

Should I Stay or Should I Go? The Clash between Push and Pull Factors Effecting Administrative Turnover

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Abstract:

The exit of city managers from a community is typically cast as a result of “push factors, such as role conflict between managers and elected officials, or “pull factors” such as personal circumstances or careers opportunities. Nevertheless, systematic investigation of the relative influence of these forces on whether managers stay or go is conspicuously absent. We begin to fill this lacuna by tracking the career paths of managers who responded to an ICMA survey on council manager relations in 1996. The survey asked managers about the ideal and actual roles for managers, council and mayors to play in their community. It also included information on the personal and professional background of managers. We then identified which managers remained in their positions five years later. In addition, for those managers remaining in the profession, we identify characteristics, such as fiscal health, of the community they were in five years later.

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Introduction

What factors account for turnover among local government managers? City and county managers often confront role conflict or political turmoil in the jurisdiction they serve. One day is fine the next is black, so moving gets council off the managers back. Yet moving to another community to advance their career is also fraught risk and personal and political uncertainty. In trying to determine, should I stay or should I go now, a manager recognizes that, if I go there will be trouble, and if I stay there will be double. In recognition of the clash this choice embodies, we seek to answer the question: Should I stay or should I go (see Strummer, Jones, Simonon and Headon1981)¹.

Several studies over the past two decades have attempted to answer this question (DeHoog and Whitaker 1990; Whitaker and DeHoog 1991; Feiock and Stream 1998).

Understanding what factors contribute to manager turnover is important not only because of its theoretical connotations, but also for its practical implications. For turnover may contribute to not only inconsistent organizational outcomes (Finkelstein and Hambrick 1990; Feiock and Stream 1998), but also to the erosion of institutional integrity and neutral competence (Hecl 1977; Wilson 1994; Hass and Wright 1989; Lewis 1991; Feiock and Stream 1998).

The preponderance of empirical studies explaining manager turnover in local government have argued that attrition is a function of both push and pull factors (DeHoog and Whitaker 1990; Whitaker and DeHoog). Push factors are typically those which contribute to conflict between a manager and his elected overseers. The nature and intensity of these conflicts may ultimately result in a manager exiting her position either voluntarily or

¹ Appendix One details Strummer, Jones, Simonon and Headon's (1981) first person analysis of this question.

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involuntarily. In contrast, pull factors are typically are most routinely associated with managers' professional or career advancement, or personal objectives. These factors act to draw a manager away from her position. Though popular practitioner and academic interest in explaining manager turnover is great, to date the empirical findings about their effects on manager turnover have not told a consistent story.

The conflicting findings of prior studies may be attributable to several limitations of this work. First, much of the literature is descriptive and does not seek to test causal explanations. Second, some studies have focused primarily on community social and economic factors, while others focus on the backgrounds, experience and career paths of managers. Third, some studies measure key concepts such as role conflict based on perceptions of managers themselves (DeHoog and Whitaker 1990; Whitaker and DeHoog 1991; Kammerer et al. 1962) while others rely on objective measures of managers work situation environment and context. Fourth, most work neglects the importance of political institutions in shaping the individual incentives of managers (though see Feiock and Stream 1998). Because institutions shape the environment in which managers operates we should expect executive and legislative structures to influence tenure.

We address each of these limitations by supplementing managers background, perceptions and assessments of role conflicts in their community with archival economic, demographic, political, fiscal and institutional data. This more comprehensive model is then used to predict where the manager will still be serving in this community seven years later. survey that of managers

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I. Manager Turnover - What Do We Know?

Turnover in local government entities is important because city managers play increasingly complex and interrelated role in both the substance and the process of local governance (Svara 1999). Many inferences about local government turnover may be derived from studies on turnover at the federal and state levels. The literature associated with the turnover of appointed federal executives has focused on the political dimensions of the appointed executive and his or her relationship with career federal employees. Covington (1985), suggests levels of stress and uncertainty occur between politically appointed federal executives and career federal executives, resulting in a blurred understanding of the organizational hierarchy. The literature also suggests that a high degree of organizational turmoil follows the turnover of politically appointed federal executives (Covington 1985; Hecl 1988).

Similar to the federal level, the literature associated with turnover of appointed state executives has also focused on the political conflict. Roberts (1988) study of appointed state executives found that bureaucratic appointees tended to have more stability, leading to lengthier tenures than political appointees. Much like the research at the federal level, there has been no research focused on specific factors that could explain appointed state executive turnover other than change in administration.

Consistent with patterns observed at the federal and state levels, frequent turnover among local government executives can have far-reaching effects on service delivery capacity, the ability of local governments to enter into long-term contracts and commitments, economic

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development, and an array of other operational and planning areas (Clingermayer and Feiock 2001; Clinger et al. 2008; McCabe et al. 2008).

Factors Contributing to Manager Turnover

Early studies attributed turnover to political conflict and political uncertainty (Kammerer et al. 1962; Banfield and Wilson 1963). DeHoog and Whitacker's (1985) much cited work suggested that internal political struggles for control within city and county commissions played a major role in managers' decisions to voluntarily seek employment elsewhere. They also found that uncertainty within the commission led to involuntary turnover when the top executive became entangled or aligned with the commission members. Recent studies of manager turnover focus on how disagreements and role conflicts between commission members and managers influence the decision of a top executive to leave his or her position (DeHoog and Whitaker 1990; Desantis and Newell 1996; Stream 2009).

Government fiscal performance has also been linked to manager turnover (Feiock et al. 2001; Feiock and Stream 2002; McCabe et al. 2008). Fiscal stress, fiscal crisis, and declines in city financial conditions have each been linked to the exit of managers from a community (McCabe et al. 2008).

Community characteristics play an important role in city manager turnover (Boynton and DeSantis 1990; Feiock et al. 2001; McCabe et al. 2006; Newell et al. 1989; Stillman 1974; Watson and Hassett 2003). Stillman (1974) found that population size was a dominant factor in top public executive turnover. Similar results were found in later studies which suggested that

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managers' career ambitions led them to seek out positions in larger cities (Feiock et al., 2001; McCabe et al 2008). Community diversity has also been linked to turnover. Watson and Hassett (2003), for example, found that the longest serving city managers worked in communities with racially homogenous populations.

The career trajectories, tenure and personal characteristics of managers also influence whether they continue in their positions (DeHoog and Whitaker 1990; DeSantis and Renner 1993; Feiock and Stream 1998; Renner 2001; Watson and Hassett 2002; 2004; Whitaker and DeHoog 1991). Watson and Hassett (2002) found that a vast majority of long-serving top municipality executives had graduate degrees. DeSantis and Newell (1996) found that most managers came from outside the community, suggesting that career ambitions might explain tenure.

Several studies suggest managers change positions numerous times during their careers seeking stability or pursuing positions in progressively larger and better paying jurisdictions (Feiock and Stream 1998; DeHoog and Whitaker 1990; DeSantis and Renner 1994; Kaatz et al. 1999; Renner and DeSantis 1994). Feiock and associates (Feiock and Clingermayer 1997; 2001; Feiock 2004; Zhang and Feiock 2007; McCabe et al 2008) advance a city manager career incentives thesis that argues that ambitious managers seeking career advancement in the city management profession pursue innovation and cost efficiencies seeking to be "residual claimants" on local government performance. Nevertheless, at least some managers experience lengthy tenures in a single municipality (Watson and Hassett 2003; 2004). Several studies suggest that as a manager's tenure in a particular city increases, the probability that they will leave this position decreases (Mobley et al. 1979; Cotton and Tuttle 1986).

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Political Structure

Several institutional characteristics of communities are expected to increase the likelihood of turnover to the extent that lead to conflict, particularistic demands and potential for elected officials to be more active in policy and administration. Where mayors are elected at large or have their own staff we expect turnover to be more likely. Likewise where there are more elected officers and council has its own staff, there is more potential for conflict and turnover. Whether council members are elected from the community at large or represent local districts has been demonstrated to influence conflict and the representation of particular community interests (Lubell et al. 2009). Thus we anticipate district representation will increase the likelihood of turnover.

Role Conflict

The role of the city manager relative to mayor and council has been a contentious issue throughout the history of the council manager plan. Some interpretations of Woodrow Wilson's politics administration dichotomy suggest a very narrow and limited role for managers.

Svara's dichotomy-duality model identifies four dimensions of municipal governance: mission, policy, administration, and management. Both elected officials and administrators can be involved in these four dimensions, but managers should exert control over administration and management, while there is still extensive power sharing between elected officials and administrators in the policy realm (Svara 1985). Recent work describes the politics-administration relationship as a "complementarity" model that views managers' relationships with elected officials as complementary (Svara 1998, 1999b). Administrators accept the control

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of elected officials while elected officials respect what administrators do and how they do it.

Dunn and Legge (2002) similarly describe a council and manager relationships as "partnership."

Nalbandian (1987) notes public executives are increasingly responsible for bringing forward issues and information before the elected governing board. By providing the board with information that supports their recommendations and directing employees to carry out specific programs, top public executives have become an integral part of the organization's policy-making process. Policy proposals frequently begin with top public executives and not with the commission or council (Morgan and Watson 1992; Newell and Ammons 1987).

Empirical studies report overlapping roles between managers and elected leaders. Boynton and Wright (1971), and Morgan and Watson (1992), identify four possible interaction patterns where either: 1) both the manager and mayor are strong; 2) a strong city manager dominates policy-making; 3) a strong mayor dominates policy-making; or 4) both the manager and mayor are weak in policy leadership. They also use the distinction "team" or "no team" to describe the relationship between the mayor and manager based on the frequency of their interactions. They find that slightly over half of cities have mayor-manager teams; and within the team category, the most common arrangement was the manager-dominant partnership. Svava's (1999a) empirical analysis concludes that the boundary line between the council and the city manager is frequently blurred.

Role conflicts between a manager and his elected overseers may result in lower trust in the manager by elected officials, and thus decrease their willingness to assign policy-making power (Zhang and Feiock 2009). A good relationship is indicative of frequent and/or effective council-manager communication, which facilitates mutual understanding and lowers the risk of

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conflict. Browne (1985) finds that managers who report having a good working relationship with the council feel that their participation in policy making is necessary.

We identify ten key areas where role conflicts might be motivate the exit of a manager from a community. These areas are derived from the 1996 ICMA Council-Manager Plan Task Force Survey which collected asked local managers a series of two-part questions about first, how their governing bodies dealt with an array of issues, and second, about their beliefs on the most effective way to deal with these issues. We argue that conflict may arise as a result of the following activities including: requirements to report to the council as a unit, requirements to report to council members separately, council goal setting, structuring relationships between the manager and council, the dictation of council priorities, and legislative red tape. Additional contributors to conflict may include limitations on the ability of managers to present the council with options for policy implementation, interactions between council members and administrative staff, executive involvement in policy initiation, and manager involvement in refereeing relationships between the council and executive. More detailed descriptions of these variables and their hypothesized effects on manager tenure are provided in the variable key.

II. Research Design

The dependent variable is local manager turnover five years following completion of the 1996 survey and is measured by a binary indicator. We do not have the exact data of departure and therefore a duration model is inappropriate. Normally a logit or probit analysis would be

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used in this case, but the data contain multiple influence points and diagnostics indicated a cauchit regression provides more reliable and conservative estimates. A cauchit model uses the Cauchy distribution as the link function and is particularly useful when there are extreme values in the tails. In the analysis presented here, the fiscal variables all have extreme values for cities with extremely good or extremely poor health. The cauchit model provides similar estimates to those of a logistic model after removing all the outliers, but allows us to avoid bias the model through data elimination.

The majority of independent variables in this study are derived from the 1996 survey instrument. Numerous dummy variables are included to distinguish between cities and counties, if the mayor is elected or appointed by the council, and if the council has separate staff. The amount of district representation is an ordinal variable with “0” indicating all council representation is at large, “.5” indicating mixed representation, and “1” indicating the entire council is elected by district.

The role conflict variables are all measured in a similar manner. Each variable is measured by the manager’s perceived effectiveness divided by the rate of actual usage. A higher value indicates less role conflict while lower values indicate high levels of divergence. Relationships with the council may significantly impact a manager’s level of job satisfaction, and may hence influence his or her decision to stay in or leave a jurisdiction. Prior research suggests that higher quality relationships between manager and council have positive effects on job satisfaction (DeSantis, Glass, and Newell 1992). The quality of these relationships may be shaped by reporting mechanisms, planning and goal-setting activities, and by the amount of

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time that managers and the council dedicate to discussing relationships between the two. Four variables are used to test for relationship effects. The first accounts for the frequency of, and manager's perceptions about the effectiveness of, reporting to the council as a unit. Because reporting to a single unit may increase transparency and reduce redundancy and inconsistency, we hypothesize that reporting of this nature will reduce conflict and have a positive effect on manager tenure.

While reporting to the council as a whole may reduce conflict, a higher frequency of reporting to legislators on policies and initiatives may increase tensions not only between the manager and other members of the council, but also within the legislative body. It may also divert the manager away from more preferred activities. While 73.6% of managers in the survey indicated that they were frequently required to respond to individual council member inquiries, only slightly more than a third of them viewed this as an effective way to interact. We hypothesize that greater conflict here will be inversely associated with manager tenure.

Next, relationships between a manager and council may be shaped by the extent to which legislative goals are clearly articulated to the manager. Routine planning and goal-setting during non-legislative sessions and other meetings may contribute greatly to an understanding of these priorities, the identification of shared goals, and to conflict resolution where the manager's understanding of objectives and council preferences are misaligned. Opportunities to discuss important issues in less structured settings may reduce council-manager conflict. Hence, we hypothesize that the more frequent occurrence of retreats, informal meetings, and other non-legislative sessions to discuss council priorities will be positively associated with

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manager tenure.

Our final test of possible relationship contributors to conflict is a measure which accounts for managers' perceptions about the frequency and effectiveness of meetings to discuss how well the council and manager relate to one another. In a fashion similar to planning and goal-setting, these meetings may help to both promote cohesion and reduce transaction costs within the governing body. We anticipate that when such meetings are routinely held and valued by managers, turnover will be less likely.

Role conflict may also arise due to manager preferences relating to policy implementation and development. Inventorying council priorities relating to policy implementation may prove to be a daunting task for a manager. While managers may have their own sets of preferences when it comes to addressing community problems, prior research suggests that in addition to professional values and other factors, council support may influence these preferences. For example, DeSantis et al. (1992) find that as council support for drug prevention and education programs declined, so too did managers' perceptions about the importance of those issues. Awareness about and responsiveness to legislative preferences is likely to reduce the amount of conflict between the manager and council. This knowledge is likely to be bolstered when the council formally articulates its preferences in writing. We hypothesize that tenure be longer for managers whose perceive this as an effective contributor to policy implementations.

Overly burdensome requirements to report on policy implementation may increase the level of conflict between a manager and a council. While the ICMA survey results suggest that

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reporting on specific council policies and objectives occurs frequently, it was not among the most effective policy implementation practices identified by managers. Managers may perceive such reporting as “red tape” which adds additional, and useless, administrative burdens. Where a high level of divergence between the amount of required reporting and manager perceptions about the effectiveness of such reporting exists, we anticipate an increased likelihood of turnover during the study period.

The most effective policy implementation method identified by respondents to the survey dealt with the frequency at which managers were able to present the elected body with feasible options for policy implementation. 67.3% of respondents indicated that this was among the most effective methods for implementing policies adopted by the governing body.

Interactions between councilmembers and employees appear to be quite limited occurrences based on the ICMA survey results. This appears to be a practice that is neither favored by councilmembers, nor by managers. An explanation for this barrier is that because the council appraises only the performance of the manager, and because the manager in his or her supervisory role serves as their link to the agency, any issues they have pertaining to the performance of a specific agency should be directed through the manager (Svara, 1999). Given the implications of council interactions with employees for manager performance and authority, we hypothesize that more significant disparities between actual occurrences of this behavior and managers’ acceptance of it will be inversely related to tenure.

Role conflict may become most apparent in examining the roles of managers and executives in the mayor-council form of government. Prior studies (Kammerer, 1964 and

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Whitaker and DeHoog, 1991) that tension is likely to be increased when a popularly elected mayor is present. In the current analysis, we ask a slightly different question: are conflict and turnover a function of the divergence between who initiates policy and managers' preferences? While less than 10% of survey respondents indicated that the initiation was an effective role for the governing body's executive, half reported that it occurred frequently (6.7% reported that the executive always initiated policy). Evolving roles for elected executives and managers in council-manager forms are likely to increase conflict (Svara, 1987a). In situations where managers perceive a higher frequency of policy initiation by an elected executive or other official, we anticipate a higher likelihood of turnover.

Our last conflict variable measures managers' perceptions about the effectiveness and frequency of engaging in activities to promote cohesion within the governing body. While a majority (98.6%) of respondents indicated that they engage in teambuilding at some level, only slightly more than a quarter of them found it to be an effective role for the manager. We hypothesize that more significant divergence between the frequency and perceived effectiveness of teambuilding activities will be correlated with turnover.

The final set of variables is from the 1997 Census of Government Finance. Population is used to create the per capita measures of debt and property tax. Fiscal health is measured as the difference between expenditures and revenues divided by total revenues. Fiscal health is centered because we include the squared value also.

III. Results

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The results from the cauchit regression are presented in Table 1. The regression diagnostics indicate the model is appropriate. The model still suffers from multicollinearity issues which we plan on addressing in the next iteration of this study.

Table 1: Cauchit Model Estimates Predicting City Manager Turnover

| Variable | Estimate | Std Error | z | p |
|-----------------------------------|----------|-----------|--------|--------|
| Intercept | 0.6212 | 0.4097 | 1.516 | 0.1295 |
| population | -0.0578 | 0.0539 | -1.071 | 0.2840 |
| city | 0.2142 | 0.2135 | 1.003 | 0.3157 |
| elected mayor | -0.0493 | 0.1438 | -0.343 | 0.7318 |
| number of elected officials | -0.0394 | 0.0339 | -1.164 | 0.2446 |
| amount of district representation | 0.3949 | 0.1929 | 2.047 | 0.0406 |
| council staff | 0.3550 | 0.3847 | 0.923 | 0.3560 |
| tenure | -0.0164 | 0.0117 | -1.401 | 0.1613 |
| council | -0.7631 | 0.5089 | -1.499 | 0.1338 |
| individual | -0.2226 | 0.4221 | -0.527 | 0.5979 |
| goals | 0.1780 | 0.2099 | 0.848 | 0.3965 |
| relate | 0.2127 | 0.1994 | 1.067 | 0.2862 |
| priorities | 0.2571 | 0.3872 | 0.664 | 0.5066 |
| red tape | 0.0688 | 0.4290 | 0.16 | 0.8726 |
| options | -0.1198 | 0.4654 | -0.257 | 0.7968 |
| interfere | 1.2806 | 0.6026 | 2.125 | 0.0336 |
| exec | 0.2892 | 0.2823 | 1.024 | 0.3058 |
| cohesion | 0.6685 | 0.5045 | 1.325 | 0.1851 |
| debt per capita | 0.0719 | 0.0531 | 1.354 | 0.1758 |
| property tax per capita | -0.7401 | 0.2054 | -3.603 | 0.0003 |
| fiscal health | 0.0008 | 0.3773 | 0.002 | 0.9984 |
| fiscal health squared | -0.0972 | 0.1697 | -0.573 | 0.5669 |

The three variables that achieve accepted levels of significance are district representation, interference from the council, and per capita property tax levels. Higher amounts of district representation lead to more turnovers by city manager as expected. When city managers perceive that the council is interfering more than is acceptable, they are more likely to exit. These results indicate that council relations are a primary reason for managerial

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turnover.

City managers in areas with high percapita property tax are less likely to move. Higher per capita property taxes are an indicator of poor fiscal conditions and make city managers less marketable. Why property tax rates are a better predictor of managerial turnover than traditional fiscal health measures or debt requires future research, but it is entirely plausible that the high levels of civic engagement over property taxes compared to lower levels of local interest in overall debt make property tax the preferred signal for potential employers in other cities.

IV. Discussion

In the early days of the council-manager plan of government, proponents of the plan often compared the relationship between a city manager and a city council to the relationship that a chief executive officer has with a corporate board of directors. Although this comparison is still mentioned in scholarly examinations of the council-manager form of government, there has been little effort to link research on city managers to the theoretical and empirical research traditions that focus on the problematic relationship between chief executive officers, boards of directors, shareholders, and other stakeholders. It was argued here and in other places that city managers often act “as if” they were residual claimants who can and do capture a portion of the benefits of local government policy innovation and successful fiscal and economic development policies (see Feiock and Clingermayer 2004; Zhao and Feiock 2009). While not a residual claimant in the strict sense, since there are no profits in

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local government to distribute, city managers can use the tangible policy success to advance their careers, usually by finding better paying positions at larger and wealthier communities.

Managers of corporations and of cities may take actions that appear to benefit those they have been chosen to serve. But short-term profit statements may be achieved at the cost of long-run obligations. Economic growth in communities may be achieved at the cost of high-priced development incentives or expensive capital improvement projects. In the case of corporate managers, short-run gains may lead to much higher salaries, particularly if part of their compensation is provided in the form of stock options. In the city management profession, economic growth may make managers marketable nationwide, with managers moving upward to larger communities and much higher paying positions (see, e.g., Stein, 1990). Often growth-oriented managers end their careers doing private consulting work, at even higher paying salaries. Therefore, city managers may act as if they were "residual claimants" even if they hold no ownership rights in the organizations that they manage.

This paper provides the foundation for future research that can address this issue directly. We will start with the managers we study here that responded to the 1996 CMTF survey and follow their career patterns and compensation. We will track the careers of these managers over the next 12 years (1997- 2009) to identify not only if they moved but also where they moved to. This allows us to assess whether turnover is reflects horizontal or vertical movement in terms of city size and status. We will also collect data on their salary before and after moving. In combination with measures of policy, fiscal and development performance, this will allow us to test our "city manager as residual claimant" hypothesis.

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Variable Key

| Variable Name | Calculation | What it Measures |
|---------------|---------------|---|
| Council | IB1 / IA1 | Calculation of how frequently the manager meets with the entire council and manager perceptions about the effectiveness of these interactions |
| Individual | IB4 / IA4 | Calculation of how frequently the manager meets with individual council members and manager perceptions about the effectiveness of these meetings |
| Goals | IIB2 / IIA2 | Calculation of how frequently the manager and council meet/conduct retreats for goal setting and managers' perceptions about the effectiveness of goal setting activities |
| Relate | IIB4 / IIA4 | Measures how often the manager and governing body meet to discuss relations between the two and manager perceptions about the effectiveness of these discussions |
| Priorities | IIIB1 / IIIA1 | Calculation of how frequently the manager and council engage in activities through which council policy priorities are outlined |
| Redtape | IIIB2 / IIIA2 | Measures manager preferences for reporting progress on policy implementation and actual requirements for doing so |
| Options | IIIB5 / IIIA5 | Measure of manager opinions about the effectiveness of recommending policy implementation recommendations versus the actual frequency of doing so |
| interfere | IVB3 / IVA3 | Measures the extent to which council members have access to employees and manager perceptions about the effectiveness of such interferences |

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|----------|-----------------|--|
| exec | VA4 x VB4 / VA4 | Measure of the extent to which the mayor or another elected official initiates policy and the manager's perception of the effectiveness of this process |
| cohesion | VIB5 / VIB5 | Measures the frequency at which managers engage in teambuilding between the council and executive and perceptions about the effectiveness of these activities (4=Occurs very frequently/highly important; 3=Occurs somewhat frequently and is very effective; 2 = Occurs less frequently and is but is perceived as very effective; 1 = Does not occur but is perceived as very effective; 0 = not effective). |

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APPENDIX 1

Darling you got to let me know
Should I stay or should I go?
If you say that you are mine
I'll be here 'til the end of time
So you got to let me know
Should I stay or should I go?

It's always tease tease tease
You're happy when I'm on my knees
One day is fine, the next is black
So if you want me off your back
Well come on and let me know
Should I Stay or should I go?

Should I stay or should I go now?
Should I stay or should I go now?
If I go there will be trouble
An' if I stay it will be double
So come on and let me know

This indecision's bugging me
If you don't want me, set me free
Exactly who'm I'm supposed to be
Don't you know which clothes even fit me?
Come on and let me know
Should I cool it or should I blow?

Should I stay or should I go now?
Should I stay or should I go now?
If I go there will be trouble
And if I stay it will be double

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

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So you gotta let me know
Should I cool it or should I blow?
Should I stay or should I go now?
If I go there will be trouble
and if I stay there will be double?
So you gotta' let me know!
Should I stay or should I go