

Leading With Respect Handguides

AMO's Handguide 3
Chairing Meetings
Effectively

3



Association of
Municipalities
of Ontario

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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3.0 Chairing Meetings Effectively

Public meetings ultimately succeed or fail in the moment-by-moment management of discussion. The presiding official carries unique responsibility for translating established rules, procedures, and expectations into fair and consistent practice under real-time pressure.

Effective chairing requires judgement, neutrality, and emotional regulation, particularly when participants are frustrated, fearful, or angry. How rules are applied and how interventions are delivered strongly shape whether participants experience the process as legitimate, even when outcomes are disappointing or contested. When meetings feel disorganized, permissive, or inconsistently managed, frustration can escalate quickly.

Disorder rarely begins with a single outburst; it develops when expectations are unclear, rules appear optional, or the chair's authority is uncertain. Once that dynamic takes hold, it can be difficult to restore calm without escalating further.

Meetings that are clearly structured and predictably chaired tend to feel safer, even when the subject matter is controversial. When roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, particularly between elected officials and staff, participants have a better understanding of how decisions are made and where accountability lies. This clarity helps reduce confusion and tension, and makes people more likely to accept outcomes, including decisions they oppose, when the process is visibly fair and consistently applied.

3.1 Principles for Civil and Orderly Meetings

These principles support chairs in creating meetings that are orderly, fair, and accessible. When applied consistently, they reduce confusion and frustration and help establish shared expectations for behaviour. The goal is not to limit public input, but to ensure it can be heard and considered without conflict overtaking the process.

Predictability

Clear, easy-to-understand ground rules established both before the meeting, in posted and circulated documents, and at the start of the meeting reduce uncertainty that fuels frustration.

Consistency and Evenhandedness

Procedural rules, such as speaking time limits and sign-up requirements, must be applied identically to all participants. Favoring one viewpoint by granting extra time while strictly cutting off another violates viewpoint neutrality. Addressing minor disruptions immediately and proportionally prevents the perception that rules are optional.

Impartiality

The presiding official acts as the protector of the process, directing discussion without using their position to sway outcomes. Chairs must remain open to persuasion during deliberation.

Separation of People from Problems

Discussion should focus on the factual merits of proposals rather than personalities or motives. Chairs should redirect or stop debate if it devolves into personal attacks.

Acknowledgment Without Endorsement

Neutral acknowledgment of emotion or concern helps reduce escalation without validating positions or conclusions.

Firm but Neutral Limit-Setting

Disruptions should be addressed using clear, proportional warnings and “when–then” statements. Removal is a last resort following warnings and opportunities to comply.

Transparency

Trust increases when the public understands the rules in advance and sees how input relates to outcomes, including explanations when feedback cannot be used.



3.2 Participation Standards

These standards may be printed on agendas or read at the start of meetings to establish clear expectations. Some elements will be more appropriate for open/public, rather than closed, meetings.

Registration	All speakers must register as delegations by the prescribed deadline.
Time Limits	Each speaker is limited to the allotted time set by the chair.
Respectful Conduct and a Neutral Environment	Applause, booing, or catcalls are not permitted as they disrupt the neutrality of the space.
Prohibited Items	Picket signs, placards, or banners are not permitted in the meeting room.
Focus on Issues	Comments must be directed to the chair and focused on the item under debate. Back-and-forths between delegates and council or staff are not appropriate in this setting. Questions and comments from delegates are captured and on record but a direct, immediate response is rarely possible. A formal response will be provided in a future staff report.
Digital Standards	Online participants must comply with established terms of use; abusive behaviour results in removal.

3.3 The Role of the Chair: Responsibilities & Tactics

The head of council or presiding officer owns the process, while members own the outcome. Effective chairing balances efficiency and fairness to ensure all voices are heard without allowing disorder.

Core Responsibilities

- 1. Preparation:** Review agenda materials in advance to anticipate contentious items.
- 2. Impartiality:** Facilitate debate fairly, separating the role of facilitator from that of voter.
- 3. Enforcement:** Preserve order, enforce procedural rules, and rule on motions.

Chairing Tactics

Set expectations at the outset, acknowledging emotional issues while restating conduct rules.

Enforce one speaker at a time, recognized by the chair.

Keep **debate focused** on policy rather than personality.

Manage time to ensure efficient progress.

Attend to the energy in the room. Consider calling for recess after heavy agenda items to help with fatigue and meeting flow.

Demonstrate **active listening** through attention and summarizing.

Use the gavel sparingly; **rely on procedure and call recesses** when necessary.

3.4 Proactive Conflict Management: From Preparation to Follow-Up

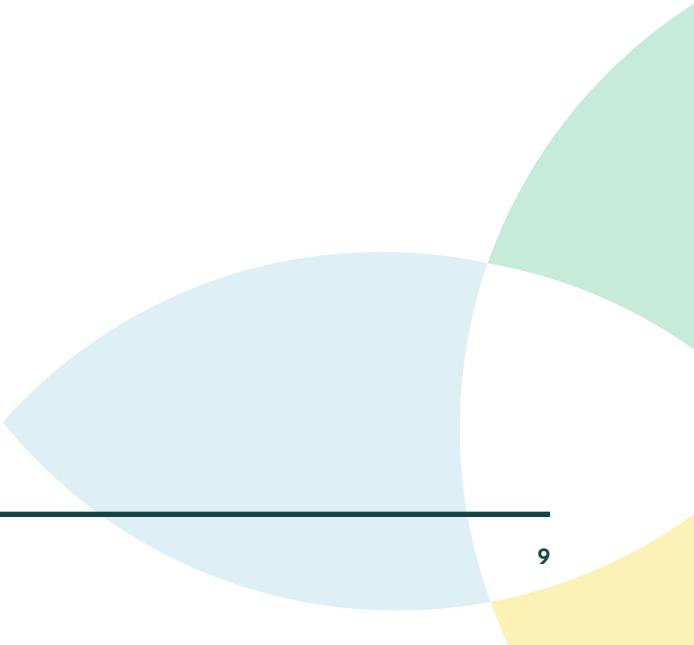
Conflict escalates when individuals feel unheard, unsafe, or confused about what is happening. De-escalation combines preparation, early intervention, and structured in-the-moment responses..

Before the Meeting

1. Identify likely flashpoints in consultation with senior staff.
2. Prepare opening scripts that emphasize civility, community values, or shared purpose.
3. Ensure agendas are finalized and distributed in advance to avoid surprises.

During the Meeting

1. Watch for signs of emotional overwhelm, such as raised voices or interruptions.
2. Remind participants of the meeting process and shared goals.
3. Clarify procedure when confusion arises.



After the Meeting

1. Close the “feedback loop” by reporting how public input influenced decisions.
2. Debrief with appropriate staff and members of council to assess what worked and where protocols could improve.

3.5 De-Escalation Principles and Structured Models

De-Escalation Principles

1

Active Listening

Maintain neutral, attentive body language and focus on understanding concerns.

2

Acknowledgment

Validate emotion without endorsing facts or positions.

3

Separation of People from Problems

Redirect heated exchanges back to the merits of the issue.

4

Managing Repetitive Speakers

Acknowledge contributions respectfully while preventing domination of the agenda.

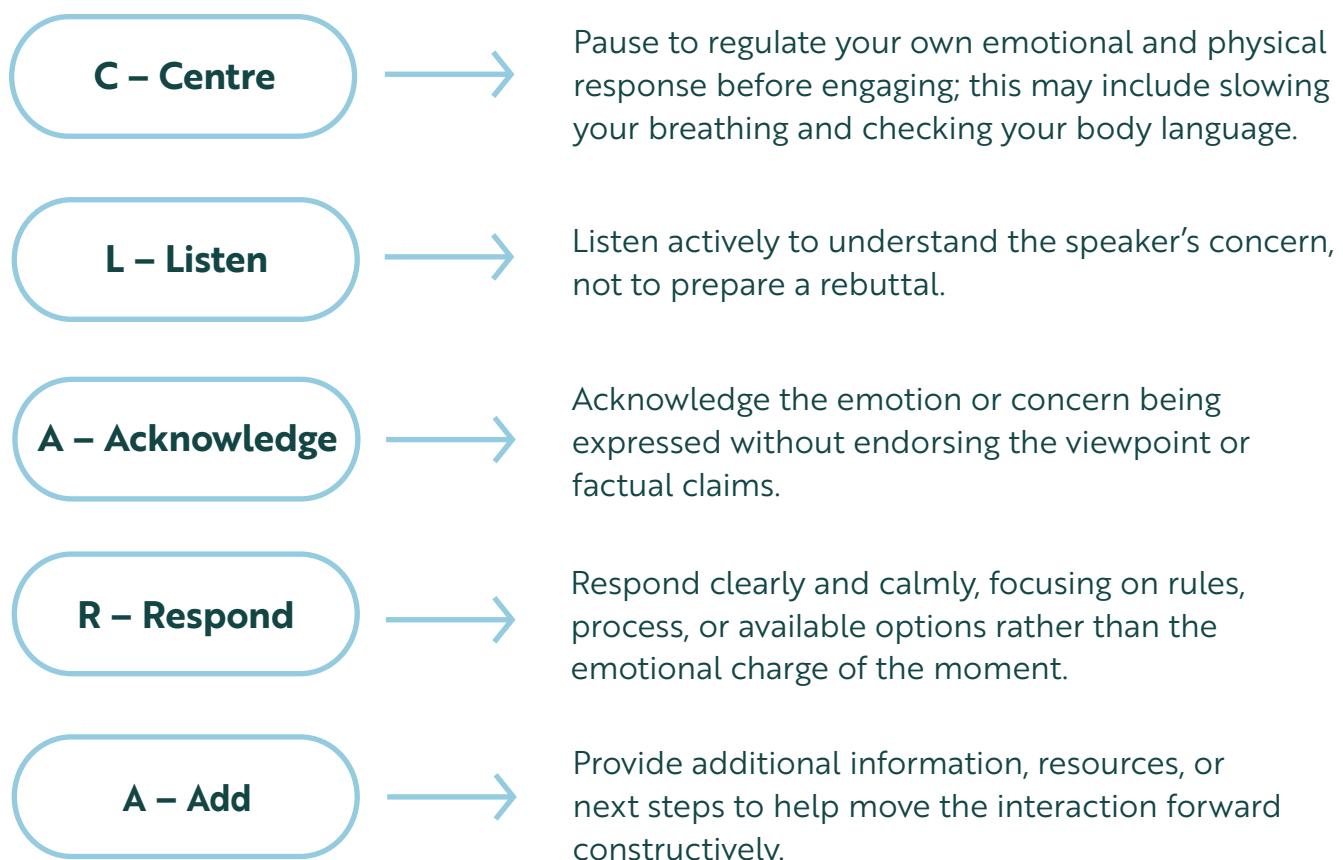
Strategic Recess:

Short breaks can reduce emotional intensity and restore order.

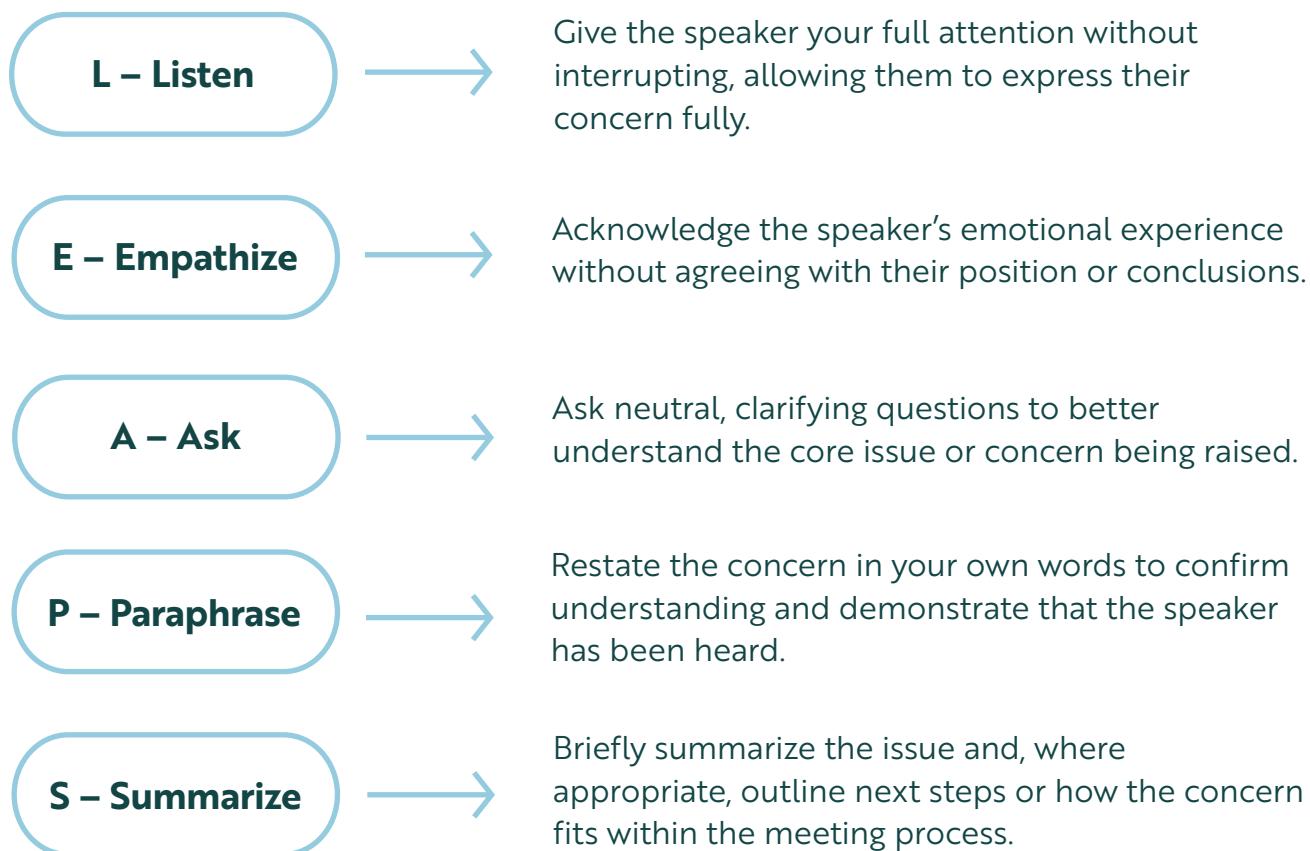
Structured De-Escalation Models

Widely used de-escalation models are helpful because they give chairs and participants a simple, reliable structure to fall back on in tense moments, reducing the likelihood of reactive responses and helping restore calm, clarity, and procedural fairness under pressure.

CLARA (Centre, Listen, Acknowledge, Respond, Add) is drawn from trauma-informed communication and conflict-resolution practice, with particular emphasis on the internal regulation of the responder before engaging externally.



LEAPS (Listen, Empathize, Ask, Paraphrase, Summarize) originated from conflict resolution training programs, particularly those used in security and law enforcement. It provides a structured communication approach to de-escalate tense situations by addressing emotional triggers like feeling unheard.



Learn More

Organization	Links
Ombudsman Ontario Open Meetings: Guide for Municipalities	ombudsman.on.ca
Office of the Ombudsperson, British Columbia Open Meetings: Best Practices Guide for Local Governments	bcombudsperson.ca
Institute for Local Government Tips for Promoting Civility in Public Meetings (PDF)	ca-ilg.org
Princeton University Bridging Divides Initiative Guidelines for De-Escalation and Communication Around Contentious Meetings for Local Elected Officials (PDF)	bridgingdivides.princeton.edu
National Civic League How to De-Escalate Public Meetings: A Practical, Step-by-Step Guide for Cities	nationalcivicleague.org
California School Boards Association Managing Board Meetings in Turbulent Times (PDF)	csba.org
Municipal Research and Services Centre Strategies for Managing Difficult Public Meetings	mrsc.org



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