

A Tribute to John E. Dever
by
Elizabeth Kellar, Camille Cates Barnett, and John Shirey

John E. Dever brought vision, discipline, leadership and class to the communities where he served as city manager and to his professional association, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) where he served as President (1985-86).

Dever kept a clean desk and was spare in his décor. That was probably a strategic decision as elected officials, staff, and other visitors were immediately drawn to the framed copy of the Athenian Oath on his wall. Without having to explain his values, the statement made clear that his public duty was paramount, to “transmit this city not only not less, but greater, better, and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.”

After serving as a first lieutenant in the Marine Corps in WW II and fighting in the invasion of Iwo Jima, Dever received his bachelor’s degree from Lawrence University and his master’s degree in Public Administration from Syracuse University. He served as city manager of Two Rivers, WI, Decatur, IL, Sunnyvale, CA, and Long Beach, CA.

Dever’s reputation for innovation and excellence was recognized by his colleagues and by ICMA. He received multiple ICMA awards: Career Excellence in Memory of Mark E. Keane; In-Service Training in Memory of Clarence E. Ridley; and two for management innovations. The ICMA Board of Directors honored him with its Distinguished Service Award in 1992.

A list of Dever’s accomplishments, however impressive, does not give a full picture of his leadership and humanity. He quietly pushed the edges. For example, he hired two young women (Kellar and Barnett) to work for him in the 1970s when it was unusual to see women at city management meetings. He entrusted them with a massive public engagement project, the award-winning “New Directions for Sunnyvale,” which rated city services by residents and city employees, and brought both groups together to set priorities.

The City of Sunnyvale became renowned for its Total Performance Management program. That included findings from an annual citizens survey to rank service importance and satisfaction; employee survey feedback, and a budget that detailed five years of financial and performance data and ten years of budget projections. City goals as well as program and financial results drove resource allocations as well as areas targeted for management improvements. Sunnyvale’s performance management program and computerized systems were studied by local officials around the world.

When Dever became city manager in Long Beach, CA, he faced significant financial and management issues. His first order of business was to tackle a top-heavy, confusing organization structure by eliminating and consolidating 26 departments into 12. He hired highly qualified staff and, in turn, set high expectations for them. In the wake of California voters’ passage of Proposition 13 in June of 1978, which greatly reduced property tax revenues, Dever acted swiftly to adjust staffing levels to deal with severe fiscal constraints.

After retiring from Long Beach in 1987, Dever worked with the International Executive Service Corps, training leaders in Russia, the Czech Republic and Panama. John Dever’s intelligence, innovation, compassion and commitment represent the very best in public service and will be missed.