

Regional Council and Chamber Professions

Peter S. Levi

A recent *Wall Street Journal* article described the difficulties encountered by a once-prominent university professor in making the professional change to become the president of a large, national membership organization. The article pointed out the differences in style, substance, agenda, and constituency of the two organizations, all of which culminated in the demise of the former professor in a relatively short period of time. The conclusion of the article was that a clash of cultures between the two organizations prevented a successful transition for what was obviously a highly talented university professor.

Although there is obviously not a great deal of empirical evidence to substantiate the theme of this reflection in regard to my careers in the regional council and chamber professions, I think it is safe to say no clash of cultures exists between those two public-service positions. Rather, the obvious similarities of requisite style, versatility, and consensus-building not only make the two professions compatible, but, perhaps more importantly, also verify the proposition that regionalism, and the advancement of a regional local agenda, is a common denominator of both metropolitan chambers and regional councils.

Few of us have operated in both arenas, something which I think is unfortunate and likely to change in the near future. So, these observations are based on my personal experience in Greater Kansas City, together with what has been a positive experience at the national level in both the National Association of Regional Councils and the American Association of Chamber Executives.

The Kansas City area is somewhat unique in that it is a bi-state region with 900,000 residents in Missouri and 700,000 in Kansas. However, if ever a case was to be made for regional cooperation in the absence of regional governance, Greater Kansas City is a perfect example. With more than 115 local governments, two state legislatures and governors, four senators, and five members of Congress, we are a region replete with government.

If our residents are bound by artificial boundaries, our businesses, by contrast, are not. Healthcare alliances, utility companies, retailers, wholesalers, professional firms, service organizations, etc., operate irrespective of local boundaries, other than in meeting local or state zoning and regulatory requirements. Their constituency, their base, and their profits are derived from the strength of

our metropolitan area. They share a common economy, transportation system, environment, and workforce. While their corporate headquarters may be located in either an urban or suburban setting, most businesses, particularly those who belong to the metropolitan chamber, recognize the importance of this schizophrenic existence.

Therein lies the strength of a metropolitan chamber and the commonality of the regional agenda with the council of governments. Within our region are many strong and effective chambers serving particular cities or groupings of cities. But the Greater Kansas City Chamber, with more than 3,200 members, has responsibility not only for its relationship with the City of Kansas City, Missouri, our central city, but also for the issues which make our community *as a region* vibrant and healthy.

The leadership of the chamber, much like that of a strong regional council, requires volunteer strength from those in the business community who recognize the need to deal with their parochial corporate interests, but who take the time and considerable effort to advance a regional corporate agenda that extends beyond their own businesses. Similarly, a strong regional council is headed by a local elected official who recognizes that the votes for re-election are at home, but the road to success in many issues goes through neighboring jurisdictions.

Once this similarity is recognized by the metropolitan chamber and its leadership, the commonality of many of the agenda items of the regional council and the metropolitan chamber becomes obvious. The challenge is in marshaling the strengths of the two organizations in a

compatible manner, recognizing the diversity and strengths they bring to the regional arena through their collaboration.

The mutual goals of the metropolitan chamber and the regional council, at least in Greater Kansas City, have been obvious.

- A sound regional transportation system to move people and goods;
- Fiscally responsible state and local governments that provide basic services to individuals and businesses;
- A trained workforce that will be gainfully employed for their individual successes and to provide a tax base for government operations;
- A logical pattern of growth that does not unduly burden taxpayers;
- An environmental policy that provides a healthy environment in which to live and work, but does not do so at the expense of business or the individual; and
- A plan properly executed to market the metropolitan area for successfully attracting businesses to the region as well as providing a base for existing companies and entrepreneurs to flourish.

And the list goes on. The cultures of the organizations don't clash—they complement one another.

Having served more than 20 years with the Mid-America Regional Council in Kansas City and participated in both state and national regional council organizations, and entering a career working for the private sector as opposed to local governments, I was predisposed to pursuing the regional agenda of our community. In fact, our two organizations have a history of working together on issues such as air quality and solid waste,

as well as sharing economic data for the region and participating on joint committees of the two organizations. At the risk of sounding boastful, I believe that my selection as chamber president was based in part on the reputation that our regional council enjoyed in the community. Furthermore, the chamber had made a conscious decision to push the *regional* agenda for the business community, while maintaining its historic role with the central city. So, the road was already paved for my good intentions.

All this background notwithstanding, and even with the fine relationship between the chamber and regional council, it is safe to say that few people in our business community truly understand what a regional council is, how it is governed and funded, and what its limitations are. And, therein, lies one of the greatest challenges for the regionalism movement. To make it work, I am convinced, the business and elected leadership need to understand their respective roles. Business leaders need to understand how the successful operation of a regional council can help achieve their community goals in concert with those of similarly minded elected officials.

Truly, the strengthening of the metropolitan planning organization legislation and the advancing role of regional transportation planning has helped. The business community's involvement at various levels in Kansas City has broadened that community's understanding of what the implications of population, employment, and household forecasts can mean, not just on the building of roads or transit systems, but on the development of a region. But the business com-

munity needs to gain a better understanding of the sometimes fragile nature of regional cooperation activities, the tender balancing act that regional councils do when trying to achieve a consensus, and, very importantly, the role regional councils can and do play in helping local governments do their jobs. I believe that developing this enlarged understanding is a key to the future growth of the regional council movement.

Once business leaders, at least in our area, decide that a cause is worth pursuing, they devote extraordinary effort to see it through to a successful conclusion. Promoting regional governmental cooperation in general is high on our leadership's list, and the place most of that promotion seems to happen is within the regional council.

But, I have to confess that having worked in the Kansas City area all my professional life, I never fully understood the breadth of involvement of the chamber and the individual businesses in governmental issues and activities in the Kansas City region.

It is a potent, well-organized force that can and should be mobilized to deal with regional issues at the legislative level and to pursue the cause of regionalism at the local level. Our chamber maintains a strong professional lobbying presence in both Topeka and Jefferson City, as well as at the local level. Lobbyists are not there merely to deal with business issues of taxation, workers' compensation, healthcare, or the like. Nor are they there in the once-perceived traditional chamber role of "againers" fighting tax increases or regulation. Rather, the chamber lobbyists, as well as individual corporate

lobbyists, are interested in making our community a better place to live and work.

This is true within local chambers across the country. They represent a tremendous force to provide assistance to local governments and regional councils on key issues.

I do not pretend to be a Pollyanna—thinking that the business community and local governments will always agree, but, when they do, what a potent force they can represent. The Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, in the past couple of years, has supported tax increases for highways, public education, cultural facilities, and a new zoo and museum. We don't always win, but the time, dollars, and clout the business community has put into the effort truly made a difference.

One important contrast between local elected officials and business leaders is the access business leaders have to local, state, and congressional leaders. Through campaign assistance, they have already achieved a level of contact that local elected officials, and staff, may not enjoy. I wish I understood this better in my years in the regional council business. It can make a difference and should not be disregarded.

One of the most complex issues our chamber faces—and I am sure this is true in other parts of the country—is the fact that we are a chamber representing businesses throughout the metropolitan area and recognize the importance of our regional agenda. However, as our central city, Kansas City occupies a preeminent position in our interest. This issue is valid not only because suburban cities have their own chambers that operate quite effectively, but also because most

of the CEOs on our board lead businesses headquartered in Kansas City, Missouri, and understand the importance of a viable central core to the future of the metropolitan area as a whole. Therefore, these CEOs devote most of their attention, regardless of where they may live, to issues relating to education, labor-force preparation, economic development, crime, etc., within the core community. They want to find solutions to metropolitan funding for services that can relieve the burden on the central city; assure that resources are directed toward the continued health of the central city, but not in an unfair manner; and work with the mayor, council, and staff of the city to pursue these issues.

Many regional councils around the country seem to be dealing with this issue, as are several noted authors. The issue of the role of the central city in the context of the regional community is one that deserves a national dialogue. It would be an excellent agenda for a joint meeting of regional council and chamber executives. I, for one, would encourage such a dialogue for two reasons. First, it is an issue that deserves dialogue between elected and business community leaders. Second, it serves as an excellent vehicle to bring these two groups together to advance mutual issues and get to know one another.

If there is a recurring theme in my comments, it is that the regional business leader can serve as an excellent advocate to encourage elected officials to become involved regionally. Their business interests require a strong regional environment; elected officials will usually listen to the business community; the business community can provide

“cover” for elected officials to think regionally; and the business community is in a position to hold the officials accountable.

A business community leader is not restricted by thoughts on how advocating a regional agenda will affect his or her reelection—making the business leader an excellent advocate for action. I would, however, urge that contacts between regional councils and business community leaders be through organizations such as chambers, rather than on an individual basis with a particular leader. Using the organization helps to bring in the rest of the business community and makes available the full force of that organization. Perhaps this publication can take the lead in establishing this dialogue.

On a personal level, I must report that chamber work has been most exciting, challenging, and undoubtedly rewarding. Having the opportunity to work not only with elected leaders, but also with the top corporate leaders in our community, has provided an insight into how our region works that I never really understood. Business leaders have an uncanny ability to force an issue to be properly focused and directed—an ability that is often successful.

Most business leaders are eager to learn more about government and its operation, which is usually different from their own businesses. They are eager to see results and less patient with government “process.” Once they make a commitment to a project or an issue, they are involved 100 percent and provide an unbelievable amount of time and energy to its conclusion. Being unencumbered by a body politic, and not having to face

reelection at the polls, their approach to problem solving is unique and most effective.

The day-to-day activities of one of the chamber or regional council staff members are not dissimilar. Seeking consensus, worrying about budgets, setting priorities among conflicting pressures, managing a staff, and keeping a diverse membership active and involved are part of both organizations. Just as in regional council work, chambers of commerce must satisfy large and small constituents, continue to show a value-added product for the investment, and constantly think of how to better market the product and communicate with the membership.

Success is often measured by perception rather than reality. It’s a healthy process, and one that makes each day exciting. There truly is no inherent clash in cultures of the two groups, and, in fact, much is to be gained by their inherent commonality. Hopefully, as regionalism continues its maturation, chambers of commerce can become even greater advocates for regionalism’s mission.

As my executive director colleagues in the regional council business can attest, we always dreaded the cocktail party question: “What do *you* do?” It is not so dreaded a question in the chamber business—at least partially because most people understand, or have a sense of, what a chamber does.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide these thoughts in the first edition of *The Regionalist* and hope that they can serve as a challenge for chambers and regional councils to work together more actively for the common goals of metropolitan cooperation and development.



Peter S. Levi

Peter S. Levi is the president of the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce and was formerly the executive director of the Mid-America Regional Council in Kansas City. He received a B.A. from Northwestern University and J.D. and LL.M. degrees from the University of Missouri—Kansas City. Mr. Levi has been a participant in international local government

management exchange programs, sponsored by the International City Management Association, with the State of Israel. He has authored a number of publications in legal and public administration journals and a book titled *Model Subdivision Regulations* published by the American Society of Planning Officials.