

Leading With Respect Handguides

AMO's Handguide 1
Introduction



Association of
Municipalities
of Ontario

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AMO's Leading With Respect Handguides provide practical resources, tips, and tools that elected officials and senior staff can adapt, rebrand, and use to foster civility and respect in municipal governance across Ontario.

There are eight guides in the series.

- 1. An Introduction to AMO's Leading With Respect Handguides**
2. Responding to Constituents
3. Chairing Meetings Effectively
4. Holding Public Meetings
5. Fostering Civility at the Council Table
6. Using Social Media and Online Platforms
7. Self-Care for Municipal Leaders and Staff
8. Professional Development and Education

The handguides were developed by MASS LBP and AMO in a joint initiative of the Healthy Democracy Project and Municipal Workforce Development Project.

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How to Use These Guides

Who These Guides Are For

These guides were designed for the people who keep Ontario's municipalities running: **mayors and reeves, members of council, chief administrative officers (CAOs), clerks, and senior managers.** Whether you serve a major urban centre or a rural township, this resource recognizes that you may be operating in a climate of heightened polarization and declining public trust.

What They Are (and Why AMO Produced Them)

This is a **practical, modular, and optional** toolkit. It is not a rigid rulebook or a provincial directive.

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) produced this guide because the tone of municipal life has undeniably changed. Through the Healthy Democracy Project and the Workforce Development Project, AMO identified that harassment and toxic behaviour are no longer occasional outbursts but have become systemic barriers to effective governance and service delivery. We heard clearly that

while local governments continue to deliver essential services, the system is increasingly strained by mistrust, misinformation, fatigue, and incivility.

Public support for Canada's political system has held steady for the last 15 years, and 74% of Canadians agree that democracy is preferable to any other form of government, particularly authoritarian government.¹ This signals to us that everyday people do value the democratic fabric that shapes their lives, that people believe there is something valuable here to protect.

These guides translate extensive research and member feedback into actionable strategies to help you:

- Protect the well-being of elected officials and staff.
- Preserve the quality of democratic decision-making.
- Attract and retain the next generation of local leaders - elected and staff.

They were not developed to displace existing policies, frameworks, or strategy that a municipality might have, rather to complement and strengthen what exists and to provide guidance on what to develop when there are gaps.

¹ https://www.enviroinicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/read-the-report17b8667c-aald-4593-a6f0-8f877d609ee4.pdf?sfvrsn=6049dc67_1

How They Were Developed

The insights here are grounded in lived experience. They are drawn from:

- **Confidential interviews** with 29 municipal leaders, staff, and experts.
- **Workshops and drop-in conversations** involving about 150 participants at the AMO 2025 Annual Conference.
- **A review** of best practices from jurisdictions grappling with similar challenges globally.

Adapt and localize

There is no "one size fits all" for Ontario's 444 municipalities.

You have clear permission to adapt, rebrand, and localize these tools. Take what works for your community's size, context, and capacity, and leave the rest.

Using These Guides Under Pressure

We know you are busy. You do not need to read this cover-to-cover to find value.

For Staff

Use these resources to support your Council. This guide is intended to make your job easier by providing third-party, evidence-based frameworks for difficult conversations regarding conduct and safety.

For Elected Officials

Use the checklists and decision trees to navigate complex interactions with constituents and colleagues without engaging in "retail politics" that erode your time and well-being.

A. Leading with Respect

Creating a Culture of Civility

Civility is not just about politeness; it is the "invisible infrastructure" that allows us to live together despite our differences. In a municipal context, civility is the professional discipline that allows conflict to be expressed without violence and disagreement to occur without a breakdown in governance.

Leading with respect does not mean suppressing debate. Politics is inherently competitive and adversarial, and disagreement is both inevitable and necessary. Opinions will differ, priorities may conflict, and solutions will not always align. The goal of this guide is to help create conditions where people can challenge one another and hold each other to account in ways that remain rooted in mutual regard and recognizing a shared commitment to the community and to the democratic process that makes principled disagreement possible.

What Is at Stake?

Leaving incivility unaddressed is not an option. The costs are already being paid by municipalities across Ontario:

Decision Quality

When councils are consumed by interpersonal conflict or inundated by aggressive lobbying, strategic work suffers. Councils report spending disproportionate time on minor operational details or procedural battles rather than long-term planning. The result is a shift from deliberation to defensiveness.

Staff Retention

Senior staff are facing unprecedented hostility, sometimes from council and sometimes from the public, often leaving them feeling undermined or "cross-examined" rather than consulted. As other staff witness this, succession planning and promotions become harder to fill. This environment contributes to burnout and early retirements, draining municipalities of institutional memory and professional expertise.

Candidate Recruitment

The toxicity of the current environment is narrowing the pipeline of future leaders. Many current members of council have indicated they will not run again due to the toll on their mental health and families. This is particularly true for women, racialized individuals, and young people, who disproportionately face identity-based harassment.

Public Trust

Dysfunction breeds cynicism. When residents see councils paralyzed by infighting or staff subjected to abuse, they disengage. This creates a feedback loop: as reasonable voices withdraw, extreme voices dominate the public forums, further eroding confidence in local government.

B. What We Heard From AMO Members

Municipal government plays a foundational role in Canada's democratic system. Elected officials and senior staff are responsible for decisions that shape daily life, often under intense public scrutiny and with limited resources. Across Ontario, municipal leaders continue to show professionalism, commitment, and resilience in the face of growing complexity and public pressure. At the same time, the conditions under which this work is carried out are changing. Increased polarization, blurred boundaries between public and private life, and new forms of engagement—particularly online—are creating risks that existing norms and supports were not designed to manage.

To create this handguide, we listened to the people on the front lines of local government. From small rural townships to large urban centres, the message was consistent: the status quo is unsustainable.

Here is a summary of the challenges facing Ontario's municipal leaders today.

Proximity Without Protection

Municipal government's closeness to the people fosters accountability but can also be the source of vulnerability.

"Leading Where You Live": Unlike MPs or MPPs, municipal officials cannot retreat to a capital city. In small communities, home, the grocery store, the hockey rink is the office. Members of council report being accosted in grocery stores, at places of worship, and in their driveways.

Not Employees: Members of council are not "employees," which means they often lack Occupational Health and Safety Act protections, leaving them isolated and exposed to harassment without institutional support.

Declining Expertise and Respect

There is a growing skepticism toward professional advice.

Skepticism of Staff: Senior staff report being called "liars" or accused of bias when presenting evidence-based reports.

Role Confusion: Members of council are increasingly pressured or choose to act as operational managers rather than governors. This leads to interference in day-to-day administration, undermining staff authority and bogging Council down in operational minutiae.

The Information Vacuum

The collapse of local journalism has left many communities in "news deserts," creating a void filled by unmoderated social media.

A new public square: In this vacuum, Facebook groups have become the de facto public square, where complex policies are often replaced by memes and unfiltered outrage. These spaces can become echo-chambers where misinformation spreads unchecked.

Dehumanizing interactions: This shift also dehumanizes officials, as it is far easier to abuse a digital avatar than a neighbour.

Structural Strain

Incivility flourishes in environments under stress. We heard clearly that the municipal sector is facing chronic under-resourcing that makes meeting rising public expectations nearly impossible.

The Volunteer Trap: In many municipalities, councilship is a "part-time" role despite requiring full-time hours. Small and rural municipalities often lack dedicated staff and office infrastructure including legal counsel, or communications staff to manage harassment.

Inconsistent Response to Threats: We heard that responses to threats vary wildly. While some urban centres have dedicated police liaisons, some municipal officials reported that police don't respond or are unsympathetic to "lawful but awful" behaviour, and rural officials report that police may be hours away.

At-a-Glance Menu of Handguide Topics and Tools

Each handguide covers a specific topic and includes different types of practical resources that can be adapted and used. There are seven topics:

② Responding to Constituents

- Core Principles That Reduce Escalation
 - Guidance for Setting Boundaries
 - Sample Response Language
 - Foundational Policies: The Rules That Protect You
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③ Chairing Meetings Effectively

- Principles for Civil and Orderly Meetings
 - Participation Standards
 - The Role of the Chair: Responsibilities & Tactics
 - Proactive Conflict Management: From Preparation to Follow-Up
 - De-Escalation Principles and Structured Models
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④ Holding Public Meetings

- A Checklist for Designing Civility and Safety in Public Meetings
 - Working with Security and Law Enforcement
 - Decorum Policy for Public Meetings
 - Principles for Public Engagement: Preempting a Frustrated Public
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⑤ **Fostering Civility at the Council Table**

- Building Effective Working Relationships on Council
- Shared Norms and Civility Pledges
- Policy Tools for Managing Conflict
- How to Be an Active Bystander

⑥ **Social Media and Online Platforms**

- Moderation Principles for Online Forums & When to Disengage
- Personal vs. Official Account Guidance
- Policies to Consider for Online Platforms

⑦ **Self-Care for Municipal Leaders and Staff**

- Warning Signs of Burnout
- Practical and Realistic Self-Protection Strategies
- Peer Support Options

⑧ **Professional Development and Education**

- Comparative Models: Professional Development as a Core Council Practice
- Recommended Training Topics: An Annotated Guide
- Tips for Making Professional Development Practical



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