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No Room For The Lone Ranger

Going it alone will get you someplace, but it might not be where you set your sights and it might not bring you what you had in mind.

Here we are in the middle of one of the greatest, most exciting revolutions of all time, featuring an explosion in the amount, quality, precision, and substance of information that would seem to promise success at every turn, yet instead of generating solutions to our pressing issues the process seems to have mired us deeper in uncertainty.

Part of the problem lies in the high degree of specialization emerging in MSW management. Not only do we find ourselves drowning in information, but facing a rapidly emerging infrastructure of interpreters who drive the requirements for ever-more data to ever-greater, never-satisfactory heights. You want to site a facility somewhere? It used to be sufficient that you got your facts together and forwarded them up the line. Today, you assemble your legion of experts armed with answers to every conceivable concern, only to find five other armies on the field, equally armed, equally prepared, equally convinced in the merits of its cause. To get the point, one has only to look at flow control where, with so many uncertainties clouding the complex and highly site-specific issues, the entire industry is in danger of coming unraveled. Indeed, take a peek at any project threatening diversion of any element of the waste stream from its preexisting course, and you'll find a battery of entrenched, well-funded factions anxious to support any number of alternatives. Faced with all these challenges, not even the most intrepid MSW manager can tough it out alone.

Once you recognize that success in moving projects forward is not a function of more-and-more or deeper-and-deeper levels of information, perhaps you will notice that other elements of the municipal system face the same problem. By pursuing objectives independently, departments not only forego vital support from those who could be valuable allies, but are likely to create opposition in the process. While some of this opposition reflects zero-sum fears in the face of shrinking budgets, equally operative is the knowledge-gap that has arisen among agencies in the wake of monumental change in methods and machines of data management.

At first glance, this information gap might seem trivial, but it is in great measure responsible for the creation of municipal feudalism. The rise of mainframe computers in municipal activities centralized information management, which in turn led to an ever-increasing demand for services. This insatiable demand spurred an almost chaotic introduction of mini- and microcomputers into various levels of government. Not only did departments develop their own information management systems, but the transition occurred unevenly, placing some departments - in some cases, relatively minor divisions - in positions of advantage.

Time, and continued improvements in connectivity will narrow the knowledge-gap, weakening the mechanics and culture of division in local government, but neither is apt to bring MSW concerns to the foreground of municipal debate.

A question we may ask ourselves is, "What does MSW bring to the party?" The answer, is, "a whole lot." Not only does MSW rank just behind police and fire in terms of expenditures, it is the community's front line effort in environmental achievement. One key to success lies in involving others in such recognitions -- not only for our own benefit, but theirs as well.

Often, it's a matter of perspective. What is a problem to one department, may become an opportunity for others. While it won't always work out that way, you'll never know until you've gone beyond "networking" and assessed the needs of each element of your municipal structure, looking for ways to help others realize their stake in waste management. Until then, you run the risk of locking horns with someone who, by rights, should be in your corner.