

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast Season 4, Episode 1, “Don’t Lose Sight of the Things That Aren’t on Fire”

[Podcast theme music begins]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is City Speak. I'm your host, Adriana Temali-Smith. So hey, everyone — it's been a little while since The City Speak has been in production, and it is great to be back for our fourth season. [Podcast theme music fades out] I'm excited to announce that this season has a few noticeable changes to it. Firstly, I'm not your only host. You are going to hear from both myself and Luke Fischer, as we chat to guests from around the state. Secondly, we are all about leadership this season, and asking city leaders to tell their stories. So there's going to be a lot less interviewing, and a lot more storytelling. And thirdly, we are keeping the episodes short. We know and appreciate how busy everyone is, and we want to create something that you can tune into, learn from, get motivated by, and fit into a window of time that doesn't eat up your whole day. So take us with you on a screen break, a walk around the block, or a super short errand. We'll get started after this brief message from one of the League's business partners.

A message from a member of the League’s Business Leadership Council:

[Music] WSB is a design and consulting firm. We partner with clients to create what's next in infrastructure. Thank you to everyone who helps us build for tomorrow, today. [Music ends]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So with all that introduction out of the way, I'm super excited for the guests that you're going to hear from this season, and without taking up any more time, let's get into it, with our first guest, John Cunningham, fire chief for the City of Brooklyn Park, and president of the Minnesota State Fire Chiefs Association. [Podcast theme music plays briefly and fades out] I'm going to dive straight in, and just ask you, what drew you to public sector leadership roles?

John Cunningham:

Uh, well, first, thanks very much for having me. It's great to be here today. Uh, you know, I started kind of in that public safety sector when I was 13. I, I joined the fire explorer program in Greenwich, Connecticut, uh, and that literally, I kind of, uh, got bit by the fire bug, so to speak, and, um, I was an explorer for several years until I became 18 and was old enough to be a volunteer firefighter. And then I served there for, uh, several years before I got hired in Elk River, as, uh, their full-time fire chief when Bruce West left, and I've been in, uh, the fire service for now going on over 23 years.

John Cunningham:

Hard to, hard to imagine, but, uh, it's been so incredibly rewarding, and I think when you think of, you know, public sector work and especially public safety, it's really about connecting with the community, and making an impact on those that you serve each and every day.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

I'm really excited because I asked you here to tell us a little bit of a story. So, tell me a story about what you've learned about the experience of being a public sector leader, and those things that go well, those things that maybe don't go so well, and, and how that's impacted you in your career.

John Cunningham:

When I started in Elk River, one of the first things that I kind of jumped into was a culture that needed to be changed, and I was the outsider coming in. And that was a struggle. You know, I moved out here from the East Coast, from Connecticut. And people didn't know who I was. It was a learning curve. And I realized that one of the biggest challenges for me as a leader is I just didn't have enough peers that I could reach out to at that point. Because, uh, we always kind of talk about how leadership can be lonely at the top, and especially when you're that, that top figurehead, and you are the chief one, that you have to make some of those really, you know, important and strategic decisions. Which sometimes go against decades of tradition in an organization, and you have to move an organization forward, move people forward.

John Cunningham:

And now I'm in Brooklyn Park, and when I started this position, I really had such an incredible personal board of directors. And that's so vitally important. I stumbled along the way, and I just didn't know how to get up. And I think that was the challenge that I had. I didn't really have anyone to call. I was the new chief out here, didn't understand the different cultures, from the fire service in Minnesota to the fire service on the East Coast. And you think that putting a fire out is the same everywhere, right? Well, yes and no. But you also have to spend the time to get to know the organization, culture, um, how to, to be a new leader, and especially at that young, I just, I didn't know what I didn't know yet.

John Cunningham:

So that's, that's been my biggest advice to new leaders, especially new chiefs going in, is surround yourself by people that have different thoughts than you, but aren't there to judge you, but are just there to support you. And, and don't be afraid to run ideas through them. They're some of my best friends today, and you know, I just love being able to connect with colleagues. And sometimes you don't even connect about work stuff. It's just being able to go out and, you know, have dinner. Spend some time, you know, with, with peers that understand what it's like to be a fire chief. Because there's only one person in the organization that holds that role, and typically there's no one else in the organization that's ever been the chief-

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

John Cunningham:

So you have to really surround yourself by people that, you know, can understand it. You can run things by. Uh, but then also take time to just decompress.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So I heard you say a few different things. One was about peers, and I'm really glad to reiterate again that you're the president of the Minnesota State Fire Chiefs Association. So presumably that is a great place for people who are looking to connect with peers in this field, for them to do so. Um, and then the second thing that I heard you mention was your board. And having a really great relationship with your board, and, and that idea that, um, if you're in a position where it might feel lonely at the top, there probably are people that you can talk to and turn to. Do you have any specific advice for folks that maybe are, are in that newer development phase of relationships with their city council, or, or their board, or whoever that might be?

John Cunningham:

As the president of the Minnesota State Fire Chiefs, you know, I kind of have multiple boards, right? You know-

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

John Cunningham:

As a fire chief, I have my city council. I had my director team, which I rely heavily on as a, as a fire chief with my peers in the city that I can talk to about strategic initiatives. You know, and then as state chiefs president, I have a board of directors that we can look and strategize, and look at the entire state of the fire service, across, uh, the great state of Minnesota. Um, but then personally is, you know, just surrounding yourself by those, those people that are mentors to you, and you know what? Maybe also have different thoughts than you. That's so vitally important that you, you don't want to get into that groupthink kind of, you know, mentality. And I'm always that person that kind of push the envelope, on explore new ideas and new initiatives.

John Cunningham:

And you want to surround yourself by people that, that aren't afraid to push, you know, some of those things, too. Especially when you're looking to innovate and grow and develop your organization. So, you know, I'd encourage, you know, new chiefs is one, you don't know what you don't know. So reach out to people and peers because, um, not surprisingly, there's probably people out there that have been through exactly what you're going through. And that probably have, have seen the same challenges that you're seeing, and you just need to put the different name on the fire department or in the organization, and they go, "Yep, I had that same issue."

John Cunningham:

Those are the people that, you know, whether I was a new firefighter at 18 years of age, um, to you know, now at 41, going, you know, people can pick up when you're not acting right. And I think especially in public safety, when things get stressed out, those are the people that will call you just to check in on you and see, "Hey, how you doing?" And that's so vitally important. They can pick up on the little nuances just like your spouse or someone at home can. So, you know, it's, it's important to keep those people close.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Yeah, that's good advice. So I have one final question for you. I want to ask, can you share maybe one specific mistake that you can think of in your career, and then maybe more importantly, what are the things that you used as tools to help you recover from that mistake? And resiliency's a bit of a buzzword right now, so just generally, like, we all screw up from time to time, and we all feel bad after that. So what's your way of, of kind of recovering when that happens?

John Cunningham:

You know what? That's, that is a really good question. During COVID, um, I, I think we became so focused on, especially for, as a fire chief and also city's emergency management director, that we're just bouncing from fire to fire. You know, these, the rhetorical, you know, fires that were always happening. And you know, it never seemed like I... I couldn't come up for a, a breath of fresh air because then we went from fires into some civil unrest that was just stressing our community out, stressing our organization out. I forgot to kind of keep, keep a check on, you know, even our people. You know? That we had some retirements, some people that left that we didn't recognize. That just, the day-to-day stuff just kept on, on, on happening, right?

John Cunningham:

But I was so focused in this kind of spur of the moment, you know, all these little spot fires that had to get put out, that you know, I saw really good people doing incredible things every single day, and, and you know, we missed the mark. And that was something that we realized going into a department meeting,

and, and we've making it, made a conscious effort to, you know, celebrate, you know, the successes that our, our firefighters have, and our team does every single day, you know, celebrating retirements and getting people back together.

John Cunningham:

And I had to own that. I mean, that was something that, you know, we, we missed some, you know, retirements. We didn't send the emails out. We didn't do the social media posts, and you know, there's some opportunities to, to change that. And, and people brought that up. And that's the one thing that I, I always encourage people in an organization. It's like, don't wait, you know, for things to boil over. You know, even with your leaders. If, if you're struggling or you, you know, someone did something that you don't like, even if it's at the top. Bring it forward. Because that was, you know, that was part of the struggle for me is like, oh, God, I missed that. I didn't see it coming, and you know, people were kind of upset about it, and we missed that mark.

John Cunningham:

So you know, that's, that's been a really recent thing, but it was kind of a really humbling reminder to me of, even though you got all this other stuff going on, you, you still gotta to be, you know, focused on, you know, everyone that's, that's doing the work each and every day, you know, especially on the recognition that those have served.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

That's a really good reminder for a lot of our leaders out there, who maybe, you know, like you said, are bouncing from fire to fire. Not literally, like you and your team are, uh, although yours was also metaphorical, right? We're all bouncing from thing to thing. I want to thank you so much, John, for joining us on The City Speak today, and for all of the work that you and your colleagues are doing to keep people safe across the state of Minnesota. We value your leadership, and I'm just really, really honored that you would come chat to us today, so thank you.

John Cunningham:

Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Well, that is it for our show today. I want to give a huge thank you to our guest, John Cunningham, and to all of you out there listening. If I learned anything from him today, it's that we're all out there putting out fires, bouncing from fire to fire, and we need to ensure that we don't lose sight of the important things that aren't on fire right in front of us. So I want to thank all of you, our listeners, for doing the hard and rewarding work in cities.

[Podcast theme music begins]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Just a reminder that you find City Speak in all the places where podcasts are found, and you can rate and review us. Or do it the old-fashioned way. Tell a friend about The City Speak podcast. And if you want to get in touch with an idea for the show, you can reach out to us at podcast@lmc.org. We'd love to hear from you. Until next time, take care. [Podcast theme music ends]