

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast

Season 4, Episode 6, “Yeah, That Probably Wasn’t the Best Way to Handle It”

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

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[Podcast theme music begins]

Luke Fischer:

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is The City Speak. I'm your host, Luke Fisher. Throughout the course of the pandemic, leaders across the state have had to adjust to a lot of challenging and changing dynamics [Podcast theme music fades out] in their organizations and within the public. I think one of the things where leaders have maybe been taxed a little bit more is dealing with all of the emotion that their employees and that the public bring to everything they do. And that's not just the stuff related to work, but it's the personal things and challenges that people have encountered related to a lot of uncertainty.

Luke Fischer:

So, I'm joined today by Colleen Winter. She's the city administrator with the city of Melrose where she served in that role for a couple of years. Before that, she served as a community development director in East Bethel. And as she likes to say, she's been in local government for a long time. Colleen, thanks so much for being here today and for sharing your story with us.

Colleen Winter:

Thanks, Luke. I'm really happy to be here.

Luke Fischer:

Yeah, well, you've got a great perspective. And as I mentioned, you've been in local government for a long time. So I'm curious what drew you to public sector service?

Colleen Winter:

So, our parents really taught us that you can't just take out of this world, you really have to have that sense of giving back somehow.

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Colleen Winter:

You know, giving back, I think really ...

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Colleen Winter:

... sort of drew me to local government because ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Colleen Winter:

... it's really a job where you truly are working for the public. You know, you're working for the taxpayers or the ratepayers of the community. I guess it's something that I've always been interested in and always something I've wanted to do.

Luke Fischer:

One of your big roles as a city administrator is leadership within your organization and working with your staff. And I'm wondering, through the pandemic how that's been, how that's gone, what you've learned — maybe where you've picked up a lesson or two along the way?

Colleen Winter:

That's a great question, Luke. I started in June of 2019, I've been with the city just a little over two years. And you know, you jumped out of the plane, you hoped your parachute deployed, you hoped you landed feet-first. And if you didn't land feet first, you at least hoped that you knew how to tuck and roll. So we were dealing with some pretty big, very emotional issues for the community, things that we had to get through. So, we were kind of, you know, getting everything on a good path and I felt like we were putting those fires out. And then all of a sudden we get to March of '20 when the executive orders started rolling in, ...

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Colleen Winter:

... as far as what we could and couldn't do with a pandemic. And it was during that phase, when we're all trying to learn this new reality that we had to live in, you know, how are we going to manage this? It was new to all of us. So, we were trying to navigate through this. At that point I'd been in my role for 7, 6-7 months.

Luke Fischer:

Wow.

Colleen Winter:

Um, I just remember we had a staff meeting and I had told everyone, "We're doing the best we can, here's what we know, and here's how we're going to approach this."

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Colleen Winter:

No sooner had we gotten out of that meeting and that I had a couple people go out, literally in the hallway, just gripe about, "Well, I don't know what's going on, that doesn't, that's not telling us anything," etcetera. And it was at that point [laughs] that I actually just — I don't know if it was anybody in particular — but I just kind of said to the staff, I said ...

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Colleen Winter:

... "Enough, we are not talking about this. You are going to know as soon as I know."

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Colleen Winter:

Um, and let's just say my voice was raised a little when I said that.

Luke Fischer:

[laughs]

Colleen Winter:

Afterwards, I was like, "Yeah, that probably wasn't the best way to handle it." What I realized is the folks that were kind of voicing those concerns were not necessarily attacking me as their leader, but what they ...

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Colleen Winter:

... were, they were coming from a place where they were scared.

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Colleen Winter:

And in, in retrospect, I was nervous and scared about, you know, what does this mean and how, how is it going to impact everything we do?

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Colleen Winter:

What it really taught me, Luke, was that it's important to really not provide that emotional response to what those folks ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Colleen Winter:

... are saying, but to really practice those active listening skills.

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Colleen Winter:

And try and get to where, the level where they were at to understand where they were coming from. So, that's one of those situations that, you know, you look back and you go, "Yeah. I should have handled that probably quite differently."

Luke Fischer:

Sure. So, you mentioned, you know, that people were stressed and scared in the pandemic. And I think that that's something that we've probably all encountered with our coworkers, with our friends, with our families. Seeing that emotional response from your team at that time of uncertainty, how do you think that that's changed your lens? So, coming out of that situation, do you feel like that's something that you're going to be more perceptive of in the future, or is that just like one of those blips in the pandemic, and like, we're going back to the way we were?

Colleen Winter:

No, I, I definitely think the pandemic, in terms of how you have to interact with your staff and the public, there are, there are lessons that we need to learn coming out ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Colleen Winter:

... of that. Um, in particular, because of the stresses that it caused for everyone, no matter what the situation was, there's unknowns that we don't know what people are facing, what's happening in their personal life. What I have tried to emphasize is active listening, which is something that we all need to be doing, doing a better job of, in my opinion regardless of what level you're at. And this is kind of the, the messaging that I've, um, given to staff. Not only active listening, but understanding that you can't take what they're saying personally. There may be some ...

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Colleen Winter:

... other things going on. But at the end of the day, if you explain it and they still walk away mad or upset, that's not on you. As long as we maintained that level of decorum, and we were calm, and we were really empathetic in terms of what they may be going through. One of the things that happened, actually — it was a ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Colleen Winter:

... gentleman that had come in, and he was really struggling with paying a utility bill, and kind of walking through the process of how you get him on a plan, etcetera, etcetera. I think he was just ...

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Colleen Winter:

... upset, and he just wanted to be heard. And I think ...

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Colleen Winter:

... that's all it was. And at the end of it, he goes, "Well, I may not agree with you, but, you know, thanks for listening." One of the, um, big things that I always tell staff, it's consistency, communication, collaboration. That's, that's what we base everything we do on, is those sort of three things.

Luke Fischer:

So, thinking sort of retrospectively too, do you think you were carrying around a bunch of stress and anxiety related to the pandemic? And how, how has that sort of informed next steps for you, or helped your leadership evolve over time here?

Colleen Winter:

As a leader, you know, you're supposed to kind of be the rock for the organization. You don't have any, any cracks in that facade. You're supposed to be the strong one just to, kind of, move forward. Of course, I had fears and anxieties around what was happening. And what I think the most important thing, as a leader, that I did is, I acknowledged that to the staff. I put out that vulnerability to the point where I'm saying, "You know, I get it. I feel what you're feeling." And I think that helps because it, it lets them know they're not alone, number one. And number two, "Yeah. I don't have all the answers. Um, I do the best I can. I, I'm stressed about this as much as you are. Let's try and figure out how we can get through this together."

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). You know, one of the things I like about your story is, there's a certain acknowledgement of the whole person, right? Not just the person who shows up at work, but sometimes you bring stuff from home into work. And sometimes the public brings a bunch of fear and uncertainty to the counter when they come to pay a utility bill. And that's just something that's real, it's human nature, it's, it's what we've got to do. And as a leader, I think it, it requires a certain amount of resiliency, um, to get up every morning when you're facing that. So, I'm curious, what, what keeps you going when things get hard?

Colleen Winter:

Going back to the consistency, the communication, the collaboration, sort of my motto. At Melrose, our tagline is strong, diverse, connected. I have outstanding employees. And so for me, we really have exemplified that strong, diverse, and connected, and we've been able to pull together as a team to really serve the public. And when it comes to knowing that I've got not only the support of a mayor and a council that is excellent — and really supports what I am trying to accomplish, as well as the rest of the staff — but I've got a staff that, that believes in me and has the face to say, "Yes, we, you know, we will work with you. We'll do what we need to do to get through this." So, from my standpoint, I think that's a lot of it.

Luke Fischer:

So, Colleen Winter, you are the city administrator in Melrose. You landed a new job right before a pandemic. People always say, when you start a new job, you're, it's like drinking out of a firehose. And I can only imagine how much more challenging that was when you layer in everything that we've dealt with over the course of the past 18 months.

Luke Fischer:

And it sounds like you're really coming out of things with a clear perspective of what leadership is and what it means. And you're doing that through really intentional consistency, communication, and collaboration with your staff, sort of your internal tagline. And, and what a great, true north and beacon to keep out there, to keep yourself and your organization pointed in the right direction. Thanks so much for your time today. Thanks for sharing your story with us, and keep up the good work.

Colleen Winter:

Oh, I appreciate it, Luke. Again, I, I was very glad to be part of this and certainly honored that you guys chose me.

Luke Fischer:

As I reflect my conversation with Colleen, one of the things that I know I will take away is the importance of active listening and ensuring people feel heard along the way. In the pandemic, everyone's encountered stress differently. And that's something that I think we ought to carry forward, regardless of what's going on in the greater world. I think we'll all do a better job if we're able to do that.

Luke Fischer:

And that's it for our show. Thanks again to Colleen Winter, city administrator of Melrose, [Podcast theme music begins] and all of you out there listening and doing the hard and rewarding work of cities.

Luke Fischer:

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