Event Recap — The City's CEO: A Rousing Conversation with Lisa Goldman

Speaker:
- Lisa Goldman, City Manager, City of Burlingame

Can you elaborate on your journey and what ultimately led you into the local government space?
- Coming out of undergrad, I didn’t know what I wanted to do. This was right around the time city-wide recycling programs were starting and I thought it was so cool. I was taking a year off before going to law school when I connected with the city manager of my hometown and started working for him on these recycling programs.
- I ended up not going to law school and, after working in my hometown for a bit, I moved to Washington D.C. to work on Capitol Hill. It took a while, but eventually I started working for a Representative from California. I stayed in D.C. for a few years before going back to school to get my Master’s in public policy. After working at a non-profit, I started missing my roots in local government, so I did a lot of networking and informational interviews before I found a job at the City of Fremont. And from there it was a matter of moving up and moving around until I landed in Burlingame.
- Ultimately, I went back to the local level after working on Capitol Hill because it was so hard to get anything done at the federal level. You work on these bills that may never get a hearing. But at the local level, I could see the results of my work rather quickly and I missed the feeling of doing something good.

How did you go about developing your leadership skills and style?
• Unlike some of my peers in this field, I never thought I wanted to be a city manager until I wanted to be a city manager. I didn’t go through college thinking that this would be my life. So, I didn’t have much of a purposeful development of my leadership style.
• The way I approached it was thinking about my past supervisors and doing the opposite of what bugged me about their leadership styles.
• I also don’t read management or leadership books. I’m more intuitive in the way I lead. I want to meet people with the way that they can best absorb the information. I also want to be clear about my expectations for my employees. I want to make sure that what is being done is being done to be helpful, not just being done to be done. The people who live in our city are our bosses, so let’s respect that.

How did you go about advocating for yourself in your career?
• Advocating for myself was not an easy skill to learn. For women, it’s not an easy skill to learn. Early in my career, I wasn’t getting noticed much and I thought “If I work harder, they’ll notice me.” And my supervisors didn’t, and they won’t.
• I had to learn to advocate for myself the hard way by not getting certain opportunities. Not being a good enough advocate for myself kept me from getting the jobs I wanted.
• But after I was Acting City Manager in Alameda, things changed. Once they hired a permanent City Manager, I told him “I’ve been doing your job and I’m not going back to my earlier position. I’m getting a promotion and a raise.” And I got it. Since then, I’ve been better at advocating for myself and getting what my work and impact deserve.
• If you don’t have a boss that lets you advocate for yourself, you have the wrong boss. You should be able to talk to your supervisor about where you want to be and how you want to get there. So, if you don’t have a boss that lets you go to trainings and develop professionally, then they’re not the right boss for you.

As a city manager, how do you go about setting priorities for your city?
• My entire team and I have a goal-setting session every year. When I first came into Burlingame, they had a list of 55 goals — those aren’t goals, those are tasks.
• So, I called up my old boss and talked to her about goal-setting sessions and how to frame them. Now the process looks different and we tinker with it every year to better it. Now instead of 55 goals, we have 5 priorities that we come back to every year. In subsequent goal-setting meetings, we can drill down those priority areas and figure out how to improve on things like housing and sustainability.
• Part of it is also letting the community inform our goals, priorities, and solutions. We have to be thoughtful about what we’re dedicating our time to and working together to figure that out.

What does your best day look like? What about your worst day?
• Some of my best days are when I get to meet with my department heads. We laugh so much in those meetings and they are all so smart, so we always learn a lot, too. These meetings are also often spaces to debrief after city council meetings or bad days.
• A ribbon cutting is also a great day. They’re culminations of years of work and to celebrate that is amazing. Those events are the kind of thing that brings the community together.
• A bad day is when a community member isn’t ever happy with their problem. I’m a public person, so people can come to me and be mad over something I don’t have control over. I got into this line of work to help people and so I hate not being able to help our community members find solutions and answers.

How do you deal with unintended consequences in the work you do?
• Ultimately, I hope that with all the work I do there aren’t any bad, unseen consequences. But a lot of the work we do leads to unintended consequences or our solutions don’t solve the problem.
• You have to start thinking ahead in your decision making so that you can avoid as many of those situations as possible. That’s partly why I value my department heads so much, because they can see a lot of the consequences I’m not seeing.
So, you have to think strategically to find the best solution and then lead with the courage of conviction of a leader. And if there are consequences, going back to the drawing board and figuring out the best solution again.

**What are some common or reliable pathways into local government?**

- Informational interviews are really important. Go talk to people and see what’s out there, see what the landscape is. You have to meet with people and talk to people in order to figure out what you want. People in local government are generally receptive to these informational interviews.
- Entry level analyst positions are a great start for people graduating from undergrad. There are usually management analyst positions at various levels like specific departments, city manager offices, and county offices.
- I will say, I started with an internship at a city manager’s office after undergrad and if you can afford it, internships are a great place to start. You can gain a lot of clarity and understanding from internships.
- CalOpps is where most local opportunities (city and county) in the area are posted. You can view by interest and region. A lot of city and county positions will make you apply through CalOpps, so definitely get on there.
- Also, if you’re not sure where to start, large cities are nice for the built-in network that comes with them. These cities can be fun when starting out and you can learn a lot because they’re large.

**Fellowships and resources to look up:** [CalOpps](#), City of San Jose [Postgraduate Fellowships](#) (Mayor’s Office of Tech and Innovation and Office of Public Policy)