

**COACHING THEORY, LEVEL 4, TASK #17**

**Post Course Assignment**

**Learning From The Leaders**  
**“The Interview”**

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**Interview - October 6, 2003**

**Topic Area:**

**LEADING A MULTIFARIOUS POLITICAL PROCESS**

**THE ORGANIZATION**

**OBJECTIVES**

**PROCESS**

**BALANCE:**

**JOB OBLIGATIONS vs. PERSONAL LIFE**

**Ideally, a process is formed in order to implement a change. The objective for the change is either necessary or would enhance the existing standard. The purpose for this interview is to learn from a leadership perspective what determines the possibility for a successful outcome in a multifarious political process.**

**SELECTED INTERVIEW CANDIDATE:**

**Hugh McKay**

Director,

Engineering Services Department

The Corporation of The District of Saanich

**Hugh: It is important from a leadership point of view that people feel encouraged that they have an expertise which is of interest and of value to the general group, that their concerns will be truly listened too.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

I had a tremendous opportunity to work through an Integrated Watershed Management Planning Process from July 1997 to May 2000. **Hugh McKay**, the Engineering Services Department Director for the Corporation of the District of Saanich, led the process.

The District of Saanich invited a diverse group to develop an Integrated Watershed Management Plan that consisted of representatives from: municipal, provincial and federal government; environmental and recreational special interest groups; ratepayer groups from both inside and outside the watershed boundaries; and landowners within the watershed that would be affected by change. I participated as a landowner.

The process was challenging having to combine government policies with diverse personal and business interest of the land use, while also dealing with conflicting levels of government policies. The committee of 19 reached consensus May 19, 2000 on a Watershed Plan, which included recommendations to council for implementation. The majority of the works have been completed. This was the first consensus building process for The District of Saanich.

From this experience I discovered that **a fundamental part in learning from a leader is being able to participate in a process with them.** This interview provided me with the opportunity to learn more about the person who led the process.

**An enlightening experience!**

## **THE ORGANIZATION**

**Sonja:** We can start with the first question:

**The Corporation of The District of Saanich is one of the largest Municipalities in B.C. In the mid 1990's you were hired in to a high authority leadership/management position. What has been the most difficult challenge?** Maybe just before you answer, if you could confirm when you were hired on.

**Hugh:** May 1996. We are the largest Municipality on the Island and about the 7<sup>th</sup> in B.C. Ahead of us would be municipalities like the City of Vancouver (582,000), City of Surrey (240,000), City of Burnaby (190,000), City of Richmond (160,000), City of Abbotsford (117,000), City of Coquitlum (112,000), The District of Saanich (107,000). All together 154 municipalities in B.C.

**Sonja:** Other municipalities that you have worked for?

**Hugh:** I was originally in the private sector, I only moved to the public sector when I moved to B.C. 20 years ago. First working 12 years for The City of North Vancouver, then the last 7 years with The Municipality of Saanich.

**Sonja :** Here is my diplomatic way of asking how old you are. How close are you to retirement?

**Hugh:** Very close. I am 58.

**Sonja:** So what would be the most difficult challenge?

**Hugh:** From my perspective the largest, most difficult challenge - and it still is a challenge - is introducing and implementing change into an organization. Especially one where the culture has been there for quite a while and it hasn't changed significantly. If you want to make a change to that culture, it is very difficult because you are changing the way people react and respond to issues that arise.

**Sonja:** More of a mind set?

**Hugh :** Primarily a mind set, what they will tell you in the Behavioural Science manuals is that you can't change attitude, you might be able to change behaviour and over time if

you change behaviour that may in turn change attitude. So certainly my desire was to change behaviour. Whether I could change their attitude would be a different matter. In fact I know I didn't in many cases but as long as the behaviour was changed that, hopefully, would be a step in the right direction.

1.

**Sonja:** What ways do you look at changing a behaviour or a mind set?

**Hugh:** Well, leadership is where, if you are wanting to change and make change, you have to provide leadership within the organization to do so. You have to give the people a clear understanding of where you want the organization to go. And preferably you would want them to come to that understanding as well. Because one of the things that is happening out there is the whole interaction between the public and the administrations is changing at all levels of government.

**Sonja:** Ways of looking at change.

**Hugh:** Well, you look at public involvement. Twenty years ago an engineer wouldn't have asked everyone how to build something. Now we have public involvement processes for almost everything under the sun. That has been something that has occurred because more people want to become involved in things which affect them, and they are not quite willing to believe those people know all the answers; those people being the administrators. In fact, we know in many occasions they come up with the wrong answers.

When I first arrived in Saanich I used to annoy some of our councillors because I kept on saying engineers don't build roads, communities build roads. And they didn't quite understand what I meant by that. But basically I was saying it is not my road system, it is not my water system, it's not my drainage system, it belongs to the community. What the community wants, I am here to provide them with the expertise hopefully until they achieve it.

In the past and certainly with the culture that prevailed here, that was almost a 180 degree diametrically opposite to what they were used to. Because we (the engineering department) told them what they needed, and so changing that mind set has been a major challenge to me, and continues to be. But certainly the younger members of the department are more into that than the older members because it is a newer concept to them and the older members have 20-30 years of ingrained experience that says "no, it goes this way."

**Sonja:** Same difficulties with North Vancouver?

**Hugh:** It is a different environment, much more urbanized environment. Like here, a highly educated environment of the citizenry. In fact, that is where I got my involvement in public process. Because the engineering department when I arrived there was doing it the “good old fashioned way,” and constantly getting castigated in front of council by the general public. So one of the things I instituted there was the development of a public involvement process. That was relatively easy to do there because the level of conflict wasn’t as potentially as high as it is in Saanich because you still have a fairly relatively large rural area of environment that people would like to protect. North Vancouver is more of a man made environment. 2.

**Sonja :** Being under the restriction of a Union....

**Hugh:** Certainly that was a novelty to me when I moved to the public sector, as I always worked in a non-unionized private sector. In Saanich we are lucky that we have a very close working relationship between management and union. It is not the same level of antagonism, for example, that exists in, say Victoria. That has been there for generations, I don’t know why. I am certain that will change as different personalities come into play, but that is the prevailing culture.

It was interesting, I was talking to the Engineer from Victoria about a year or two ago and he was quite proud of the fact that the number of grievances that they were dealing with there was now down to less than 100 a year. I told him that in the 20 years I had been working I hadn’t accumulated 100 grievances; I haven’t probably accumulated 10. The environment in Victoria is completely different from Saanich.

**Sonja:** I know you talked a little earlier in having your staff looking for mentors. Are you looking at also developing staff in directions of leadership?

**Hugh:** Yes, that is in fact why I changed the organizational structure here, so that when I retire the council will have at least some internal candidates who will be capable of replacing me. Not definitely meaning that they will go for an internal candidate but at least the organizational structure gives people far more authority and responsibility than they had previously, so that they are able to gain more expertise and be of more value to the community.

**Sonja:** Through education? Through projects they are working on? Through...?

**Hugh:** Through the organization, through training, we encourage training considerably. Not as much as we should. In the ideal world I think an organization should spend between 1 and 1 ½ % of their personal expenses in training. I don’t think we are anywhere near that percentage, but I know we are considerably better than we were three or four years ago. Certainly my staff, we send them out to as many courses as possible.

**Sonja:** Not just engineering courses.

**Hugh:** No, in fact there are very few engineering courses we send them to. It is primarily management in conflict resolution and that type of training. They already have the engineering training. They may need to periodically get it updated. But the primary training that we are doing is more dealing with people. Engineers traditionally are not people type people, so they don't intuitively have those skills.

3.

## **OBJECTIVES**

**Hugh:** It became more clear to me as I rose in the organization that the only way those objectives could be gained was if they were shared objectives, not unilateral objectives. When you are a young engineer you are directly responsible for a project. You work directly with the objectives you want to achieve. You achieve those objectives primarily from your own efforts. As you move in the organization from a project engineer to a project manager to a project director and so on, your level of control in achieving anything directly diminishes, and indirectly increases substantially because you only achieve things really through your staff.

You don't achieve departmental objectives by unilaterally imposing them on the staff. Otherwise they won't buy in. They have to be involved in the process of developing those objectives and subsequently implementing them and success with them.

**Sonja:** Is that within your staff and outside of...?

**Hugh:** I think externally, the problem is what level of public involvement do you have. Were the public there to just be informed, were they there to actually give us advice, or were they there to actually be directly involved in the problem-solving? Problems arise when I think you are here on the public involvement spectrum and the public think they are here on the public involvement spectrum and there are different expectations. So it is very important that there is a clear understanding on both sides of just what the level of involvement is on both sides.

It wasn't much of a step to look at how an internal organization would work with objectives to looking at the external organization and saying 'why would the public be any different from our trained staff, why would they accept objectives which our unilaterally imposed on them?

**Sonja:** Who are a few of the people over the years that have been the most valuable influences or role models in developing you as a managing director?

**Hugh:** Well two of the people that I could think of, one was a previous boss and then one was someone who was actually teaching a course I took. The previous boss listened and he gave everyone the opportunity to participate. He didn't consider issues to be resolved as problems, but more as challenges, and encouraging in that process of resolving that challenge, or addressing that challenge, that you enrich your own expertise. So it wasn't treated as a negative problem, it was treated as a positive challenge. I hopefully have learned that ideally you should listen but also take a positive approach to problem solving, not a negative one. That is what he taught me.

**Sonja:** Is this the boss from North Vancouver?

4.

**Hugh:** Yes. Then I took a course, 'Principle Negotiation'. Principle negotiation is where you try and get behind positions, and identify concerns. The idea is that with positions it is very difficult to come to solutions that meet everyone's positions. But when you get to concerns, generally it gives you a great deal more opportunity to find solutions that might actually address the concerns. And watching someone teaching you that, and the way he did it really emphasizing the importance of the need to get behind people's positions and truly understand their concerns I found very enlightening, but also of course reinforced the need to listen.

**Sonja:** Are these courses you pick out because they personally interest you in developing?

**Hugh:** I have an MBA, Masters in Business Administration, so I am more attuned maybe than an engineer at looking at the social aspects, more than I would otherwise if I just had my pure engineering training. Certainly that MBA training gave me a greater appreciation of the diversity of people and the way they solve problems; everybody is different. Whereas engineers think that as long as you apply logic, logic prevails. Doesn't work that way.

**Sonja:** Something you enjoy now that you have opened the door to?

**Hugh:** Something I enjoy as it has opened my mind to it. Whether I actually apply it is another matter. It is something I certainly know I don't apply consistently.

**Sonja:** That is what intrigues me, is going from this technical component...

**Hugh:** It came from a realization early on that the level of control you have over a project as you move up in the organization moves from direct control to indirect control. And therefore, you achieve your objectives not through the actions of yourself but the actions of your staff. That is when leadership and other things that you have to apply become important because you are trying to get your staff to move in a certain direction. That was an area I had no knowledge of prior to the MBA.

**Hugh:** “You don’t achieve departmental objectives by unilaterally imposing them on the staff. Otherwise they won’t buy in. They have to be involved in the process of developing those objectives and subsequently implementing them and the success of them.”

5.

## PROCESS

**Sonja:** Describe some of the past projects/processes that you have lead that may have significantly influenced the way you may lead a process today.

**Hugh:** It certainly became fairly obvious to me both through my training and from experience that no one person, including myself, has all the answers. And that time and time again it has been proven that the quality of decision-making is improved when it involves the input from others, recognizing that it may also take longer. There has also been the reverse in many situations because no one was willing to speak up against an opinion, that everyone blindly followed that opinion down to oblivion. I have seen it happen at the senior levels of the private sector; the company went down the tubes accordingly.

**Sonja:** North Vancouver, you started right with consensus building processes?

**Hugh:** That is why we built the public involvement process, because there was such a high level of suspicion out there with the general public. I felt the general public wouldn’t buy into this unless they were directly involved in developing the process. That was apparently quite revolutionary, in fact we got two awards for it.

**Sonja:** The actual running of the process?



**Hugh:** Involving the general public in developing the public involvement process. We advertised and got a number of people from the community and in fact at least two of the people had previous run-ins with the municipality, and felt they hadn't been properly addressed. We had those plus a few others, then hired a public involvement facilitator. The purpose of the public involvement facilitator was one, to teach us all what public involvement was, and then two; to help us collectively develop a public involvement strategy for the City of North Vancouver. From my perspective we needed to do that because the level of suspicion out there was so high that the public would not necessarily buy in or agree to a public involvement process which was imposed on them. In fact that group who designed a public involvement process then applied it on a specific project and they were the facilitators explaining it to the general public. They were not only able to develop a public involvement process, they were also able to apply it, and then have it critiqued. So that strengthened the involvement even more.

**Sonja:** To be effective in leading a diverse process, what do you feel are important characteristics to have?

**Hugh:** Well, to some extent you need some leadership, but also a process and maybe because I am an engineer, I automatically think process. But certainly if people don't feel they are going to get involved in decision-making, or if they do get involved and their comments aren't going to be listened to or just be discounted, that will devalue their interest in getting involved in such a process. 6.

I suppose the important characteristics are the ability to bring together a group of people with diverse opinions, and yet somehow or other provide a process for them and leadership that will encourage them to come up with solutions.

It is important from a leadership point of view that people feel encouraged; that they have an expertise which is of interest and of value to the general group, and that their concerns will be truly listened to.

To some extent, that is the driving force for consensus-building because consensus really depends on people having enough confidence to believe that each of their concerns are going to be addressed. Reasonably, not necessarily wholly but reasonably, because they do literally have the opportunity to stop the process by saying no, so when you put that kind of process on the table, it places a great deal of control with the individuals but also a considerable amount of responsibility. I think that environment hopefully people will recognize it is not only their own concerns that need to be addressed, but everyone else's concerns.

**Sonja:** So teaching people to step into other peoples' positions.

**Hugh:** Yes.

It's maybe an ideal that you would like to achieve all the time, but it's just a tool to make people realize the importance of their involvement and decision-making. They may not need that level of reaffirmation of their level of involvement if you have a group of people who are confident that they will be listened to. You might be able to use a different process.

The biggest problem is trying to find out where we all are on the spectrum of public involvement, what is my expectation and what is your expectation. That is usually the biggest problem to determine, and then once you have established that, what is it that you as a group collectively want to achieve. Some of the involvement is almost mandated by the legislation when it comes to planning, public hearings, so forth.

When you're in the engineering it is much more flexible. We don't have any specific mandate from legislation that says we have to do this first before the next thing, but we do have significant public interest in anything we do if it is above ground. That has resulted in considerably more public processes than would have been done 10 years ago. Different areas, different levels of education, whether the project is above ground or below ground-all these can have an impact or an effect on what level of public involvement you would need.

**Sonja:** So as you learn the municipality you understand the dynamics of the different areas...

7.

**Hugh:** And that is where you go to the politics. The power centers weren't obvious to me when I first arrived here, but there are certain power centers - and I am certain when you get into applying this in your sport, there are power centers that you have to be aware of - otherwise you can get killed. I didn't even know those power centers existed, so that of course makes it difficult. So one of the things you talk about in public involvement is trying to get some idea beforehand by just talking to the general public, whether in fact there would be a reaction to this project. And what I am finding is that we have to do that even more frequently than we did before. This is kind of a preamble to determining what level of public involvement we would need. It is almost like an Environmental Study from Sociology planning terminology: testing the waters.

**Sonja:** In testing the waters, and from my own experience through our watershed, if you sent a Saanich Municipality person out there you weren't going to get any information whatsoever. So how do you test the waters when there may be mistrust?

**Hugh:** A great deal came through our councillors; they already know the community. We are looking at groups like SCAN, Saanich Community Association Network, to see if in fact that is somewhere we should bounce ideas off before we even go to the community.

**Sonja:** All very time-consuming.

**Hugh:** All time-consuming. That's probably the biggest impact is that projects that previously would have taken 6 months, automatically look at two years now, to have all the public processes.

**Sonja:** I would think, in my mind, that it would be more successful to have in your mind that this is going to take time, rather than rushing the process at the beginning.

**Hugh:** That is the argument for public involvement, as it is better to spend the time at the planning stage, rather than when you are about to put a shovel in the ground. Because for one thing, it is very expensive at that point to stop anything, where it is not expensive to stop something in the planning stages. Certainly the argument for public involvement is that it is better to have conflict or issues arising earlier in the process, rather than later in the process. That is where, hopefully, public involvement would allow these issues to rise to the surface.

This goes back to the aspect with what I was talking about my evolution of getting people to work. When you are dealing with an educated work force, if they don't buy in to what you are doing, you can talk as long as you like: it is not going to get anywhere.

**Hugh:** And that time again it has been proven that the quality of decision-making is improved when it involves the input from others, recognizing it may also take longer.

8.

## **BALANCING JOB OBLIGATIONS & PERSONAL LIFE**

**Sonja:** Last question. **How do you balance the many obligations required for your job and your personal life?** In the three years, I have seen you in council with budget meetings and presentations, and I am sure it was just a hint of what your job obligation is at that higher authority level.

**Hugh:** My answer is I don't, although I probably do better than I have in the past. One of the things that again I think goes back to this idea of when you are a young engineer you control jobs, when you are a manager you control them more at arm's length.

One of the things you have to accept is that you don't know everything that is happening in your organization, and you have to rely more on your confidence in the staff that you have. That they have been given enough direction, hopefully, that they can make decisions without every decision having to come to you. Otherwise you just have a funnel effect and you become a workaholic; nothing can get done unless you decide it. I have

tried to do the opposite by trying to move the decision-making farther into the organization as is practical. That relieves me of a lot of the decisions, but it also increases my uncertainty in many cases because I won't necessarily have all the information at my finger tips.

So you have to start to kind of live with the idea that you don't know everything and you increasingly know less and less about more and more. If I tried to know everything about this organization I would be here 24 /7 and I still wouldn't know it all. I used to be a workaholic when I was in the private sector and that was one of the things I had to come to terms with was accepting the fact that I don't know everything that goes on in this organization, and it is not really going to make me any less of an engineer not knowing everything. If I don't know, I will just say I don't know.

**Sonja:** I heard you say that many times, "I don't know".

**Hugh:** That was one of the things; my comfort level had to be addressed because that wasn't the way I was used to working, and that was certainly not the way I worked when I was younger and I had complete control over things.

**Sonja:** Especially your own company, I would imagine.

**Hugh:** Yes. So these are the types of things you have to come to terms with. So what I do is I tend to try and keep in touch with the hot spots, or if I am wanting a certain direction that's where I might take the lead on. That's more the way I do it, rather than knowing on a day to day basis everything that everybody is doing.

**Sonja:** Is this something you did in North Vancouver; something you learned through North Vancouver?

9.

**Hugh:** I applied it in North Vancouver again because of my background, where I started to push the areas of decision making down to the lower levels rather than all funneling to the top. General you usually get better decisions anyway, decisions that get made by the people that know what the issues are. You also have to recognize that different people react different ways.

**Sonja:** When you start to delegate more, do you find more fall-outs, feedback, or positives that come from particular employees ?

**Hugh:** I changed their job description, because we used to be very narrowly focused. They would be either sewer, or water, etc; now I make it more interesting by telling them you are doing everything. That is more challenging for them, but it is a more enriching job and a much more interesting job for them. That kind of feedback has been coming back, that people like to know they have that much more authority and control over

projects that they are working on. That means I have to really rely more and more on my confidence that they are doing a good job. And 99.9% of the time my confidence is well-deserved, and there is the odd occasion when something happens that should never have happened. It happens anyway and I'm not going to lose sleep trying to eliminate it.

**Sonja:** Hobbies, things that interest you to do outside of....

**Hugh:** Kayaking, biking, walking, golfing mostly.

**Sonja:** Well, you live in the perfect area for all this. Sea kayaking?

**Hugh:** Yes.

**Sonja:** Something you just started over here?

**Hugh:** Yes, the last couple of years. Haven't done anything fancy, just around Willows beach, Cadboro Bay beach, Saanich Inlet. I would like to go to the Broken Islands, but my wife certainly won't go there.

**Sonja:** If you paddle all the way there, you have to paddle all the way back.

**Sonja:** Well, I think that is it Hugh. Thank you very much.

**Hugh:** You are very welcome. If you find there are gaps, do not hesitate to give me a call and we can get together again.

10.

### **My Final Thoughts:**

It became apparent during the interview that Hugh McKay is genuinely passionate about the values that are important to him as a leader, and that these values have been important to him in his leadership style for many years. They are the same values that I observed during the three years participating on the Watershed Planning Process led by Hugh.

#### **The main points I learned from the interview:**

- ◆ The importance of involving all those in the process who will be affected by the change. Everyone has an added contribution and input, which is of greater value to the success of the outcome.

- ◆ Providing participants with a process that ensures their own expertise will not be dismissed or devalued; and also an atmosphere that people will be able to appreciate that it is not only their concerns that need to be addressed but others as well.

### **Principles from the interview I can follow through in my own leadership practices:**

- **No one person has all the answers.**
- **To listen to people's concerns in order to clarify objectives.**
- **The importance of a well-defined process.**
- **Involving those affected in the decision making process.**
- **The people that know what the issues are make better decisions.**

### **Hugh McKay's leadership qualities that are evident to me from our interview and from the Watershed planning process:**

**Challenging:** Taking risks to find solutions that would incorporate the concerns of those affected by change, into the decision-making process. Even with the difficulties of the prevailing culture that may exist within the organization.

**Enabling:** Providing a process needed at the time for the group to move forward. Modifying the process as the objectives grow and change. When challenges appeared, continually finding ways to help staff and those involved in the process to find a means.

**Modelling:** Consistent in his leadership style. Clear about the direction desired, while maintaining a positive attitude, and a sense of humor. One of the expressions Hugh used throughout the watershed planning process, "Holistic Approach".

11.

### **ATTACHMENT:**

#### **Interview Question Outline**

The concept described under "topic area", plus the five key questions, was sent to Hugh McKay previous to our interview for the baseline inspiration for the interview.

#### **TOPIC AREA:**

## **Leading a multifarious political process.**

### **KEY QUESTIONS:**

- The Corporation of the District of Saanich is one of the largest Municipalities in BC. In the mid 1990's you were hired into a high authority leadership/management position. What has been the most difficult challenge?
- Describe some of the past projects/processes that you have lead that may have significantly influenced the way you may lead a process today.
- Who are a few of the people over the years that have been the most valuable influences or role models in developing you as a managing director?
- To be effective in leading a diverse process what do you feel are important characteristics to have?
- How do you balance the many obligations required for your job and your personal life?