

Approachability as a City Manager: How to Build an Authentic Circle

*2026 League of California Cities
City Managers Conference*

Thursday, February 12
10:45 a.m.–12 p.m.

Your Panel



MODERATOR

Chris Freeland

City Manager

City of Indian Wells



Heather Abrams

Town Manager

Town of Fairfax



Jim Lewis

*CCMF Board Member and
City Manager*

City of Atascadero

Why Approachability is Important

While vision, integrity, communication skills, leadership and resilience all remain important, research continues to suggest most valued traits for a manager in the workplace are softer skills that include:

- ✓ **Self-awareness**
- ✓ **Good listener**
- ✓ **Compassion**

- ✓ **Gratitude**
- ✓ **Collaboration**
- ✓ **Empathy**

Embracing Vulnerability in Leadership

- Makes you relatable
- Drives trust
- Demonstrates strength of character
- Inspires creativity
- Transforms you into a “modern” leader
- Encourages psychological safety
- Connection
- Shared ownership
- Others step up to assist
- Builds stronger teams
- Enables continued growth

What Experts are Saying

“The C-suite is a different place — and the old CEO model doesn’t always motivate today’s workers. Millennials, in particular, want their leaders to share their human side, including their vulnerabilities. What they are seeking, in short, is authenticity.”

“How do you, as a leader, become more vulnerable? In short, it involves making the switch from proving to improving yourself. It means having an open, rather than a fixed mindset, reflecting the belief that you can always do better. It means focusing on personal growth rather than perception management.”

Source: McKinsey and Company Quarterly

Jim's Tips on Building Authentic Circles

- Being **authentic and genuine** in who you are and honor this in others
- Demonstrate **vulnerability** and **recognize and support it** when demonstrated by others
- Practice **humility** and **ask forgiveness**
- Demonstrate **active listening** and **awareness of others**
- Don't sweat small stuff, laugh at it and use it as an **opportunity to connect**

Jim's Tips Continued

- Know employees' names and **take interest in them**; ask about their environment
- **Meaningfully serve** in the community
- **Mentor** a few people in the organization
- **Never miss** a funeral, wedding or major life event if invited
- Remember **birthdays** and **employment anniversaries**, send cards
- Make the annual evaluation a **celebration** and **really check in**
- Have **meaningful, impactful** and **relational** team retreats
- Create a culture where **every member of the team** feels valued

The Flip Side: Accountability!

- Keep a sense of **healthy competition**
- Offer **recognition** and **awards** so team is afraid to disappoint
- Meaningful **performance conversations**
- Always have difficult conversations in a **timely** and **firm** manner
- Discipline **promptly** when necessary
- Encourage department heads in **maintaining discipline**
- Always do what you say you will. **Follow through!**

Q&A with Panelists



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Access to Resources

CCMF Website

