

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast Season 3, Episode 10, “Focus on the Windshield, Not the Rearview Mirror”

[Podcast theme music begins]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is City Speak. I'm your host, Adriana Temali-Smith. This is our last episode of season three of The City Speak [podcast theme music fades out], and so after today we're gonna take a little bit of a break. But we know that this is a really important time for cities right now. Next week there is a general election. Many of our cities are deep in the mix of running elections and many of you who are listening might be running for re-election, or perhaps you're even a future city official who's running for the first time. And so, we wanted to wrap up the season by bringing you some well wishes from all of us at the League and especially from our League of Minnesota Cities Board President, Brad Wiersum. I think you're going to enjoy the conversation that we had today.

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Adriana Temali-Smith:

So Brad, there's an election next week. Can I start out by asking you, what was running through head when you realized that you'd won your election?

Brad Wiersum:

Well perhaps the first thought is, “Well, I've really done it.” And a second thought was, “This is a great city, so don't screw it up.”

Adriana Temali-Smith:

[Laughs]

Brad Wiersum:

And those were, those were really my first thoughts because I follow a strong legacy of leadership in the City of Minnetonka. It, I was very excited about as- basically ascending into that role because I had been a longtime city councilmember. But really, it was, this, this is a significant responsibility and I want to maintain and build on our reputation of excellence.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, we're gonna get to some advice for those newly elected officials who are perhaps being elected to city council for the first time. But before we do that, I wanna ask you, when you first took office as a councilmember in 2004, what most surprised you about the job?

Brad Wiersum:

Well, I really didn't have any significant expectations because I had so little experience. And so, as a, I, I've called myself the greenest of green horns when I stepped in because I had not been involved in city activities and I really applied for the opening that existed on the Minnetonka City Council kind of as a lark. I mean, I, I had the time, and I knew I could do it, and I always had an interest. But my expectations were, I'm here to learn and I wanna do a good job for the city. But it, it was one of those things where I really didn't have any specific expectations, but I did have a very experienced council so I took advantage of that. I sat back and observed and I was h- I was in a position where I had the luxury to do that.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, over the years, have you had any “aha” moments while serving?

Brad Wiersum:

Well the, the “aha” moments occur based on the reality that, you know, nobody does this job perfectly. And, while you always want to do a good job, the, the thing that I've learned is that you need to take a broad view and you need to think of the position strategically. When I make decisions and vote on things in the city council, I really work not to listen to the loud few, but take a step back and think about what is best for the city as a whole. I was a ward councilmember, and so that puts a little bit more pressure on you to really listen to the constituents that live in your ward. But I always had the attitude that if it's right for the city, then it will be right for my ward, and if it's not right for the city, then it won't be. I did not get too parochial in my decision-making.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Everyone is feeling the challenge of this year. What kind of role should a mayor assume as a morale booster during uncertain times?

Brad Wiersum:

Well, I think above all, a mayor has to recognize that he or she is a leader in his or her city. And we have to take a leadership role and understand what that means. And I've described my role in my city during the, um, during the pandemic is, managing the space between, um, hope and danger. Because we need to be hopeful, we need to be positive, and we need to provide a perspective to our residents that we believe we are going to get through this and I am here to help our residents get through this very difficult time. At the same time, um, part of the job is to put up a caution flag and say, “Danger,” because this pandemic is nothing to trifle at, and we can't just shrug it off and act like it's nothing because people are getting sick and people are dying, and that's happening in my city as it is in cities across the state and across the country. So it really is to navigate that space between hope — because we have to be hopeful — and danger, because this is a very serious set of circumstances.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

There's a lot of partisanship in public discourse today. We know that you've done a lot to keep discussions nonpartisan in Minnetonka and certainly here at the League. Why has that been important to you?

Brad Wiersum:

Well first of all, my role as a city official is nonpartisan. Secondly, [laughs] I'll be very honest and say, neither of the political parties has done a particularly good job of persuading me that they have the right path forward. I think that, uh, the truth usually lies in the middle. But I think holding a nonpartisan role, I think it's important to demonstrate from a leadership perspective that I'm going to do what's right for my city based on what I believe, and that is nonpartisan. I mean, I'm, I'm, my party is the City of Minnetonka party. I wanna do what's right for our city and, uh, not, um, get pulled left or right based upon what the pundits are saying and the political winds are saying. I think it's very important that, uh, the basic things that cities do are frankly nonpartisan. And we have to rise above partisanship to do the things that, uh, we believe and I believe are right for my city and frankly, at the League as well. Um, we need to lead from a, from a broad perspective.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, Brad, you have talked a little bit about being mayor and I, I wanna transition now into talking more about your role as the LMC Board President. And I'm wondering if you could expand on how your role as an elected official or your m- your role as mayor has prepared you to lead the LMC Board.

Brad Wiersum:

Well, I think that a key attribute of being a good leader is to be a good listener and to understand the pulse of what is happening in your city, and you get that by talking to people and, and listening to what they have to say. And I think that skill is very necessary as president of the League of Minnesota Cities. I live in a metro suburban city and I'm mayor of that city. And there is much I have to learn and don't know about the issues of Greater Minnesota cities.

Brad Wiersum:

And while all cities have a lot in common, I've learned a great deal, and I've also learned about how different cities are managed and how the responsibilities of different cities fall on the mayor and on the city council. And, there are many things that are done in Greater Minnesota cities that, frankly, I don't have to worry about as mayor of Minnetonka. Wastewater, for example, is handled by the Met Council in Minnetonka, where many Greater Minnesota cities have their wastewater systems and are dealing with issues from the State Pollution Control Agency and so forth. So, I've had to listen and broaden my perspective as I've learned the issues that Greater Minnesota city representatives have to deal with and that's been helpful and very interesting.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, Brad, you recently spent some time visiting counterparts throughout the state in your role as LMC president. Were there any reoccurring themes in your conversations?

Brad Wiersum:

Well, clearly COVID-19 is a reoccurring theme everywhere. And a lot of our conversation had to do with how different cities and different regions are dealing with the pandemic. And it was very revealing and very interesting, because we're, while we probably all have emergency preparedness plans, or pandemic plans, or whatever, that have been on the shelf for a long time, I think that this pandemic is testing cities and requiring them to collaborate in ways that they perhaps never did before or never could before. But when you're facing a crisis and an emergency, all of a sudden things that didn't seem feasible or were things that people didn't wanna do, all of a sudden become necessary.

Brad Wiersum:

For example, when I was in Biwabik, the, the mayor there and the officials from the surrounding communities talked about how they meet routinely to talk about the pandemic, and their response, and how they can collaborate together. They also talked about collaboration across entities that typically did not collaborate so well together. And they would have, routinely have meetings with the hospital, um, leadership, the county leadership, the IRRRB leadership, and, um, and their fellow cities. And I think that those types of cross-functional, cross-entity communications and collaborations were new due to the pandemic and they were very refreshing and exciting to see.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

We mentioned that there's a big election next week and obviously we are looking at the possibility of having about 600 new elected officials on city council across the state of Minnesota. And so, I wanted to take an opportunity to get your opinion on some advice as these folks start out their journey in public service.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, here's the first question for you. Things don't always go the way that you planned or expected. What is the biggest lesson you've learned that you think will help others to keep them moving forwards as they work through surprising, complex, and disruptive issues in their city?

Brad Wiersum:

I think the best thing a new councilmember can do is to focus on the windshield and not the rear-view mirror. As we go through whatever issues we confront, we never get them perfectly. And we have to make decisions, we have to move forward, and we have to live with the results of those. And don't spend time regretting or kicking yourself for the ones that didn't go the way you wanted them to. Learn from it, and have the resolve to make a better decision next time. But, I can, I talk to people and I try to be honest about the fact that I don't do this job perfectly. And I've done things that I think, if I had it to do over again, I would do differently.

Brad Wiersum:

But I don't spend a lot of time beating myself up from, from the mistakes, or the, or the decisions that I wish I had done differently. Um, that, that time has come and gone. What we need to do is learn from our experiences, focus on the future, and continue to work toward excellence and to, um, continuous improvement, because we can all do our jobs better and we can all learn from our experiences.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, Brad, I know that you are a family man and I know that many of us are feeling the pressures of balancing our personal lives and our work lives. I'm wondering, as you approach all of the various roles that you play and the obligations that you have, what practical advice can you offer folks about balancing priorities as they embark on their city leadership journey?

Brad Wiersum:

That's a good question. And I think it is a challenge for everyone, but I also think that, there's a couple of things that, that work for me. One is, don't take yourself too seriously. The work that we're doing is important and it is serious, but at the same time, um, cut yourself some slack and, and seek some humor, um, even in challenging situations. I think that humor goes a long way to break tension and to show the world and your colleagues and your family, um, that you, uh, that you're ho- normal and that you're human.

Brad Wiersum:

The second thing is that, we're working hard and we're long hours and we are facing stress. So, you need to take a break and cut yourself some slack and, and be kind to yourself. And, in your, while you're doing that, be kind to others. I think that one of the themes that I've tried to, um, provide in my communication to my city is that, if we don't do a good job of taking care of ourselves, we can't do a good job of taking others. And even if that little break is a walk around the block, or, or five minutes just to take some time for yourself, I think it's important because sometimes we get so wrapped up in our work that we don't take time for ourselves and we don't take time for the, those that are, we're close to who mean the most to us. And we have an obligation to do that, but at the same time, we have to stay on the treadmill, as well.

Brad Wiersum:

So, it's, it's a really an issue of balancing and, um, and, you know, dealing with the stress because this is a stressful time and no one can say that COVID-19 is not stressing them or their families. Um, so we need to, uh, cut ourselves some slack, smile once in a while, and then, be kind to others.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

That was a great answer and I know that we can all do a little bit more of that. I have two more questions for you. I wanted to know, if you could recommend a single book that newly elected officials should definitely read. What would it be?

Brad Wiersum:

That was, that was one of your harder questions and I, I put some thought into that. And a- as, th- the book, and the two, there's two books that came to mind. One is quite current and it is, um, "Leadership in Turbulent Times" by Doris Kearns Goodwin.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brad Wiersum:

And she traces the leadership of Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Teddy Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson. And their presidencies were far different, but they certainly faced turbulent times and I found that reading about those great men and how they handled their leadership roles in very challenging times, is very relevant to leadership in, um, the time of, uh, COVID-19. And these are turbulent times, and I think staying focused and keeping your eye on the ball and, but listening to others, as well, so that, um, that you can deal with things and you're not putting it all on your shoulders, but you know where you're going. You have, you have an approach and you know where you're going with what you wanna do. So, that was a very valuable book.

Brad Wiersum:

There's another book, though, that it's a mu- it's an older book and I read it early in my career, but it was "In Search of Excellence," and that's a Tom Peters book and, um, the other is Waterman. And it was a, kind of the, management book of the, uh, the early '80s and there was a- there's a lot in there. But one of the suggestions is management by walking around.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Brad Wiersum:

And what you learn from your colleagues and so forth is so valuable. It's not just about sitting at your desk and doing your work, it's about listening to others and understanding the pulse of your organization as, when you're a elected official, it's the pulse of your city. Now that's, management by walking around's hard to do during a, during a pandemic where we're all socially distancing and, um, and isolating at home in many cases. But, staying close to the people that you work with and understanding what's going on in your city, management, managing by walking around is, um, a very important skill for an elected official.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Can I ask you to just expand upon that? In a, a non-pandemic world, what does that look like for an elected official in a city?

Brad Wiersum:

Well, I think it's, you know, so much of our communication today is, uh, email and text and, and things like that. I'm not a big social, um, media user, but it is touching base with people. But I think, I think it really is working to be visible, letting people know that you have an open-door policy. The only, um, phone I have on the city website for contacting me is my cell phone. And people call me at all times and they are often surprised when I pick up. But I think it is being reachable and letting people know that you, you care and you wanna hear what they have to say.

Brad Wiersum:

Sometimes people want to debate in email and I find that never works well. So after I send, s- somebody sends me an email and I respond, and if they wanna come back and, and make some counterpoints, I

suggest that they give me a call because I think conversations can be done much better, um, when you're talking with someone or s- or visiting with them directly than they can be through, um, through written media. So, I think that's a big part of it. Being visible and being willing to talk to anybody at any time.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

All right, Brad. This has been a great conversation. I have a last question for you which is, what would be your top piece of advice for a newly elected official in their first year of office?

Brad Wiersum:

Well, it's, it goes back to what I said earlier about being strategic and taking a broad view. I know many newly elected officials got elected because they wanted to do something. There was a specific issue. But oftentimes, that specific issue may go your way or maybe not go your way, but regardless, when it's over, it's over. And you're still a councilmember or you're still a mayor. And you're there to do the work of your residents and the work of the city. So take a broad view and make decisions not based upon what you want or what your neighbor likes, but what's best for the city because I think that will serve you well and I think it will help people realize that, uh, there's more to you than just one issue, and I think that's important. So, I really think a broad view and trying to understand what your city needs and how you can help your city achieve what it needs, is the best advice that I can provide.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Well, Brad, it's been really wonderful getting to chat to you today. Thank you so much for sharing your experience and your wisdom with us and with our listeners on The City Speak podcast. Is there anything you wanna leave our audience with?

Brad Wiersum:

Yes, there are, and thank you very much for having me. Next week we have an important election in our history. And elections are essential to our democracy. And I just wanna thank everyone who has stepped forward to run for office. It's a very important step and I salute your courage for stepping forward and running for office and I wish you well in the coming election. Good luck.

[Podcast theme music plays briefly and fades out]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So here at City Speak we like to wrap up by reflecting on the important lessons that our guests bring us. And those of you who listen regularly know that I like to bring three key messages to the end of the show, but in all honesty, it's been really hard to narrow it down to three. Here are a few key messages that I heard from my conversation with Brad today.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

The first was to focus on the windshield and not the rear-view mirror. I loved that. Don't dwell on the things you've done in the past, but keep looking forward and continue to improve. He placed a lot of emphasis on making decisions strategically. You need to make sure that you are thinking about what your whole city needs and not just listening to the loudest person. I absolutely loved what he said about the role of managing the space between hope and danger when we're in uns- uncertain times. The role of a leader during these times is to really find that balancing point between being hopeful for the future and being risk averse.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

There was some great advice that Brad shared around understanding the needs of your city by becoming a really good listener, and when you become an elected official, listening skills are perhaps the thing that we at the League talk about most and hear most elected officials say that they had to develop.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

And lastly, there was a couple of great personal notes. The first was, don't take yourself too seriously. I've had the opportunity to work with Brad in the last two years since I've worked for the League of Minnesota Cities and I would say he's a joy to work with, not only for the professionalism and dedication he brings to his role, but for the fact that we can have a laugh at the end of the day. And if things don't go exactly as planned, he's the type of guy that can learn from it and make you feel okay about it. And the last was to be kind to yourself and be kind to others. And I think that in this year of 2020 and as we head into what could be a divided, uh, difficult election result, that's really good advice. So, I leave you with that one. Be kind to yourself and be kind to others.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

That's it for our show and for season three of The City Speak podcast. I want to thank you, the listeners, for your continued support. [Podcast theme music begins] A big thank you to today's guest, Brad Wiersum. If you are running for election on November 3, we wish you luck. And don't forget to keep an eye out for our Elected Leaders Institute for new and experienced officials. That will be coming your way in early 2021 and registration will be out soon, so keep an eye on those emails. Lastly, I need to give a big thank you to my colleagues, Laura Zenz and Eric Haugen, without whom this show wouldn't exist. We are gonna take a little bit of a break while we begin to work on season four of the show, so make sure that you hit subscribe if you haven't already and we'll release some bonus episodes from time to time. And we love hearing from you. Feedback, show ideas, city issues that you care deeply about, all of those things can be emailed to us at podcast@lmc.org. Until next time, take care.

[Podcast theme music ends]