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Chief Executive Structure in Massachusetts Towns: The relationship between authority levels and leadership opportunities

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Abstract

Throughout Massachusetts towns and cities there are various organizational and chief executive structures that dictate levels of authority and leadership opportunities. Drawing mostly from the literature on city forms of government, this research explores the authority-level variations among town administrators and town managers in Massachusetts and examines how authority levels relate to leadership opportunities. A mixed methods approach is used via a survey instrument to the 215 Massachusetts town administrators and town managers, 7 in-depth interviews, and secondary data review. Levels of chief executive authority and leadership were found to vary widely among the 94 survey respondents. While quantitative results show a weak, positive relationship between authority and leadership, qualitative results show a stronger connection between the two variables. Overall, results indicate that if day-to-day management and leadership are important goals for Massachusetts towns, increased levels of chief executive authority will provide the structural context for enhanced leadership and better local governance. This research has the potential to contribute to existing knowledge by filling gaps in the literature where there is sparse information on chief executives in town forms of government. Second, the research may contribute new knowledge on the relationship between chief executive authority and leadership in local government.

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Introduction

The Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA) (MMA, 2011) reports that, of the 351

communities in Massachusetts, 296 have a town form of government while 55 have a city form

of government. The chief municipal official in each town and city varies depending on the form

of government. In town forms of government, the majority of the chief municipal officials are

either town administrators or town managers with 152 town administrators and 63 town

managers. In other towns, there are 43 chief municipal officials with one of 14 different position

titles and 38 communities without chief municipal officials whose role is filled by the chairmen

of boards of selectmen (MMA, 2011). In cities, the majority of the chief municipal officials are

either mayors in mayor-council forms of government or city managers in council-manager

forms. A few cities have a mayor-manager-council form of government while one other has a

council-administrator form. Altogether, there are 46 mayors (3 also having city managers), 11

city managers (3 also having mayors), and one city administrator (MMA, 2011).

The foregoing data reveals that there are a multitude of organizational and chief executive

structures across towns and cities in Massachusetts. While this information may seem

inconsequential to the basic function of governing, the literature reveals that within different

types of organizational and chief executive structures, there can be varying levels of authority,

which, in turn, relate to other variations such as leadership opportunities. Past research on

authority shows that in city forms of government, substantive distinctions in levels of authority

exist between city manager and city administrator roles in council-manager and mayor-council

forms of government, respectively (Ammons, 2008). Additionally, a study by Svara (2008)

examines how the structure of executive authority can shape opportunities for executive

leadership in council-manager and mayor-council forms of government. This research uses the

literature on chief executive structure in city forms of government to inform an examination

of chief executive structure in town forms of government in Massachusetts.

First, it is important to provide some history and context for this research. From 1965 to 2005 there was a 662% change in the number of Massachusetts municipalities with professional staff to manage their communities; 34 professional managers in 1965 and 259 in 2005 (Morse, 2005). Of the 16 different titles of professional positions in support of boards of selectmen, town administrator positions are the most numerous throughout the Commonwealth with town manager positions a distant second (MMA, 2011; Morse, 2005). Despite the 16 different titles used for these professional positions, none are defined in state law and there are no statutory differences among them (MMA, 2007). Elected boards of selectmen are designated by state law to serve as the primary executive and policy making entities, while traditional New England town meetings still serve as the legislative bodies in Commonwealth towns as they have for almost 400 years (Massachusetts Moderators Association, 2001). It is within this context that appointed professional administrators and managers work to implement the policies of boards of selectmen and the votes of town meeting.

Research Focus & Questions

The unit of analysis for this research is chief executive structure in Massachusetts towns. This research will focus only on town administrator and town manager positions found in 215 Massachusetts towns since these are the predominant types of chief executives. Drawing from the literature on city forms of government, this research will explore the authority-level variations among town administrators and town managers. Additionally, this research will compare the relative strength of chief executive positions among Massachusetts towns, as well as how this relates to leadership opportunities. Specifically, this research sets forth one primary question and two sub questions:

- *What are the differences in levels of authority among the majority of municipal chief executives (town administrators and town managers) in Massachusetts towns?*

o *What is the comparative strength of the chief executive positions in terms of authority?*
o *How does the level of authority vested in the chief executives relate to leadership opportunities?*

While some literature exists on the authority of chief executives in Massachusetts towns, it is limited. For example, Morse (2005, p. 14) uses the term "administrator" to refer to all types of chief executive positions in towns including town administrators and town managers, among others, but finds that some "administrators" have "broad appointing and administrative authority," while others have authority only on matters assigned to them by boards of selectmen. Moschos (2005), on the other hand, categorizes town administrators as chief administrative officers (CAOs) and town managers as chief executive officers (CEOs) and finds that CEOs have more authority than CAOs. Moschos (MMA, 2007, p. 1) also finds that town administrators and town managers whose positions "were created through a home rule charter or special act of the legislature" have more "sovereign authority" on budgetary and hiring matters than those whose positions were created through a municipal by-law. The Massachusetts Municipal Management Association (MMMA)(MMMA, n.d.) publication, *Management Flow Chart,* shows town managers generally working within a more centralized form of government with greater appointing authority in comparison to town administrators generally working within a more decentralized form with less appointing authority. Despite these generalizations, ambiguities in the variations of authority in chief executive structure in Massachusetts towns still remain and it is from this place of ambiguity that the researcher seeks to determine how levels of executive authority may drive executive leadership opportunities in the majority of Massachusetts towns.

In the broader literature on leadership, Svara (2008, p. 538) finds that removing structural impediments can enhance executive powers that allow executives to lead and that "institutional features" like budgetary and appointing authority can not only strengthen the position of chief

executives, but also drive their leadership opportunities for developing, directing, and controlling

an organization. Hennessey (1998) found that organizational performance is determined by

organizational culture and that leadership is the most significant variable in changing

organizational culture. Leadership may therefore be seen as critical to driving organizational

change, culture, and performance.

This research defines *authority* as the "power to give orders or make decisions; the power or

right to direct or control someone or something; the power to influence or command thought,

opinion, or behavior" (*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary,* 2014); "power as capacity," and "the

ability to take effective action" (Brandt, 2013, p. 201). Leadership in this research is defined as

"the power or ability to lead other people" (*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary,* 2014); "the act of

influencing people to follow a particular direction" (Brandt, 2013, p. 73); and "the ability to

drive change and innovation through inspiration and motivation" (Gulati, Mayo, & Nohria, 2014,

p. 7). Lastly, the structural context of executive authority and its role in shaping opportunities

for executive leadership (Svara, 2008) provides the research framework for the phrase *leadership*

opportunities.

Literature Review

In an effort to probe at the underpinnings of municipal performance, the researcher seeks to

determine whether a relationship between authority levels and leadership opportunities exists

among various town administrator and town manager structures within Massachusetts towns. A

review of the public administration literature provides evidence that a nexus between *authority*

and *leadership* is well established.

Authority. For the purposes of this research, the literature on *authority* is reviewed from the

perspective of chief executive structure in Massachusetts towns as it relates to the organization of

local government. The "functional equivalency" research by Ammons (2008, p. 27) revealed

that, while there exist many similarities between city managers and city administrators, key differences exist in budgetary and personnel matters on which city managers were determined to have more authority and responsibility than city administrators.

In an examination of city manager turnover and the factors that influence its likelihood, Renner & DeSantis (1994, p. 104) asked how "internal structural arrangements" affect manager turnover and whether city managers with more "institutional authority" are likely to turn over more often. Like Ammons (2008), Renner & DeSantis (1994) found that in cities where city managers have more budgetary and personnel authority, there was less turnover than in cities where the manager had limited authority in these two realms. Furthermore, Ammons (2008) found that the authority to hire a team of staff is highly valued by executive managers and that the more professionalized a government, the more likely a manager will stay with the organization. According to Feiock, Clingermayer, Stream, McCabe, & Ahmed (2001), the tenure of municipal managers directly relates to the performance of local government in which institutional structures, including authority levels, are determining factors influencing tenure. It is therefore possible that similar authority-tenure-performance relationships exist among town managers and town administrators in Massachusetts.

Additionally, Ammons (2008) makes a distinction between strong and weak mayor forms in mayor-council governments explaining that the concentration of executive authority in the office of the mayor defines the strong mayor form, while diffused executive authority shared between or among officials defines the weak mayor form. Ammons (2008, p. 27) is careful to explain that while the gap between strong and weak forms is wide, "placement along this divide is determined not only by the experience and skills of the person," but also by the "real authority in the position."

In studying how city managers can become more effective leaders in improving city

government, Whitaker & Jenne (1995) found that, in council-manager cities, most managers already operate within a chief executive structure that has strong and centralized formal authority. In cases such as this, Whitaker & Jenne (1995) do not recommend further strengthening of chief executive authority, but instead recommend improving leadership through sharing authority and strengthening the capacity of city council and city staff to be more effective, collaborative, as well as communicative in working toward improved governmental performance. As far back as the 1940's, the public administration literature references the need to build a "central core of authority" in public agencies followed by "an informed capacity for decentralization" (Appleby, 1945, p. 45). Recognizing that executive authority is essential to good public administration, Appleby (1945) also acknowledges that it is limited by, among other things, the necessity to delegate, or share, authority. Appleby (1952, p. 239 & 241) states further that the "law invariably must vest much more authority than can be exercised in practice" and that the amount of responsibility accepted by a government official "precedes authority."

Perry (2014, p. 28) discusses organizational structure and how it affects the choices of managers when they have "plenty of room for maneuver" versus "a situation in which rules, interdependencies, and power relations restrain the possibilities for action" and asks, "is good governance – defined as managing tensions between public values - possible if managers are severely limited in their options for action?" Furthermore, Perry (2014, p. 28) asks, "What are the minimum degrees of freedom required to hold an official accountable for good – or bad – governance?"

Leadership. The literature on *leadership* is reviewed from the perspective of chief executive structure in Massachusetts towns as it relates to the organization of local government and the individual chief executive's role in leading organizational performance. According to Moynihan & Van Wart (2013, p. 553), "understanding the lessons of leadership is important in order that

those aspiring to leadership may identify their strengths and weaknesses and improve themselves, as well as leadership in their organizations."

As mentioned previously, Svara (2008) finds that the structural context of executive authority shapes opportunities for executive leadership. Additionally, Ammons (2008, p. 26) explains that the greater authority of city managers results in enhanced "ability to shape the culture and operating standards of the organization," while Hennessey (1998) finds that leadership is the most significant variable in changing organizational culture, which directly influences organizational performance.

In a review of the most prominent leadership theories in the literature, Moynihan & Van Wart (2013, p. 561) list the various theories relating to leadership focus including leading for results (i.e. management theory), leading followers (i.e. transactional leadership theory), leading organizations (i.e. transformational leadership theory), leading systems (i.e. collaborative leadership theory), and leading with values (i.e. ethical leadership theory). While all of these theories are important to public administration, the two theories discussed by Moynihan & Van Wart (2013) that are perhaps most relevant to this research are transformational and collaborative leadership theories that involve leading organizations and systems.

Transformational leadership is defined in the literature as the practice of changing the mindset of followers from self-focus to organizational focus and instilling them with a commitment to organizational mission. Wright & Pandey (2009) find that public sector structural constraints, such as hierarchical authority, do not unduly inhibit transformational leadership in local government. Brandt (2013, p. 87-89) refers to transformational leadership as "servant leadership" and describes "servant leaders" as "those who serve causes greater than their own self-interests and who inspire their members to do the same," while "self-focused leaders" are primarily motivated by their own self-interests. Brandt (2013, p. 94) challenges leaders to

inspire staff so that they become "intrinsically motivated" to perform based on a heightened sense of purpose.

Collaborative leadership is also known as facilitative leadership in which leadership is shared, decentralized, and delegated from top to bottom throughout an organization (Whitaker and Jenne, 1995). Moynihan & Van Wart (2013, p. 559) discuss how collaborative leadership emphasizes the "common good" making it a good fit for the service-oriented public and nonprofit sectors. Brandt (2013, p. 96) considers collaborative leadership a departure from "the traditional paradigm of *leaders lead* and *followers follow*" and a shift "to a new paradigm – *everyone a leader* and *everyone a follower*" in which anyone can lead or follow regardless of position in order to increase personnel as well as organizational capacity.

Research Methods

This research used a mixed method research design employing a survey, in-depth interviews, and review of existing documentation. The University of Massachusetts Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the research proposal and methods described herein. Confidentiality of survey and interview participants was maintained throughout the research project in accordance with IRB protocols for human research subjects. Informed consent (Appendix A.1. & A.2.) was obtained prior to the commencement of data collection from all interviewees.

Quantitative measurement included a survey distributed to all current town administrators and town managers (n=215) whose contact information was obtained through searching local government websites. The survey (Appendix B) link was emailed to town administrators and town managers that filled out the survey through a secure online portal, SurveyMonkey, Inc. The survey included 30 questions seeking background information, authority levels, leadership activities, and contact information for interviews.

Qualitative measurement included seven in-depth interviews with current town administrators

(n=2) and town managers (n=2), a former selectman (n=1), a chief executive recruiter (n=1), and a municipal attorney (n=1). Survey results, personal contacts, and snowball sampling were used to determine the list of candidates for in-depth interviews for which the researcher used an interview guide (Appendix C).

Secondary data was also reviewed including documentation on formal chief executive authority as declared in municipal charters, special acts, and by-laws and as shown in organizational charts. For the most part, the documentation review focused on the communities in which the four chief executive interviewees were employed. Documentation relating to informal chief executive authority and leadership in interviewee towns was also reviewed including financial reports, strategic plans, goals and objectives, quarterly reports, and performance evaluations. All secondary sources were found online at municipal government websites. In the interest of maintaining confidentiality, the websites from which secondary data was retrieved for interviewee communities are not provided in the references. The secondary source data supported and expanded upon the primary source authority and leadership data.

Survey data was exported from *SurveyMonkey* into *Microsoft Excel* in order to develop descriptive statistics, to determine relationships among the authority and leadership variables, and to create a ranking system for authority levels among the chief executives who responded to the survey. Qualitative data analysis involved identifying recurrent themes in the transcripts of the in-depth interviews, summarizing, and interpreting the data. Both quantitative and qualitative results are reported, synthesized, and generalized below.

Findings

There were 94 survey respondents out of 215 recipients for a response rate of 43.7%. Of the 94 respondents, 65 serve as town administrators and 29 serve as town managers yielding response rates of 42.8% of all town administrators (n=152) and 46.0% of all town managers

(n=63). An overwhelming majority of survey respondents (n=76) have graduate degrees

(80.9%) and of the 91 respondents who answered the survey question on gender, 72 were male

(79.1%) and 19 were female (20.9%). The survey provided information on the range of chief

executive authority and leadership among respondent towns. Seven survey questions generated

authority-related data, while four other survey questions generated leadership-related data as

shown in Table 1 (Appendix D).

   Survey Findings on Authority. In order to answer the primary research question - *What are*

the differences in levels of authority among the majority of municipal chief executives (town

administrators and town managers) in Massachusetts towns? - chief executive responses on the

authority-related survey questions were ranked via a scoring system that assigned values

according to the levels of authority reported (Table 1, Appendix D). The values assigned for each of the seven authority-related responses were then added together for each town to create a ranking. The lowest value, 5, represents those chief executives with the least

Figure 1. Histogram Showing Frequency of Occurrence for Authority Rankings Among Massachusetts Chief Executives
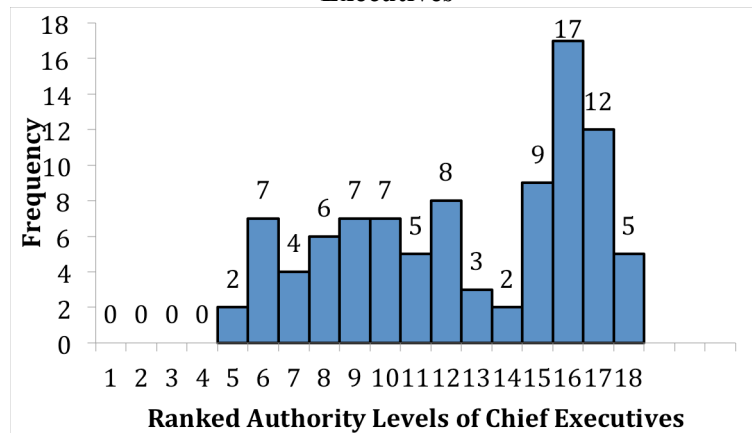
authority and the highest value, 18, represents those chief executives with the most authority.

The distribution of ranked authority levels among the survey respondents is shown in Figure 1.

The distribution shows that levels of authority vary widely across the 94 chief executives who

responded to the survey with the greatest concentration of chief executive authority levels

occurring in the ranked categories 16 (n=17) and 17 (n=12)(total n=29 or 30.9% of total

respondents). It is interesting to note that while the potential authority rankings ranged from 3 to

18, none of the chief executives surveyed indicated having authority levels at the lowest levels of

3 or 4. Therefore, all of the 94 chief executive respondents have authority levels above

minimum levels.

In order to answer the first research sub question - *What is the comparative strength of the*

chief executive positions in terms of authority? - three typologies were developed and each of the

94 respondents was categorized as having weak, moderate, or strong levels of authority. Table 2

shows the three typologies along with the measures of authority used in the survey. While each

survey question had more than one response to choose from, only the response conveying the

highest levels of authority for each measure was chosen in order to create a point of comparison

among the weak, moderate, and strong typologies. To explain further, point of comparison

responses to the authority-related survey questions are shown outside of the parentheses in each

Table 2. Comparative Typologies for Chief Executive Authority Levels

Measures of Authority	Weak (n=26)	Moderate (n=34)	Strong (n=34)
% Annual Budget Prep	76-100% (15.4%)	76-100% (52.9%)	76-100% (67.6%)
% FTE Hiring	80-100% (0%)	80-100% (23.5%)	80-100% (94.1%)
Termination of Hires	Yes (11.5%)	Yes (79.4%)	Yes (100%)
BOS Approval/Veto of Hires/Fires	No (7.7%)	No (14.7%)	No (64.7%)
Awarding Contracts	All (11.5%)	All (41.2%)	All (82.4%)
Collective Bargaining	Yes (69.2%)	Yes (88.2%)	Yes (100%)
Voting Member of School Committee	Yes (11.5%)	Yes (29.4%)	Yes (64.7%)

box under the three typologies, while the percentage in parentheses in each box reflects the

percent of chief executives from each typology that chose the response provided. For example,

under the **% FTE Hiring** measure of authority, none of the chief executives in the weak

category reported having the authority to hire 80-100% of full-time equivalents, while 23.5%

reported having this much authority under the moderate category, and 94.1% reported having

this much authority under the strong category.

The typologies were developed through sorting the survey dataset on the ranked authority

levels, from low to high, and examining those against the authority-related response data in order

to find clear lines of distinction among the data. The weak typology represents those chief executives (n=26) with authority rankings of 5 to 9, the moderate typology represents those chief executives (n=34) with authority rankings of 10 to 15, and the strong typology represents those chief executives (n=34) with authority rankings of 16 to 18. In addition, 100% of the chief executives in the weak typology and 84.4% of the chief executives in the moderate typology are town administrators. In contrast, only 30% of the chief executives in the strong typology are town administrators; a typology dominated by town managers.

With the majority of chief executives (56.4%) indicating that they have served in their current position for only 0 to 5 years, the researcher sought to determine if short tenure corresponded with lower levels of authority as found in the literature (Ammons, 2008; Renner & DeSantis, 1994). However, when the authority level rankings for those serving from 0 to 5 years were reviewed, authority levels varied widely and no relationship was found. It is possible that the short tenure of the majority of chief executives relates to the increasing rate of retirement.

Survey Findings on Leadership. In order to answer the second research sub question - *How does the level of authority vested in the chief executives relate to leadership opportunities? -* chief executive responses on the leadership-related survey questions were ranked via a scoring system that assigned values according to the leadership opportunities reported (Table 1, Appendix D). The lowest value, 0, represents those chief executives with the least leadership opportunities and the highest value, 8, represents those chief executives with the most leadership opportunities. The distribution of ranked

Figure 2. Histogram Showing Frequency of Occurrence for Leadership Rankings Among Massachusetts Chief Executives

leadership levels among the survey respondents are shown in Figure 2. The distribution shows that the level of leadership varies across the 94 chief executives who responded to the survey, but not as widely as the authority levels. The greatest concentration of chief executive leadership levels occurs in the ranked categories 4 (n=16), 5 (n=20) and 6 (n=17) (total n=53 or 56.4% of total respondents). It is interesting to note that only one chief executive reported having no leadership opportunities.

To determine if a direct relationship exists between the authority and leadership variables, a linear regression was run on the rankings in *Excel*. The scatterplot with linear regression shown in Figure 3 demonstrates that, when plotting ranked authority and ranked leadership levels together, data points are widely scattered with a correlation *r* value of 0.3779 and only 14.28% of the variation in leadership levels among chief executives can be explained by the variation in authority levels. This indicates that only a weak, positive association exists between the two variables and as authority levels increase, leadership levels will also increase, but perhaps minimally or inconsistently. It is interesting to note, however, that the data points at higher levels of authority are more tightly clustered around the regression

Figure 3. Linear Regression Showing Relationship Between Chief Executive Authority & Leadership Levels

$$y = 0.1788x + 2.5315$$
$$R^2 = 0.14284$$
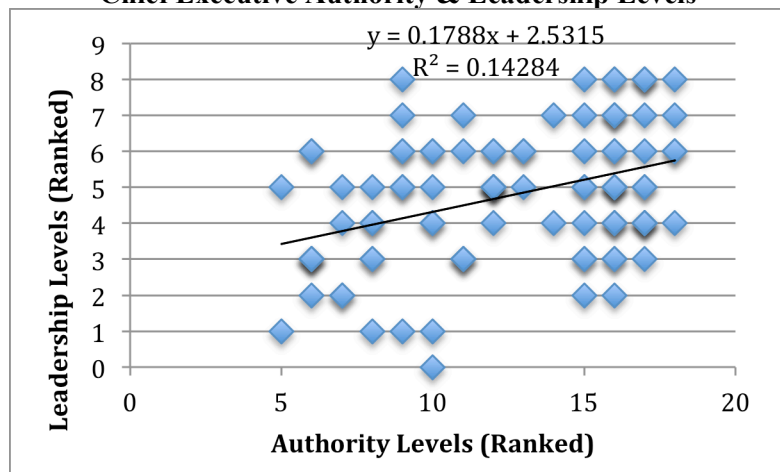
line than the data points at lower levels of authority. This may indicate that at the upper levels of authority, chief executive leadership is less variable, perhaps more consistent, and perhaps more expected. Additionally, when comparing the typologies on authority to the leadership levels of the 19 female chief executives, a positive relationship is found (Table 3, Appendix D).

The survey results also provide insight into chief executive perspectives on the relationship between authority and leadership in that the majority of chief executives consider budgetary, hiring and firing, and collective bargaining authorities as critical to their ability to lead their municipalities and to create organizational change. In comparison, only a minority of chief executives considers awarding contracts and conducting performance reviews as critical to their ability to lead and change their organizations. Figure 4 (Appendix D) shows that almost half of the chief executive survey respondents (n=45) are given the authority to prepare 76-100% of the municipal budget and all respondents have at least some budgetary authority.

In-Depth Interviews

The data generated from the interviews confirmed that the levels of chief executive authority in Massachusetts towns vary widely and that the authority in a position facilitates leadership opportunities. Some key themes emerged from the interviews including: 1) chief executive structure and authority varies with organizational structure; 2) there is a trend toward changing organizational and chief executive structures; 3) there are both formal and informal types of chief executive authority; 4) chief executive leadership is shared, or subordinate to, the appointing authority leadership; and 5) organizational performance is a function of organizational and chief executive structure, among other variables. The key themes are discussed in more detail below.

Organizational Structure. The researcher interviewed chief executives in both centralized (Figure 5, Appendix D) and decentralized forms of organizational structure (Figure 6, Appendix D). Some chief executives have clear lines of authority over most government functions and the majority of personnel (Figure 5), while others have authority only over limited functions and personnel (Figure 6). Organizational structure clearly affects the levels of chief executive authority in Massachusetts towns and the interviewees agreed that there is a trend not only toward centralizing structure and strengthening chief executives, but consolidating government

functions as well. Four of the interviewees had recent experience with changes in organizational

structure in their communities and described a process of gradual change to become more

centralized and functional in moving away from an "everyone in charge, but no one charge"

governing structure.

Chief Executive Structure & Authority. Organizational structure in each community dictates

the structure of the chief executive position in terms of authority and, just as organizational

structures vary widely, so do chief executive structures. There are both formal and informal

aspects of chief executive authority. Some chief executives operate under explicit formal

authority, while others operate under more nuanced authority. One town administrator explained

that the charter he works under gives him no formal hiring or budgetary authority, but he still

engages in those activities because the selectmen want him to do it. An executive recruiter

explained that when a chief executive does not have explicit formal authority, "gaining control of

the 3 or 4 major processes in town - the budget process, the procurement process, the personnel

processes - gives them a lot of power." Another town administrator whose authority is broad and

formally defined in a municipal charter said that he borrows from the charter when his authority

is questioned in order to make his responsibilities known. These examples clearly show how

both formal and informal factors play a role in defining chief executive authority.

Chief Executive Leadership. Chief executives are appointed by, and work under the direction

of, the selectmen. A town administrator explained his leadership role as "the leader of the

organization" and the selectmen as "the leaders of the community." When asked if his broad

authority helps him to lead the town and drive change, he explained that the budget is a town

administrator's budget and that "control of the budget is huge because that allows you to allocate

resources, to organize departments, to hire the staff." He also said, "In some towns, people seem

to think there can only be so much leadership and if too many people are leading then it's a zero

sum game," but he sees leadership as a good thing, "everybody be a leader – why not?" A former town administrator with weak authority levels said that the selectmen "didn't really want someone to be the leader, they wanted someone to follow them and I'm not a good follower." Another town administrator explained that in a centralized structure there is inherent leadership, but in a decentralized form, "you don't have any leadership, you can't have any leadership – it's horizontal." An executive recruiter finds that, "if a person is in a strong manager position, almost by definition it is an explicit public leadership job" and for weak manager positions, one has to wonder, "when does leadership start to emerge as an important characteristic?" A town manager explained that, "being a really effective manager, by necessity, has a leadership component." The interviews make it clear that leadership is shared with boards of selectmen and that chief executive leadership depends on the authority in the position, local customs and needs, and the person in the position.

Organizational Performance. The drive to improve organizational performance in terms of efficiency and effectiveness is a product of the down economy coupled with increasing costs and declining revenues; a fiscal environment in which government must find ways to do more with less. One town administrator reorganized a couple of departments so that they "could share resources and work more cooperatively." In a town where a special act was passed to change the town administrator to a town manager form of government, the town manager said that he thinks "the trend to go to a manager form of government is a good one because it's almost necessary for a government to be successful and sustainable for the manager to have that sort of freedom." He has continued to drive the performance of the municipality by working with the selectmen to undertake strategic planning and performance-based compensation initiatives. A town manager in another town does quarterly performance reviews and talked about why many towns don't do performance evaluations because "it's easy not to do them if there's no immediate impact from

doing them. If you could tie performance evaluations to step increases, it's an effective management tool." Another town administrator conducts annual performance reviews by having every department head go through a self-evaluation process that he highly recommends so that managers become more engaged in the process rather than simply reacting to a review by someone else. The interviews show that chief executives with more authority do more strategic planning and more evaluation of individual and organizational performance.

Discussion

The results of the survey and interviews clearly show that the differences in the levels of chief executive authority in Massachusetts towns vary widely depending on the community. While the survey instrument was more effective at measuring the range and strength of authority levels, the interviews were more effective at measuring leadership and how authority affects leadership opportunities. Nevertheless, the survey results showed a weak, positive association between authority levels and leadership opportunities. In addition, the interviews clearly expanded upon the idea that greater levels of authority provide more opportunity and freedom for chief executives to exercise leadership. The interviews also show that increased levels of both authority and leadership provide the structural environment to drive organizational performance.

The three typologies developed for chief executive authority levels – weak, moderate, and strong - can be useful in determining the degree to which leadership is shared among boards of selectmen and chief executives. For instance, weak chief executive authority indicates that the board of selectmen is likely the dominant leadership entity, moderate chief executive authority indicates that leadership is likely shared with the board of selectmen, and strong chief executive authority indicates the town administrator or town manager is likely the dominant leadership entity. It is important to remember, however, that the chief executives who were interviewed considered the board of selectmen to be the ultimate leadership entity in their communities.

Therefore, the typologies relate more to day-to-day organizational leadership than to overall community leadership.

The research shows that if towns want to improve their organizations, strengthening chief executive authority and creating more leadership opportunities will promote better governance. Professional chief executives with weak to moderate levels of authority are likely underutilized. Strengthening the authority of chief executives by giving them more budgetary and appointing authority will allow municipalities to harness the untapped potential of chief executives and to set a new expectation for performance-based executive leadership. Communities with decentralized organizational structures should consider streamlining to further enhance chief executive authority. While informal authority may be granted by boards of selectmen and exercised by chief executives, it is largely dependent upon the tradition and needs of the community, the skills and experience of the chief executive, or the political environment and it is therefore subject to change without notice. As a result, formally defined and declared chief executive authority is critical to consistent management, leadership, performance, and overall governance. Once chief executive authority is strengthened, the practice of transformational and collaborative leadership will improve both personnel and organizational capacity. Working together for the common good should be the goal of all public sector employees and chief executives should communicate and demonstrate this goal organizationally.

Chief executives who are interested in serving in positions where they can take effective action to improve organizations through good management and leadership practices, may want to consider working for a town where the position has more formal authority. However, new chief executives may want to start their careers in positions with less authority and progress to those with greater authority as they gain experience over time.

While this research touched upon how levels of chief executive authority and leadership

affect organizational performance in municipal government, a more in depth study into how organizational culture affects performance and the role leadership plays in changing culture, as well as improving performance, could be a future direction for related research. However, the development of more effective, municipality-wide evaluation tools to measure leadership, performance, and culture would be helpful. Nevertheless, in the absence of more authority or better evaluation tools, chief executives may still exercise leadership and drive performance by simply conducting performance reviews of staff and requesting their own performance reviews. This effort, alone, could be successful in leading a culture of performance.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to answer one primary question and two sub questions:

- *What are the differences in levels of authority among the majority of municipal chief executives (town administrators and town managers) in Massachusetts towns?*

  - *What is the comparative strength of the chief executive positions in terms of authority?*
  - *How does the level of authority vested in the chief executives relate to leadership opportunities?*

The main findings are that the authority levels of town administrators and town managers vary widely, from weak to strong, throughout Commonwealth towns. Authority levels are largely dependent on the organizational structure in each municipality and there is a trend in Massachusetts to change organizational structure through centralizing government functions and strengthening chief executive positions. Greater levels of formally defined chief executive authority facilitate leadership opportunities and where there is greater leadership, there is more effort directed toward organizational performance. Massachusetts towns are poised to make good local governance possible by capitalizing on their overwhelmingly professionalized organizations through strengthening weak to moderate chief executives to usher in a new era of performance-based executive leadership, fiscal management, and public service.

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Appendix A.1. Consent Form for Participation in a Graduate Student Research Study
University of Massachusetts Boston (In Person Interview)

Principal Investigator: Maureen Thomas
Study Title: Chief executive structure in Massachusetts towns: The relationship between authority levels and leadership opportunities.

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study to examine chief executive structure in Massachusetts towns and the range of town manager/administrator authority levels as well as leadership opportunities. You are being asked to participate because you work/volunteer with municipal government.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this research is to determine variations in authority levels and leadership opportunities among Town Managers and Town Administrators in Massachusetts. This study will contribute to our understanding of the variations in chief executive structure in Massachusetts towns and will help municipalities craft Manager/Administrator positions to best fit their communities, as well as help managers identify authority/leadership-level employment preferences.

What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview conducted by the principal investigator. The interview will ask you questions about your work with municipal government. If you are a Town Manager/Administrator, you will be asked about your authority, responsibilities, preferences, leadership, interaction with staff, strategy, goals, performance, longevity, etc. If you are a municipal official other than a Town Manager/Administrator, you will be asked about your position, length of service, your community, authority and leadership of chief executive, municipal performance, etc. If you are an executive recruiter for municipalities, you will be asked about variations in chief executive structure, authority levels, leadership, performance, qualifications, etc. The interview is expected to last for approximately 1 hour.

With your permission, I will audio-record the interview so I can accurately capture your comments. Any audio-recordings will be protected as described below. The audio recordings will not contain your name or other identifiable information.

What are the risks or inconveniences of this study?

There are no anticipated risks to participating. The questions in this interview will give you a chance to reflect on chief executive structure, authority, and leadership in your municipality. While you may not receive direct benefits from participating in this study, others may benefit from the knowledge obtained from your participation.

Are there costs to participate? Will I receive payment for participation?

There are no costs to participate and you will not be paid to be in this study.

How will my personal information be protected?

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your data. The researcher will keep all study records locked in a secure location. Research records will be labeled with a code. Documentation linking names and codes will be stored separately from the data. All research records, documentation, data, audiotapes will be destroyed upon completion of this study. All electronic files (e.g. database, interview transcripts, etc.) will be stored on a computer and/or external hard drive with password protection to prevent access by unauthorized users. Any hardcopy transcripts will be kept in a locked file separate from identifying documentation. Only the principal investigator will have access to the passwords. Data that will be shared with others will be coded as described above to help protect your identity. At the conclusion of this study, the researcher may publish their findings. Neither you nor your municipality will be identified in any publication or presentations.

Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?

You do not have to participate in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will be notified of all significant new findings during the course of the study that may affect your willingness to continue.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the study?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We would be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigator, Maureen Thomas at Maureen.Thomas001@umb.edu or 339-832-2206. Alternatively, you may contact the research advisor, Hsin-Ching Wu at 716-238-1878 or Hsinching.Wu001@umb.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Boston Institutional Review Board at 617-287-5374 or human.subjects@umb.edu. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Documentation of Consent:

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible hazards and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. If I do not wish to be audiotaped, I have initialed the appropriate box below. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form.

_____ I consent to having my interview audiotaped.
_____ I DO NOT consent to having my interview audiotaped.

_____   _____   _____
Participant Signature   Print Name   Date

_____   _____   _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Print Name   Date

Appendix A.2. Consent Form for Participation in a Graduate Student Research Study
University of Massachusetts Boston (Telephone Interview)

Principal Investigator: Maureen Thomas
Study Title: Chief executive structure in Massachusetts towns: The relationship between authority levels and leadership opportunities.

Thank you for your willingness to be interviewed for my research project on chief executive structure in Massachusetts towns. I will now read several statements that provide the background necessary to offer informed oral consent:

- You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to.
- There are no anticipated risks to participating. There are no direct benefits for participation, however, responses will be used to help understand the variations in authority levels and leadership opportunities across Town Managers/Administrators in Massachusetts.
- All responses will be kept confidential, and only I will have access to the record of our conversation.
- I will keep all records that identify you private to the extent allowed by law. However, officials from the federal government and/or the University of Massachusetts may inspect the records that identify you for the purpose of protecting your rights as a human subjects participant.
- The interview process will take approximately 1 hour.
- With your permission, I will audio-record the interview to ensure all information accurately reflects respondent comments.
- If you have further questions about this study or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigator, Maureen Thomas at 339-832-2206 or Maureen.Thomas001@umb.edu. Alternatively, you may contact the research advisor, Hsin-Ching Wu at 716-238-1878 or Hsinching.Wu001@umb.edu.
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact a representative of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, which oversees research involving human participants. The Institutional Review Board may be reached at 617-287-5374 or at human.subjects@umb.edu.

Do you offer your consent to participate in an interview? _____

Do you offer your consent to be audio-recorded? _____

Appendix B. Town Manager/Town Administrator Survey Instrument

\<i\>Chief Executive Structure in Massachusetts' Towns\</i\>\<br\>

This survey is part of a UMass Boston Master of Science in Public Affairs research project. The purpose of this survey is to learn more about the structure of various Town Administrator and Town Manager positions throughout the Commonwealth. This research project and the following survey questions were reviewed by the UMass Boston Institutional Review Board (IRB) and all responses are required to be kept confidential. This survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Thank you very much for your participation!

1. In what town do you work?

2. What is your job title?

- ○ Town Administrator
- ○ Town Manager

3. How long have you served in your current position?

- ○ 0-5 years
- ○ 6-10 years
- ○ 11-20 years
- ○ 21-30 years
- ○ 30+ years

4. Was your position created through a town charter or by-law/ordinance?

- ○ Town-wide Special Act or Home Rule charter
- ○ Special Act or Home Rule charter for position only
- ○ Town by-law/ordinance
- ○ Vote of the Board of Selectmen
- ○ None of the above
- ○ I don't know

5. Have you ever served as a Town Manager/Town Administrator (whichever answer was not chosen in Question #2 above)?

- ○ No
- ○ Yes

**<i>Chief Executive Structure in Massachusetts' Towns</i>
**

6. If yes, for how many years?

○ 0-5 years

○ 6-10 years

○ 11-20 years

○ 21-30 years

○ >30 years

7. What is your level of education?

○ High School Diploma

○ Associates Degree(s)

○ Bacherlor's Degree(s)

○ Graduate Degree(s)

8. What is your gender?

9. What is the population of the town in which you work?

○ <6,000

○ 6,000-11,999

○ 12,000-17,999

○ 18,000-23,999

○ 24,000 or greater

10. What is the municipal budget (including school budget) of the town in which you work?

○ $ 0 - $9,999,999 million

○ $10 million - $24,999,999 million

○ $25 million - $99,999,999 million

○ $100 million - $499,999,999 million

○ $500 million or greater

<i>Chief Executive Structure in Massachusetts' Towns</i>

11. What percent of the annual town budget package (including schools) are you responsible for preparing?

- ○ <1%
- ○ 1-25%
- ○ 26-50%
- ○ 51-75%
- ○ 76-100%

12. What is your salary?

- ○ <$50,000
- ○ $50,000-$79,999
- ○ $80,000-$109,999
- ○ $110,000-$139,999
- ○ >$140,000

13. How many full-time staff members (excluding schools) are employed in the town in which you work?

- ○ <25
- ○ 25-50
- ○ 51-75
- ○ 76-100
- ○ 101-125
- ○ >125

14. What percent of full-time staff members (excluding schools) do you have the authority to hire?

- ○ <1%
- ○ 1-19%
- ○ 20-39%
- ○ 40-59%
- ○ 60-79%
- ○ 80-100%

Page 3

28

<i>Chief Executive Structure in Massachusetts' Towns</i>

15. If you have hiring authority, do you also have the authority to terminate those you hire?

◯ No

◯ Yes

16. Are your staff appointments/terminations subject to Selectmen approval/veto?

◯ No

◯ Yes

17. If you do not have hiring authority, do you recommend a list of candidates or individual candidates to the Board of Selectmen for their consideration?

◯ List of candidates

◯ Individual candidates

18. Are you required to conduct annual performance reviews of department heads?

◯ No

◯ Yes

19. If you are required to conduct annual performance reviews, do you do them annually?

◯ No

◯ Yes

20. Do you conduct regular department head or staff meetings?

◯ No

◯ Yes

21. Are you required to be a MA Certified Public Purchasing Official?

◯ No

◯ Yes

22. How much responsibility do you have for awarding contracts?

◯ None

◯ Some

◯ All

Page 4

<i>Chief Executive Structure in Massachusetts' Towns</i>

23. Are you responsible for all collective bargaining negotiations?

○ No

○ Yes

24. Are you a voting member of the school committee for union contracts?

○ No

○ Yes

25. Does your organization employ a trained human resources professional?

○ No

○ Yes

26. What do you think are your most critical statutory authorities that allow you to make organizational change and to lead the town? (choose all that apply)

☐ Budgetary discretion

☐ Hiring and firing authority

☐ Awarding contracts

☐ Negotiating union contracts

☐ Performance reviews

27. Do you think Town Managers or Town Administrators have more overall authority (i.e. control, influence, responsibility, accountability)?

○ Town Managers

○ Town Administrators

○ Equivalent levels of authority

○ It depends

○ I don't know

28. Would you consider participating in an in-depth interview for this research project?

○ No

○ Yes

<i>Chief Executive Structure in Massachusetts' Towns</i>

29. Would you consider providing more information for this research (e.g. town charter or by-law creating your position, a position description)?

○ No

○ Yes

30. If you replied yes to Question #28 or #29 above, please provide your contact information below

Name	
Phone	
Email	

Thank you very much for participating in this survey!

Appendix C. Interview Guide

I. Town Manager/Town Administrator Interviews

1. In your experience, do you think there are differences in the levels of formal authority (i.e. right to take effective action, make decisions, direct someone or something, influence behavior, etc.) among Massachusetts town managers and town administrators?
2. If so, what do you think the main differences are (control, influence, responsibility, complexity, accountability, etc.) and did you always know there were differences or did you figure it out over time and with experience?
3. Do you have a personal preference for being a town manager or town administrator? Or are you concerned with the levels of formal authority vested in the position? If so, why?
4. Do you think there are more opportunities for leadership (i.e. influencing people or an organization to follow a certain direction, driving change and innovation through inspiration and motivation, providing direction and guidance) when one has more authority? How much explicit authority and what kinds of authority do you think a TA/TM needs in order to drive significant change? Do you think there is a minimum amount of authority needed in order to lead?
5. Do you feel limited by your position and do you feel your organization could be improved if you had more authority?
6. How long do you think one needs to be in the TA/TM position in order to lead a municipality?
7. Do you think managing an organization is the same as leading an organization?
8. What do you think are the traits of a good manager? What do you think are the traits of a good leader? Do you think you have established good management and good leadership practices in your organization? Do you think chief executives need to have better management and leadership skills if they have less formal authority?
9. Do you directly provide guidance, vision, goals, and motivation to staff?
10. How involved have you been in developing the mission, vision, values, culture, goals, strategies, and policies in your municipality?
11. Do you attempt to drive the performance (i.e. effectiveness & efficiency) of your organization?
12. If you have hiring authority, have you been able to build a team of staff and does it seem that the staff members you hire have more longevity than other hires?
13. How does the budget process work in your organization? Do you, the Board of Selectmen, or the Finance Committee prepare the annual budget? Is there a unified budget presented to the citizens at town meeting? Who presents the budget on town meeting floor?
14. What is your sense of the local politics in the town where you work? Is it politically challenging or chaotic? Or is it more pleasant and benign? Is there an old guard or a new guard that dictates the local political scene? Do you feel your authority and your leadership opportunities are hampered by local politics? What is your relationship like with the Board of Selectmen?
15. Is there anything else you would like to add? Do you have any recommendations for resources to consult or other people to contact that may contribute to this research?

II. Municipal Official Interviews

1. On what board or committee do you serve in your community? How long have you served in that position?
2. How long have you lived in your community?
3. What were the overriding factors that led your community to change the form of government or the authority of the chief executive in your town?
4. How long has the town had the new position?
5. How well is it working for the community?
6. Do you think it was the right decision? Why?
7. Having experienced both, what is your perception on the different levels of authority and the leadership opportunities?
8. Does the town government seem to be performing more effectively and efficiently with the changed or strengthened chief executive position?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add? Do you have any recommendations for resources to consult or other people to contact that may contribute to this research?

III. Municipal Consultant/Chief Executive Recruiter Interviews

1. In your experience as a municipal consultant/recruiter for chief executives in Massachusetts towns, is there a difference in the levels of authority (i.e. right to take effective action, make decisions, direct someone or something, influence behavior, etc.) among town managers and town administrators?
2. If so, is it generally clear which position has more authority? What are the main differences?
3. Do you think there is more variation in authority levels in town administrator positions than in town manager positions across the Commonwealth?
4. Does it seem that applicants to chief executive positions perceive a difference among the various town manager and town administrator positions? Do applicants seem concerned about authority levels in positions to which they apply?
5. Does it seem that those applying for town manager positions are more qualified or experienced than those applying for town administrator positions?
6. Do you think there are more opportunities for leadership (i.e. influencing people or an organization to follow a certain direction, driving change and innovation through inspiration and motivation, providing direction and guidance) when a position has more authority?
7. Does it seem organizational performance (i.e. effectiveness & efficiency) is better in towns that have stronger chief executives with more authority?
8. Do you find that such organizations with strong chief executives also have a better culture?
9. In your experience, have you noticed a pattern of chief executive turnover in municipalities where the position has less or vague authority? If so, do these towns seem more politically complicated or difficult?
10. In municipalities where the chief executive has limited authority, do you think the position of chief executive is unnecessary or do you think that a day-to-day, on-site manager is essential despite a lack of authority?

11. Do you think that successful town managers and town administrators have particular characteristics that allow them to succeed? If so, what are some of the common traits that allow for success?
12. Does it seem more likely that the authority in the position leads to success more than personal qualities or do you think it is a combination of the two?
13. What do you think drives municipalities to strengthen the statutory authority of their chief executives?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add? Do you have any recommendations for resources to consult or people to contact that may contribute to this research?

III. Municipal Attorney Interviews

1. Do you find that towns having town managers and town administrators with broad authority are run more effectively and efficiently or do you think it is more a function of local personalities, relationships, and politics?
2. Do you find there fewer lawsuits in towns where the chief executive has more authority?
3. Would you say there are fewer lawsuits in town that have fewer elected boards?
4. Do you think organizational effectiveness and efficiency is difficult to achieve in municipalities because they are so complex and there is such a wide range of services to provide?
5. Do you think that open and traditional New England town meeting is going to continue to survive or do you think more towns are going to start looking to change their form of government due to the apathy of voters?

Appendix D. Tables & Figures

Table 1. Survey Questions on Authority & Leadership with Response-Dependent Assigned Values

Authority		
Survey Question	**Response**	**Point Value**
1. Q11 What percent of the annual town budget package (including schools) are you responsible for preparing?	<1%	1
	1-25%	2
	26-50%	3
	51-75%	4
	76-100%	5
2. Q14 What percent of full-time staff members (excluding schools) do you have the authority to hire?	<1%	1
	1-19%	2
	20-39%	3
	40-59%	4
	60-79%	5
	80-100%	6
3. Q15 If you have hiring authority, do you also have the authority to terminate those you hire?	No	0
	Yes	1
4. Q16 Are your staff appointments/terminations also subject to Selectmen approval/veto?	No	1
	Yes	0
5. Q22 How much responsibility do you have for awarding contracts?	None	1
	Some	2
	All	3
6. Q23 Are you responsible for all collective bargaining negotiations?	No	0
	Yes	1
7. Q24 Are you a voting member of the school committee for union contracts?	No	0
	Yes	1
Leadership		
Survey Question	**Response**	**Point Value**
1. Q18 Are you required to conduct annual performance reviews of department heads?	No	0
	Yes	1
2. Q19 If you are required to conduct annual performance reviews, do you do them annually?	No	0
	Yes	1
3. Q20 Do you conduct regular department head or staff meetings?	No	0
	Yes	1
4. Q26 What do you think are your most critical statutory authorities that allow you to make organizational change and to lead the town?	Budgetary discretion	1
	Hiring and firing authority	1
	Awarding contracts	1
	Negotiating union contracts	1
	Performance reviews	1

Table 3. Female Chief Executive Authority – Leadership Comparison

		Weak (n=8)	Moderate (n=5)	Strong (n=6)
Ranked Leadership	Levels	1	4	6
		3	3	2
		3	4	4
		3	3	4
		3	4	8
		1	-	6
		1	-	-
		6	-	-
Average		**2.6**	**3.6**	**5**

Figure 4. Chief Executive Budgetary Discretion

Survey Question #11: What percent of the annual town budget package (including schools) are you responsible for preparing?

0%
10% (n=9)
48% (n=45)
19% (n=18)
23% (n=22)

■ <1% ■ 1-25% ■ 26-50% ■ 51-75% ■ 76-100%
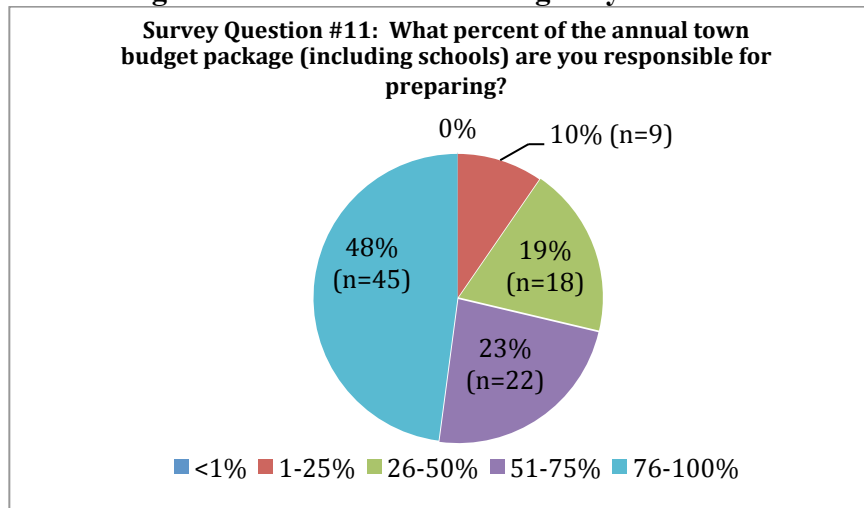
Figure 5. A Centralized Organizational Structure
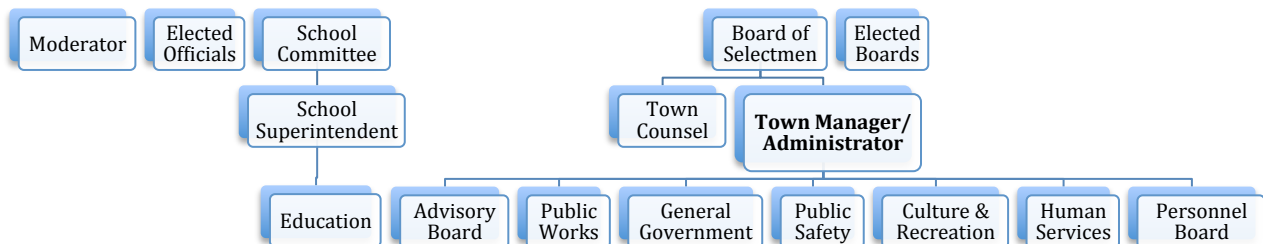
Moderator | Elected Officials | School Committee | | Board of Selectmen | Elected Boards

School Superintendent | Town Counsel | Town Manager/ Administrator

Education | Advisory Board | Public Works | General Government | Public Safety | Culture & Recreation | Human Services | Personnel Board

Figure 6. A Decentralized Organizational Structure