trajectory with Escambia County, and my personal life as well.