Tips for Maintaining Civility and Providing Leadership

“Coming together is the beginning, staying together is progress, working together is success.”
—Henry Ford

When serving the public, either in an elected role or an appointed role, this famous quote is even more meaningful. Because of the structure of local government – an elected decision-making body working hand in glove with appointed staff – behavior of leaders can either bring communities together or tear them apart. The following tools help promote civility and create a culture of strength and unity.

Intentional Communication Practices
The group decision making structure of local government can thwart development of critical relationship foundations. As a result, both elected officials and appointed staff may benefit from following the below tips for being more intentional in how to communicate.

- **Overcommunicate.** Write (and speak) with clarity with each other, maybe much more than your natural tendency. Avoid assuming others know what you mean or what you are thinking. This particularly holds true when meeting telephonically or virtually, such as in times of declared emergencies. However, writing and speaking with clarity does not mean finding fault with others and making accusations.

- **Build public trust.** Strive to have systems in place to get as much timely information out to the public in as many ways as practical. This includes using various communication tools. In addition to traditional communication (such as newsletters), use your city website, email alert systems, local news outlets, and consider embracing social media, such as Facebook or Twitter. Residents respond more positively when receiving information.
• **Avoid side conversations.** Although likely more relevant to elected officials, side conversations can erode trust in all team settings. Specifically, for elected officials, side conversations between members of a decision-making body may violate the Open Meeting Law. However, even when they do not, these types of conversations can lead to incomplete information, feelings of exclusion, suspicions about secretive and manipulative actions, and feelings of bias. Ultimately, the effect of side conversations oftentimes results in an increase in distrust and a barrier to teams moving forward together.

• **Practice listening.** Interrupting — now more than ever — frustrates others. Intentionally work on listening to each other with curiosity — this is the time to hear and learn what others know — before providing your input. Since meetings represent the time to hear what others are hearing and share what you have heard, the community benefits from hearing the decision-making body’s, as well as the staff, perspective before a vote. Remember listening involves focusing on what the speaker is saying, asking questions to clarify the speaker’s underlying interests, and summarizing what you hear the speaker say to confirm the speaker’s meaning. Listening does NOT mean being quietly distracted when someone else is speaking because you are internally processing how to counterargue or disagree.

• **Use rules of process for council or board meetings.** Rule of process help ensure clear communication in meetings. This is especially true in times of declared emergencies when a decision-making body likely sits at a virtual Dais. Making sure a process exists for the meeting leader to ask for a motion, a second, and then ask each member if they have input for discussion creates a clear and structured dialogue, where everyone gets a chance to speak and no one feels left out. Also, in those unique instances when council is meeting by telephone or electronically, the statutes require that votes are taken. Roll call votes, in those instances, help minute takers and the public know and understand everyone’s position so no dispute arises in votes later.
Team Mindset by Leaders
Highly cohesive teams have more success achieving the goals they have set for themselves. Lack of civility within a team working environment impacts team performance by causing unnecessary stress and tension among team members. Leaders of highly cohesive teams do the following:

1. **Cut people slack** – remember the situation likely is new for everyone and may be causing angst for all.
2. **Don’t play the blame game.** Don’t play the power game. Councils and council-staff represent a TEAM.
3. **Focus on process,** not the people involved.
4. **Assume good motives of others.**
5. **Listen to learn,** rather than pretending to listen while formulating a counter argument.
6. **Ask expansive questions and be patient with silence** while waiting for a response. Compromise is good but understanding all the underlying interests may lead to a new idea that meets everyone’s needs.
7. **Practice interpersonal empathy.** Remember empathy does not mean giving up your beliefs; rather, it means listening, respecting others’ positions, and validating their worth.
8. **Identify individual strengths** of team members and recognize their unique contributions to validate belonging.
9. **Learn to delegate** with clear expectations to empower others.
10. **Celebrate success** – all success. Realize success comes in all shapes and sizes.
Use the Right Tools
Group decision making, the Open Meeting Law, and staff working for a body, contribute to organizational challenges. Having the right tools and processes in place can springboard leadership.

Not uncommonly, individuals who get elected do not have in-depth knowledge of all facets of city operations. Dedicating time after newly elected officials get sworn in to provide education on day-to-day city operations help elected officials understand all that goes into operating a city. Many cities do this as part of an annual vision setting or team building meeting. As part of these types of meetings, cities also cover the duties of elected officials as policy makers, as well as having an intra-council dialogue where experienced officials can share best practices.

Highly functioning cities have clear basic organizational processes in place:

- Clarity around how to get items on the agenda.
- Best practices for asking questions or getting answers from staff (particularly before meetings to avoid surprises at meetings).
- Understanding how elected officials can get information to other elected officials within the parameters of the Open Meeting Law.
- Clarity around how meetings run and rules of process.
- Best practices for responding to public complaints.

In addition to clear processes, all members of local government teams – from the elected officials to the staff involved – benefit from having patience and flexibility with the various learning styles that can arise. For example, if an elected official has difficulty reading online, figuring out a way to get the packet to that person in hard copy, even if most of the council have tablets, makes everyone feel included and valued.
In addition to clarity around processes, having the right technology helps groups work together, and becomes even more crucial in times of declared emergencies. If both council and employees must work remotely during an emergency, then a city should prioritize having solid collaboration tools in place. Technology can cause stress, so find tools that are easy to use. The League has some technology options that are cost effective and easy to use. The following suggestions will also help avoid issues during virtual meetings.

- Use a phone line with audio clarity and stability.
- Do not multi-task (do other work) during the meeting.
- Follow an organized line up to ensure each person has a chance to respond.
- Find a quiet space to participate.
- Use the mute button at your site to prevent the transmission of background noise.
- Within rules of meeting, speak up to get attention if you have something to say.

Remember, when working remotely, individuals lose the ability to glance across the hall to see if someone has a minute to spare for a quick chat. As such, city staff should rely on tools to indicate when individuals are available and when folks should wait a few minutes before expecting a response. Department directors and other city leaders should stay in touch with their staff through phone calls, direct messaging, or even video chats.

**Remember, Your Behavior Matters**

Like it or not, the behavior of the city’s elected officials and staff leaders affects employees’ willingness to join or stay in an organization. It also affects the public’s trust in their government. Now more than ever, citizens need civility in government to work as the glue to hold things together.

Remember, democracy is built on idea representation, not personally attacking others, and local government succeeds by working together to try to meet the needs of the entire community in a nonpartisan manner. Leaders understand that cultivating civility helps create a cornerstone for a strong community. Following the tips shared here will help you do that!