

## **Transcript for The City Speak Podcast**

### **Season 4, Bonus Episode, “My First Leadership Test and I Didn’t Even Know It”**

[Podcast theme music begins]

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is City Speak. I’m your host, Adriana Temali-Smith, and I’m super excited to be joined today by our deputy director, Luke Fischer. Luke, do you want to say hi and tell everybody what you’re doing here?

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah, hey Adriana. I’m so excited to be here and co-host season four of The City Speak with you.

**Adriana Temali-Smith:**

I am absolutely delighted that you’re going to be co-hosting this season. We are going to be going out and having 10 amazing conversations with city leaders from around the state. And we’re going to be diving into the things that make us leaders. Those little places where we learn on the job, sometimes we stumble, sometimes we succeed. And we always end up with a great story that has ended in us learning a lesson and being a better leader. So Luke, do you want to tell us how we’re setting up this season?

**Luke Fischer:**

Absolutely. Today we’re going to give you a little teaser of the upcoming season, which will be released at the end of August as you said Adriana. And ahead of that we wanted to start out with the League’s executive director and my boss, Dave Unmacht. So I hope you enjoy the conversation that Dave and I had, and I can’t wait for you to tune in to the rest of season four.

**Luke Fischer:**

To start the season, I’m joined by the League’s executive director, Dave Unmacht, [podcast theme music ends] with over 35 years of experience in the public sector. Thanks so much for being here, Dave.

**Dave Unmacht:**

Greetings, Luke. How are you doing?

**Luke Fischer:**

I’m good. I’m good. Thanks for being here. Dave, I’ve been thinking a lot about transitions and leadership challenges that people have, that they’ve experienced through the pandemic, that they’ve experienced through transition with the election, and that they’re experiencing as they’re finding their footing in their jobs. And I’m wondering where you’ve experienced transitions in your professional career.

**Dave Unmacht:**

Yeah, I appreciate it. I’ve got, I got a great story from my past. It’s a memorable one. I have a sense that very few people are going to have experienced something that I did. I call it my first real leadership test. It feels like it was yesterday, although it was about 33 years ago and I was slightly under 30 years of age, but I still remember it to this day and I’m looking forward to sharing it with you.

**Luke Fischer:**

That’s great.

**Dave Unmacht:**

So first the set-up, first, let me explain it. So, I was 24 when I started in Belle Plaine as the city administrator, I was there for about two and a half years.

**Luke Fischer:**

Hmm.

**Dave Unmacht:**

And although the city administrator, it was a really informal community. Uh, there's probably 12 people that worked for the city and we all reported to the city council, even though I was the point person. So it was, it was like ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah.

**Dave Unmacht:**

... a family. And like any family it, it worked sometimes, and it didn't work sometimes.

**Luke Fischer:**

(laughs)

**Dave Unmacht:**

But, the structure wasn't there and the organization of management wasn't quite the same as it was ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Sure.

**Dave Unmacht:**

... in how I experienced in my career. And after leaving Belle Plaine, I went to be the assistant city manager in Prior Lake. And I did that, Mike McGuire was the city manager. Great move for me. Did economic development work.

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah.

**Dave Unmacht:**

And got started in, in really a formal organized structure. Worked out really well, great team, good city council, a lot of projects going on. And part of my job was to fit in. They had a crew there, the directors and department heads, that had worked together for a number of years. And I got along really well. The culture was very strong. So my job was to, to fit in as the assistant. I was the new person on the staff.

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah.

**Dave Unmacht:**

I worked hard, I worked hard at that. And then all of a sudden Mike took a job. He went to the city of Maplewood as the city manager, and the council and the staff promoted me, essentially. The council did. I was the only candidate.

**Luke Fischer:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dave Unmacht:**

I was interviewed, even have a photo yet, Luke, of the, the, the interview of me, with the city council in the city council chambers. It's kind of a (laughs) memorable photo.

**Luke Fischer:**

That's great.

**Dave Unmacht:**

And I was supported by the staff and it was really cool. Well, well, that's, that's the set up. Now, here's where the story really begins.

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah.

**Dave Unmacht:**

My, my first real leadership test and I didn't even know it. One day, proba — I can't remember exactly, but I was probably six to nine months into my job as a city manager. Police chief walks into my office, not unusual, that happened all the time.

**Luke Fischer:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dave Unmacht:**

Dick Powell was his name. And he said, "Dave, let's go for a ride." And I enjoyed going for a ride with the, with the, with the ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah.

**Dave Unmacht:**

... police department and the chief, that was not unusual to do that. And I said, "Sure." Let me, looked at my calendar had probably nothing going on. I said, "I'm, I'm all in." So off we go, and we were driving around and next thing you know, he's heading towards the city of Shakopee. And, uh, and I didn't, I guess I don't remember exactly what ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah.

**Dave Unmacht:**

... I was thinking or if I was asking him questions or whatever he had told me, but because the shock value of this was pretty significant. And we pulled up to a hotel right next to where the horse track is. And we walked in and I had been in that hotel a number of times for meetings and whatnot. So, uh, it wasn't particularly odd, although I didn't quite know what the destination was, and sure enough ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Right.

**Dave Unmacht:**

... we walk into the hotel room and there was a conference room right off to the side of the lobby there that I'd been in a number of times. And we walked in and I'm sure my, my, uh, anxiety was high.

**Luke Fischer:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dave Unmacht:**

My, my questions were pretty, pretty significant by that time. But, as we walked in the door, there was the department heads ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Uh oh.

**Dave Unmacht:**

... sitting there, all there.

**Luke Fischer:**

That's never a good sign.

**Dave Unmacht:**

No, it was not a good sign (laughs). And I said to myself, I go, "Uh oh, you know, something isn't ...

**Luke Fischer:**

(laughs)

**Dave Unmacht:**

... right here."

**Luke Fischer:**

Right.

**Dave Unmacht:**

And, and so, you know, the chief obviously volunteered or he uh, he said "I'll, I'll do this." And, and my recollection is that not everybody thought it was a great idea to drive to Shakopee to somewhat surprise, if not totally surprise, the new city manager to, uh, to come to this meeting.

**Luke Fischer:**

Right.

**Dave Unmacht:**

But they all needed to be there to make it effective. And it certainly was my true aha moment in, in life and in leadership. And essentially they did one-on-one. They went around the room and shared their concerns with what I was doing, how I was starting. But they also shared their support for me. They respected me as an individual. They, they liked me and they wanted me to be successful. But I, I wasn't cutting it. Um, I didn't make the transition very well at all from being a deputy to a city manager. I tried to do exactly what I did as a deputy and that didn't work.

**Luke Fischer:**

Sure.

**Dave Unmacht:**

Um, I, didn't, I didn't look at everybody on individual basis like I needed to as a city manager. As a deputy, you're, you know, one of the, a peer.

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah.

**Dave Unmacht:**

As the city manager, you're not a peer anymore, you are, uh, you're the boss in quotations, obviously. And there was some other little things I was doing and they were concerned about that. And they had the, frankly, they had the gumption and the ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah.

**Dave Unmacht:**

... and the ability to do it. But the way they did it was, was, was unique. Um, a little scary.

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah.

**Dave Unmacht:**

But it turned out to be a, a good move and, and I respected them all for it afterwards.

**Luke Fischer:**

So how long did it take you to feel good about that conversation ...

**Dave Unmacht:**

(laughs)

**Luke Fischer:**

... that happened after it happened? Like I, I can imagine being shell shocked. I can imagine going home and telling my wife, "Oh my gosh. And you'll never believe what just happened to me." Or did you walk out of that meeting whenever it was done and go, "Man, I feel really good and I feel really supported right now."

**Dave Unmacht:**

Well, I don't know if I said I felt really good. I was, the surprise was still there, but ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah.

**Dave Unmacht:**

... the way it turned out was positive because the intention was good. Just the, the means by which it was created was difficult and different. It's not something I would have thought of. It's not ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Sure.

**Dave Unmacht:**

... something I would have expected. And their intention was to just say, "Hey, we, you know, we, we want you to be in this position, but it isn't starting out very well." You know, and each person went around the room and shared some observations, and some in more in-depth than others as you can imagine, some a little more blunt than others, but they're all there. And I think that was important. And, uh, shortly

thereafter it was pretty much forgotten. I made some changes in what I did, I stopped hanging around with them, you know.

**Luke Fischer:**

Sure.

**Dave Unmacht:**

I used to do that, I quit doing that. Now, I wasn't completely antisocial, but I wasn't trying to be their friend anymore. I didn't participate in some of the activities that they did. And I think that made a difference. And part of what I realized, Luke, was that the previous ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dave Unmacht:**

... city manager, Mike, who remains a friend of mine, essentially grew up with them in that job.

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah.

**Dave Unmacht:**

They all started together and they were, they began their careers together. So they had about 10 years, if not more, as working in this community that grew significantly. And I couldn't, I wasn't that. I didn't fit that bill.

**Luke Fischer:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dave Unmacht:**

I, I wasn't trying to be Mike, but I was trying to continue everything the same as it was when, while Mike was there. And that, that was the fundamental error. They wanted to see Dave Unmacht's leadership. They wanted to see what I brought. They, they were interested in doing some things differently naturally, right? Not, not unusual. And I wasn't doing that. And I didn't know it, because I didn't know, I had never been a city manager. I'd never been in a position of ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dave Unmacht:**

... responsibility like that. And in, in retrospect, I really appreciated their willingness to call a spade, a spade. And that needed to be done.

**Luke Fischer:**

Sure.

**Dave Unmacht:**

And just the way it was done was a complete and total surprise.

**Luke Fischer:**

So how has that changed how you confront people, uh, with a leadership challenge, or where you've seen people missing the mark? I think one of the things that I heard you say was that they sort of confronted

you with support and with some critique. And I'm wondering how important that support element was in the message that you were receiving.

**Dave Unmacht:**

Well, clearly they wouldn't have done it if it was all support, right? The critique was really ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dave Unmacht:**

... what led them to host a meeting of that nature.

**Luke Fischer:**

Sure.

**Dave Unmacht:**

And they, they found the right balance for me. I was, I was fragile. I mean, I was ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dave Unmacht:**

... trying to, I didn't know what I didn't know.

**Luke Fischer:**

Right.

**Dave Unmacht:**

And they did a nice job of, uh, of telling me, "This is what we see." And, you know, I was, I was young enough where I hadn't established a true leadership style ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Sure.

**Dave Unmacht:**

... or a management style yet. Belle Plaine was a great, great, great place to start, but it didn't really test me in those capacities. It was a significant learning curve about everything being a city administrator. Prior Lake was the first test of my true leadership and management capabilities. And maybe more so than anything was the fact that, uh, everybody that reports to you and everybody in the city is different and unique. And you have to understand and learn and respect those differences and how you communicate with them, how you manage them, how you lead them.

**Luke Fischer:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dave Unmacht:**

It kind of led to the story that I've shared oftentimes, especially in my masters classes of kind of, the four hierarchy, you have those eagles that like the soar and, uh, that they want to support you, they really like what they're doing. You let them go. And then you have those that are trying, but they don't have the skill or they're not trying, but you know, you can do it, you coach and develop them differently. And the final group is those that don't try, and don't have the skills.

**Luke Fischer:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dave Unmacht:**

And you have to spend a lot more time focusing on that group. So I, I kind of can put people in different one of those four categories.

**Luke Fischer:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dave Unmacht:**

And how you deal and manage with them, manage them is, very fundamentally different. If you're someone who is trying, but doesn't know how to do it, uh, you're an eagle, you could, you not only do you know how to do it, but you're doing it. And that's what I've learned from that.

**Luke Fischer:**

That's outstanding. So I, I can say working for Dave, that one of, uh, his greatest strengths is his specialization and the way he works with each person. And Dave, I think that this lesson that you learned in Prior Lake has certainly helped define the whole arc of your career. And while I'm sure it probably felt like a seminal moment at that time, did you think that it was going to be something that really is the hallmark of your leadership style, that there's so much intention and individualization in your relationships with people you work with now?

**Dave Unmacht:**

Well, living through it, no. Living through it, I just wanted to survive (laughs).

**Luke Fischer:**

(laughs)

**Dave Unmacht:**

You know, I was like, "Oh my goodness, what is going on here?"

**Luke Fischer:**

(laughs)

**Dave Unmacht:**

You know, thankfully, I ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah.

**Dave Unmacht:**

... liked each one of the people and the meeting turned out, well. It was a, it was more of a shock than anything else. It, it real, really wasn't, Luke, until some time afterwards where it all ...

**Luke Fischer:**

Yeah.

**Dave Unmacht:**

... kind of came together where, where ... so I had to produce, I mean,



**Luke Fischer:**

Right.

**Dave Unmacht:**

this, this was their, they played their card, right? They, they played a pretty significant card, to, to have a surprise meeting offsite in a hotel.

**Luke Fischer:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dave Unmacht:**

And then it was my turn to play my card, and it took some time, but I did. And it was, uh, it was a great experience. Loved working for the city of Prior Lake. There was a lot happening in that community. And if it wasn't for a unique opportunity in county government in Dakota County,

**Luke Fischer:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Dave Unmacht:**

you know, I, I'd probably still be a city manager someplace doing, doing a great job. It's a, it's a wonderful career. So more, more so after the fact when, when the realization of how you can apply things you learn to what you do today and in the future came together.

**Luke Fischer:**

Well, I've been joined today by Dave Unmacht, he's League's executive director [podcast theme music begins]. Dave, you shared an outstanding story with us today, one that takes a lot of personal reflection that you had to be a little vulnerable to share. But I think an important leadership lesson with us. So thank you so much for joining us. Thanks for the, the quick story. And, uh, we look forward to getting back to, to more stories like this over a cup of coffee or beer in the back conference room at a League event sometime soon.

**Dave Unmacht:**

Thank you, Luke. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

[Podcast theme music ends]