

# In Practice

FINANCE | ACCOUNTING | PERSPECTIVES | INTERVIEWS



## FINANCE

CITY OF ISSAQUAH, WASHINGTON

# Contribution Versus Collaboration

BY KATIE LUDWIG

**T**he City of Issaquah, Washington, has a mission: to “enhance lives through public service.” Its vision is to “be a progressive, customer-focused, sustainable organization that values its employees and is committed to innovative solutions.” City staff support the mission and vision by living out the city’s “SALMON values”:

**Sustain trust.** We make trust the foundation of our relationships and cultivate it daily.

**Act with integrity.** We hold ourselves accountable to the highest standards in all we say and do. Our actions are consistently respectful, direct, honest, and transparent.

**Lead with respect.** As selfless leaders, we take the initiative to engage others and create the momentum to accomplish the city’s vision for the interest of all stakeholders.

**Master communication.** We sustain an effective, compassionate, and approachable team environment through our actions and words, while understanding that there are different communication styles.

**Own your actions.** We are accountable for our actions while actively supporting each other to create an atmosphere that leverages our strengths as well as encouraging employee growth.

**Engaged.** We are enthusiastic, focused, dedicated, and productive employees who are proactive in our service to the community.

While these values don’t explicitly mention collaboration, Dale Markey-Crimp and Susie Monsell in the city’s Finance Department believe it is essential to their work.

Markey-Crimp, Issaquah’s citywide performance measurement and management program analyst, has

worked for the city for two years.

“My role has shifted a lot since I’ve been with the City of Issaquah,” she said.

“I came in as a management analyst for performance and budget, and worked very closely with Susie on the budget the first summer and fall that I was on staff. My role has shifted over time to really focus more on performance with a lens on how performance and data-driven storytelling supports departments in making the case for their budgets. Probably the bulk of my role is around performance measurement and management across all departments, data analysis and data visualization, program evaluation and improvement, and then data-driven storytelling.”

Markey-Crimp explained that she works closely with both the Finance Department and the Executive Office.

“I sit within Finance and meet most regularly with our finance director, although I would say a lot of my work is ‘side quests’, and most of those side

quests come from the Executive Office. In addition to performance, I do a lot of project management, and even with performance, a lot of those projects come from the Executive Office, even though they're often used within the context of our budget."

Monsell is the city's budget manager. Her role is focused on developing, maintaining, and monitoring the budget and assisting departments on budget-related matters, including budget amendments. She started with the city in April 2019 as budget analyst. "I've been in and around the city's budget for four and a half years, and it has changed a lot. One of the biggest changes is that when I started, we had an annual budget, and we now have a biennial budget." Monsell also coordinates the development of the city's capital improvement plan, which alternates every other year with the development of the operating budget.

### WHY IS COLLABORATION IMPORTANT?

Monsell sees her role as supporting the departments in achieving their goals. "More often than not, my role is doing something on behalf of someone else. My role is to build the budget, maintain it, get it through city council, and more, but it's not the Finance Department's budget. It's not the budget manager's budget. It's the entire city's budget. So much of what the city wants to be able to do—whether it's continuing to provide the same services or providing a new program—becomes reality through the budget process, so I think of my role as a supporter of these other functions," she said.

Markey-Crimp sees her role in a similar light. "My work at its essence is understanding and sharing how the city is performing on the promises it's made to the community. I can't do that without working with departments because it is their work that we've made promises to the community about. For me, collaboration often means really understanding the work of all the people around me, so that I can help them tell their story—which hopefully leads back to more investment in their work. I can't do my job without gaining the trust of my coworkers and getting them to want to come to the table with me," she explained.

“

Human connection, trust-building, and empathy-building need to be established before collaboration can occur.”



DALE MARKEY-CRIMP  
CITY OF ISSAQUAH  
PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT  
AND MANAGEMENT ANALYST

"I am someone with significant control issues," Monsell said. "I'm a details person, and being in Budget, I live and die by how accurate or detailed something is, and I want to be able to explain it down to the dollar. It's often a challenge for me when working with other people on the budget or the capital improvement plan, that I find myself thinking, 'Well, I know how I can do this better. I don't have to deal with this other person. I can do this faster. I can do it better.' But the problem is that once the budget is adopted, that's the departments' budget. They're the ones who have to own the actual work. They have to make sure that they're spending the dollars. They need to be aware of what's in it, and they need to know what went into those decisions."

This realization has prompted Monsell to focus on developing a budget process in which department staff play a more active role. "Yes, I could probably put in their data faster, I could probably process it faster. I could make it look exactly the way I wanted it to look—but then I'm the only one who knows how it works," Monsell explained.

### WHAT COLLABORATION IS AND WHAT IT ISN'T

"Collaboration equals working together on something versus contributing to something," Monsell said.

Markey-Crimp agreed and lamented that sometimes collaboration can become a "false flag" and leave people feeling resentful when "collaboration" is really "I need you to do something for me, so I'm going to call this collaboration, and then it can be done to you," she said. She explained that real collaboration involves "two or more parties coming to the table and seeing that time together, that product, whatever comes out of that as something that is mutually beneficial."

"I think that's the challenge—when we're not necessarily putting in the human connection work or building empathy to collaborate, and we're looking for people to contribute to something," Markey-Crimp said. "Sometimes contribution is appropriate. It's just that when we call it collaboration, but what we want is contribution, we're misleading people."

This dynamic can also negatively affect public engagement, according to Markey-Crimp. "I think there's a similar thing we do with the public, where we come to the table and say, 'Hey, we want you to collaborate with us on this idea, or this project, or this plan,' but really, we've already formulated what we want," she said. "I think that's local government at its worst. Human connection, trust-building, and empathy-building need to be established before collaboration can occur."

### CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATION

"It's a challenge to find the right balance for coordination, collaboration, and connection in a remote or hybrid environment," Monsell said. "I'm one of those rare people who, given the option, would love for things to go back to exactly the way they were before the pandemic. One of the main reasons this hybrid or remote environment is challenging to me is that I feel like interactions have become very transactional, and that it's harder to feel that connection. I often find myself over-communicating and over-connecting, trying get back to some semblance of what that felt like before the pandemic."

Local governments need to encourage more spontaneous remote interactions, like picking up the phone and calling each other when they have questions, Markey-Crimp said. "I think there's a lot of overscheduling that happens when we work in a hybrid environment that prevents that natural connection."

She went on to explain that without that connection, “you get to the table, and someone’s got a fully baked plan, and they’re asking you to contribute to it, not collaborate on it.”

### COLLABORATION IN ACTION

Monsell shared how the city worked together on its capital improvement plan (CIP) this year as a good example of collaboration in action. “This is the third CIP I’ve been part of since I came to the city, and for each of the last three we’ve worked hard to build in more input from the departments, so it’s not just Finance saying, ‘All right, this is what we need. This is the ultimate product that we’re going to implement.’”

This year, city staff collaborated to develop selection criteria for CIP projects. A group that included representatives from several departments developed the criteria and finalized the definitions and descriptions of each criterion. The group deliberated over several weeks about the criteria and how they relate to

the city’s priorities. The purpose of this collaboration was twofold: to ensure that the plan would be approved by the city council and to make sure the city was effectively communicating the plan to the community.

“Successful collaboration comes from psychological safety. It’s not just about doing the communicating; it’s about being in an environment in which communication can happen productively,” Markey-Crimp said. “I think Susie and I are pretty lucky. We maintain a lot of relationships across the organization where we feel like we can disagree in a way that doesn’t feel so painful that we can’t have the conversation. But it’s taken us a lot of time to get to that place, even with just some colleagues, and those are the places where the most magical collaboration happens.”

Markey-Crimp’s work with the city’s Human Services team is another example of collaboration. “They are

the leaders in our organization around performance measurement and management, and telling their story with data,” she said. “And it has led to some significant financial investments in the work that they’re doing. That happened because they’ve been so great about gathering data and demonstrating its impact, and coming up with new programs that are based on the analysis that they’ve done, so they keep coming to me for support.”

Markey-Crimp credits the Human Services team with understanding their limits and reaching out for assistance. “From the start, they were able to acknowledge the boundaries of what they could do. They knew they needed to be able to do something differently, but they didn’t have the skills or knowledge to do it, and they were willing to acknowledge that,” she said. “I don’t think local government is always structured in a way that allows us to admit that and to look for help outside of our departments.”

*We, as City of Issaquah employees, are committed to:*

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## MISSION

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### SUSTAIN TRUST

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We hold ourselves and each other accountable to the highest standards in all we say and do. Our actions are consistently respectful, direct, honest and transparent.

### LEAD WITH RESPECT

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### OWN YOUR ACTIONS

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### ’NGAGED

We are enthusiastic, focused, dedicated and productive employees who are proactive in our services to the community.



CITY OF  
**ISSAQUAH**  
WASHINGTON





Issaquah's citywide Strategic Plan outlines the city's goals, which Dale Markey-Crimp strives to support through her work. "My work at its essence is understanding and sharing how the city is performing on the promises it's made to the community," she says.

## PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR OVERCOMING CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATION

**Take time to figure out the big picture and understand everyone's role.** Markey-Crimp and Monsell both emphasized that having a shared understanding of the overall goal is an important precursor to effective collaboration.

"I always think about that Rumi poem about the elephant in the dark and how much of our work is that we all have our hands on one part of the elephant," Markey-Crimp said. "I'm not even talking about the massive range of government work. I'm saying in a single project, we all have our hands on one part of the elephant, whether that be the plan and its goals, or the budget and its expenditures, or the implementation, or the performance and impact measuring. No project is just one of those things. We have to collaborate to do our work completely, but that requires everyone realizing that the elephant in the dark is not just the part they're touching and that what we're touching is not always the most important piece."

Local government staff are often juggling many different projects and priorities, so time is a precious commodity—but Markey-Crimp believes

there is a value in colleagues taking the time to talk about what part of the elephant in the dark they are each touching so they can gain understanding and a sense of shared ownership. "I've been working on some data analysis around our procurement and payment processes, and there's been some tension and some anecdotes that are turning into stories about where the bottlenecks are, from when we start negotiating a contract, all the way to when we pay someone for the work they do, and where those things are not moving as they should. It has a lot to do with this story, which precedes both of us, about 'the black box of finance,' and a lot of that is because we don't do a good job telling the story of what we do. I think it sets up an expectation that as an internal service we're just an extension of their administrative team, and that our work is simply responsive to their need."

Markey-Crimp would like to see Finance staff—not directors and managers, but the staff members doing the work to process invoices and review contracts—going to speak to employees in other departments about what they do. "I don't quite know why we don't, except it seems like that's a 'nice to have' rather than essential. We're taught that we're too impossibly busy to do that, but we would be less busy spending our time emailing back and forth if we

went and made those personal connections on the front end," she explained.

**Develop shared expectations.** In addition to understanding the big picture, Markey-Crimp also thinks developing shared routines and expectations can aid in collaboration. "One thing I'm noticing in a project I'm working on now is that we don't have a clear and shared expectation," she said, adding that Finance's goal is to process invoices that come to them within two days—but staff in the other departments don't know that, creating uncertainty and frustration surrounding the process. The situation would benefit if Finance and the departments worked together to set expectations for how they can work together moving forward, she said. "That takes a level of self-reflection and ownership, to be the one to offer a bit of vulnerability around why things haven't worked well. That's a hard thing to do as a human, and it's even harder when you don't have a pre-existing relationship with someone."

**Earn trust by following up and following through.** An important part of earning her colleagues' trust is "following through on what I said I would do," Monsell said. "It has to be a two-way street, so the people I'm asking for information, they know when they come to me for something, they're going to get the same kind of response time back."

Monsell also mentioned the importance of asking for more time to complete a project or task, if needed. "If you said, 'I'll get this to you on Tuesday, and we can continue this discussion then,' and if you're not able to do it by Tuesday—because things happen—then communicate that. It seems like such a simple thing, but it has been massive for me in building those relationships and getting what we all need."

Finance staff can build trust by listening to their colleagues and incorporating their feedback into processes, Monsell added. "As we go through these iterative processes—multiple budgets and multiple CIPs—we incorporate the feedback we hear from the departments."

**Ask open-ended questions.** One of the strategies Monsell has found especially helpful in encouraging true collaboration is asking open-ended questions. "To me, that's one of the big differences between collaborating and just contributing. Contributing is 'I have this specific question

for you. What's the answer?' Whereas with collaborating, it's 'What do you think about this? What am I missing? What else needs to go into this? Are you okay with this? Do you have any concerns?' I get far better feedback when I do that; it's far more collaborative. The other person feels like they've had a hand in building it just as much as I have," she said.

Markey-Crimp agrees that asking open-ended questions is an effective strategy for encouraging collaboration and believes it requires some humility and a willingness to be vulnerable. "You're telling the other person, 'I see you as an expert in this and I'm acknowledging my own shortcoming. I am not an all-knowing person.' That's maybe vulnerability with a lowercase v, but it is an act of vulnerability," she said, adding that there is value in managers modeling this kind of vulnerability, helping others begin to realize they aren't expected to know everything either. "When you give people opportunities to see others acknowledging the boundaries of their own expertise, that's when collaboration happens."

**Meet in person when you can.** Monsell believes that working remotely can be isolating and lead to people becoming too internally focused.

"When you're working by yourself, for the most part, you have fewer meetings, fewer calls, and fewer interactions with other people. I had very few meetings when it wasn't budget season, and I found myself becoming guilty of something that I resented in other people, which was when you're trapped in that world all on your own and you are so focused on your work, your deliverables, and your responsibilities, it's so easy to believe that what's most important to you is the most important thing to everybody else, too," Monsell said. To combat this, she tries to meet with people in person as often as possible. "Being able to see when someone is extremely busy, even without having to ask them, makes a huge difference," she said.

During the conversations about CIP selection criteria, about half the people participated remotely and half in-person, she added. "What we got from the people who were in the room was more collaborative than what we got from some of the remote folks because when you're remote, it's hard to know when to jump in.

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SUSIE MONSELL  
CITY OF ISSAQUAH  
BUDGET MANAGER

You can't just open your mouth to signal, 'Alright, I'm ready to say something now.'"

Meeting with people in person is also necessary for trust and empathy to take root in the organization, Markey-Crimp said. "Part of sustaining trust is building empathy, and part of building empathy is knowing what the experience is for that person, day in and day out. When I meet with a colleague in person and they're constantly bombarded with people walking by their office and asking them questions, that is useful context for me to have when I think about how to get that person's time and attention," she said. "It's also important for me to be able to thank them when they are closing that office door to spend time with me. I can't put enough emphasis on the importance of interpersonal connection. Now, that doesn't mean that we meet in person every time. Clearly, we leverage the flexibility of the computer to do a lot of our work."

**Know when it makes more sense to meet virtually.** "Be intentional about connecting online when it is useful," said Markey-Crimp. "Susie and I learned, when collaborating in the 2021 COVID

era, is that when you are screen-sharing, looking at documents or financial data systems, it's actually easier to do that over the computer than doing it in person. The last thing you want to do is lean over someone's shoulder and breathe on them from behind while they show you something."

**Avoid surprises by communicating consistently and intentionally.** Monsell emphasized the importance of consistent communication and giving people advance notice. "One of the biggest things that I do now, when I have instructions coming out, or we're launching data entry, is to be saying for months ahead of time, 'By the way, we're going to be doing this in March, and you're going to be getting this from me in April.' I feel almost like a nuisance, but it's been so effective. By the time we get there, they've known this was coming for three months, and it's not a surprise," she explained.

"I totally agree," Markey-Crimp said. "I do the same thing around our annual performance data entry, and I send out a monthly email to all the data stewards."

Markey-Crimp added that she has found success in being very intentional about the purpose of a meeting and being prepared for it. She strives to co-create the agenda with whoever will be attending the meeting with her. "I send my agendas for my quarterly meetings in advance and say, 'Hey, look at this, this is what I want to do. Anything you want to add?' Very rarely does anyone have anything they want to add, but at least I'm not showing up and surprising them."

**Celebrate success and express thanks.** "Setting people up for success is great, but let's also celebrate them when they do the things successfully," Markey-Crimp said. For example, when she sends out an email reminding people that something is due in two weeks, she includes a thanks to those who have already completed the assignment. "Wow, do a bunch of people try to accomplish it as soon as possible after they see that folks do want to see great work! You have to thank people when they do what you need them to." ■

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