

Leading With Respect Handguides

AMO's Handguide 5
Fostering Civility at the
Council Table



Association of
Municipalities
of Ontario

5

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**
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5.0 Fostering Civility at the Council Table

Civility at the council table is not about the absence of conflict; rather, it is about the presence of respect while navigating inevitable disagreements. In the context of democratic governance, civility requires focusing debate on the strengths and weaknesses of policy solutions rather than engaging in personal attacks against colleagues or staff.

Maintaining this standard is critical for both institutional stability and public trust. The rise in incivility and harassment is currently driving resignations among elected officials and deterring dedicated community representatives from seeking office.

Beyond retention, a lack of decorum undermines decision-making; robust debate is necessary to avoid "group think," but it must remain constructive to ensure that collective decisions reflect the best interests of the community.

This section provides practical principles, tips, and tools designed to help you build productive working relationships with your fellow council members and manage meetings effectively, even when tensions run high. It outlines strategies for guiding disagreement toward productive outcomes, such as separating the people from the problem and utilizing parliamentary procedure to maintain order.

5.1 Building Effective Working Relationships on Council

Effective governance relies on the ability of elected officials to work together despite differing ideologies. While you do not need to be friends with every colleague, you must be able to function as a cohesive decision-making body. The following strategies can help build a foundation of trust and respect at the table.

Practice the "No Surprises" Rule

Adopt a practice of giving colleagues or the chair a "heads-up" if you plan to ask a particularly tough question or introduce a complex motion. Avoiding "gotcha" moments demonstrates professional courtesy and ensures that debate is focused on the merit of the issue rather than the shock of the process.

A fundamental rule of civility is to separate the people from the problem. Debate must remain focused on the item and policy in question, never on the motives or character of other members. When tension rises, re-center the discussion on shared goals, such as the economic or social well-being of the community, rather than personal differences.

Disagree Without Being Disagreeable

Conflict is a necessary part of democracy, but it must be managed to avoid toxicity. Strive for collegiality even when voting on opposite sides of an issue. Recognize that debate and disagreement are fundamental to avoiding "group think" and ensuring robust decision-making. Once a decision is made, accept the will of the majority and move on without harboring lingering hostilities.

Invest in Connection Outside the Chamber

It is easier to demonize a colleague you only see during contentious votes. Create spaces or opportunities for connection that are not about conflict or policy. Ad hoc conversations around the 'water cooler' are great for building social connection and empathy. Talking about real life—families, hobbies, or shared community interests—humanizes your colleagues and builds a reservoir of goodwill that can be drawn upon during difficult debates. If you find a colleague particularly difficult, actively try to identify their "biggest redeeming quality" and keep it in mind during interactions.

Listen to Understand, Not Just to Reply

Active listening is a powerful tool for reducing polarization. When a colleague is speaking, focus entirely on their argument rather than formulating your rebuttal. Demonstrating that you are willing to hear differing perspectives—and potentially be persuaded by facts—builds credibility and encourages others to accord you the same respect.

Respect Role Clarity ("Noses In, Fingers Out")

Conflict often spills over between members when the lines between governance and administration blur. Adhere to the "Noses In, Fingers Out" (NIFO) principle: Council's role is to set policy (noses in), while the CAO and staff are responsible for execution (fingers out). Respecting these lanes reduces friction not only with staff but among members of council who may feel compelled to defend staff from micromanagement.

Model the Standard You Expect

As a leader, your behaviour sets the tone for the community. If you engage in eye-rolling, interruptions, or personal attacks, you grant permission for the public to treat the council with similar disrespect. Commit to a standard of civility where you treat colleagues with the courtesy you wish to receive, regardless of the heat of the moment.

5.2 Shared Norms and Civility Pledges

Civility pledges and shared norms templates are formal commitments that establish clear behavioural expectations for elected officials and the public, providing a "neutral reference point" to de-escalate conflict and define acceptable conduct.

These tools are increasingly being utilized by governance bodies globally—ranging from the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the UK's local government associations to specific local agencies like the San Diego County Water Authority—to signal that respectful dialogue is a non-negotiable community norm.

In Ontario, [Elect Respect](#) is a civility pledge that municipalities and citizens can become signatories to.

For councils that want their own bespoke approach to norm setting, there are different kinds of shared norms or pledges to adopt.



Option 1: The "Commitment to Civil Behaviour"

(Procedural Focus)

This template focuses on the mechanics of the meeting and specific behavioural constraints. It is best suited for councils seeking clear, enforceable boundaries.

Council Commitment to Civil Governance



To maintain a productive working environment and retain public trust, the council commits to the following standards:

- 1. Unity of Purpose:** We will support the municipality's mission and bring authority-related concerns to the council table for open discussion rather than letting them fester.
- 2. Constructive Debate:** We will focus on the problem, not the person. When addressing a problem, we commit to offering alternative solutions rather than just opposition.
- 3. Respect for Roles:** We will show respect to each other as elected representatives and to staff as professional public servants. We will adhere to the "Noses In, Fingers Out" principle, respecting the distinction between policy (Council) and administration (Staff).
- 4. Meeting Decorum:**
 - We will listen to understand, not just to reply.
 - One person speaks at a time; we will not interrupt colleagues or staff.
 - We will limit side conversations and turn off mobile devices to demonstrate active listening.
- 5. Confidentiality:** We will strictly maintain the confidentiality of materials and discussions held in closed meetings (in-camera), honoring our legal obligations under the Municipal Act.
- 6. Self-Correction:** We pledge to correct ourselves and accept correction from the chair constructively should our conduct fall below this standard.

Option 2: The "Pledge of Civility"

(Values Focus)

This template is broader and focuses on the culture of the organization. It is useful for setting a tone of inclusion and respect, particularly regarding public interaction.

Statement of Values and Civility



- 1. Governance Matters:** We acknowledge that the manner in which we govern ourselves is often as important as the positions we take.
- 2. Valuing Divergence:** We believe our collective decisions will be better—and truer to our mission—when differing views have had the opportunity to be fully vetted and considered. Disagreement is necessary for democracy, but we will disagree without being disagreeable.
- 3. Right to Respect:** All those who appear before the council—including residents, staff, and fellow members—have the right to be treated with respect, courtesy, and openness.
- 4. Zero Tolerance for Hate:** We unequivocally condemn hate speech, discrimination, and harassment. We commit to a standard where such behaviour is never acceptable in our chambers or on our digital platforms
- 5. Accountability:** We commit to conducting ourselves with civility at all times. If we fail to meet these standards, we will take responsibility for our actions and seek to repair the harm.

Option 3: Short-Form Meeting Opener

(The "Community Character" Statement)

Some councils find it effective to read a brief statement at the beginning of meetings to set the stage for the public and the members. This can be read by the Chair or rotated among members.

Template



"Welcome to this meeting of the [Name] Council. This forum is a place for democracy, respectful discussion and debate. We are committed to the values of integrity, honesty, responsibility, and respect. We ask that everyone present—council members, staff, and the public—exercise self-discipline. Please focus your comments on the issues at hand, respect the time limits, and accord others the same courtesy you wish to receive. Let us work together to build a community where diverse views are heard and valued!"

Implementation Tips for CAOs and Clerks

Formalization: Do not just agree verbally. Adopt the pledge via resolution or have all members sign a ceremonial copy to hang in the council chambers.

Refresh: Revisit the pledge annually or at the start of every new term to ensure buy-in from new members.

Orientation: Include the pledge in the orientation package for candidates and newly elected officials so expectations are set before the first meeting.

Public Visibility: Post the pledge on the municipal website and at the entrance to the council chambers. This signals to the public that abuse and intimidation are not welcome.

5.3 Policy Tools for Managing Conflict

Beyond pledges, councils should enact specific policies to provide structure, manage conflict, and stipulate consequences for misconduct. This section outlines four specific policy instruments that define boundaries, clarify roles, and provide mechanisms for resolution.

A Robust Procedure By-law

The **Procedure By-law** is the primary tool for maintaining order. It should be viewed not just as a scheduling tool, but as a mechanism to enforce decorum.

Purpose: To govern the proceedings of meetings and provide the chair with enforceable rules to manage debate and behaviour.

Key Provisions to Adopt:

Role of the chair: Explicitly empower the chair to preserve order, enforce rules, and rule on whether motions or speakers are out of order.

One Speaker at a Time: Enforce the rule that only one person speaks at a time and must be recognized by the chair.

Focus on the Issue: Include a provision that requires debate to focus on the item and policy in question, strictly prohibiting personal attacks or comments regarding the motives of other members.

Electronic Participation: Clearly define rules for electronic participation to ensure remote members are held to the same standards of decorum and attention as those physically present. Ensure that video participation is monitored in the same manner as the live session, and that participant conduct online aligns with what is expected of participants in-person.

Enhanced Code of Conduct

Every municipality should have a Code of Conduct that goes beyond financial impropriety to address behavioural standards and interpersonal conduct.

Purpose: To set ethical standards for members of council and local boards and provide a mechanism for accountability.

Key Provisions to Adopt:

Respectful Conduct: mandated provisions regarding respectful conduct toward officers, employees, and fellow members.

Social Media Usage: A specific section governing members' conduct online, clarifying that the Code applies to communication on social media platforms.

Non-Interference: Provisions prohibiting members from using their office to attempt to influence staff or interfere in administrative duties (operationalizing the "Noses In, Fingers Out" principle).

Reprisal Protection: A clause prohibiting members from engaging in reprisal or threats against anyone who files a complaint or cooperates with an inquiry.

Council-Staff Relations Policy

Conflict often arises from role confusion between elected officials (policy) and staff (administration). A formal policy clarifies these lanes.

Purpose: To clearly define the distinct roles of staff (neutral advice, implementation) and council (policy, decision-making) and manage the relationship between them.

Key Provisions to Adopt:

Role Clarity: Explicit definitions of the CAO's role as the only employee reporting directly to council, and the restriction of individual members of council giving direction to staff.

Respectful Communication: Standards for how inquiries are made to staff, ensuring they are not subjected to abuse or undue pressure.

NIFO Principle: Formal adoption of the "Noses In, Fingers Out" principle to prevent members of council from interfering in day-to-day operations, a frequent source of friction.

Complaint and Inquiry Protocol

Policies are ineffective without a clear process for enforcement. This protocol defines how complaints are handled.

Purpose: To set out how to file complaints against members regarding code of conduct contraventions and how the integrity commissioner will investigate.

Key Provisions to Adopt:

Informal Resolution: Include an option for mediation or informal resolution. This allows the integrity commissioner to resolve interpersonal disputes without a costly, formal investigation, saving time and money.

Frivolous Complaints: Give the integrity commissioner discretion to dismiss complaints that are frivolous, vexatious, or made in bad faith to prevent the weaponization of the complaint process.

Timelines: Establish reasonable time limits for filing and reviewing complaints to prevent issues from dragging on and poisoning the council environment.

Social Media Policy

Given that online interactions are a major driver of modern political conflict, a specific policy or detailed section within the Code of Conduct is critical.

Purpose: To govern how members of council and senior staff represent themselves and the municipality online.

Key Provisions to Adopt:

Personal vs. Political: Clear distinction between personal accounts, campaign profiles, and official municipal channels.

Zero Tolerance for Hate: A statement that hate speech, harassment, and discrimination are never acceptable, even on personal political platforms.

Engagement Rules: Guidelines on how to disengage from toxicity and avoiding "feeding the trolls" to prevent online conflicts from spilling into the council chamber.

5.4 How to Be an Active Bystander

Bystander inaction when witnessing harassment, bullying, or other targeted uncivil behaviour is rarely due to apathy; rather, it stems from psychological barriers such as a diffusion of responsibility (assuming someone else will act) and a crowd mentality (assuming the situation is not an emergency because others are not reacting). To move from a passive witness to an active bystander, sometimes called an "upstander," an individual must navigate a specific decision-making process: noticing the event, interpreting it as a problem, assuming personal responsibility, knowing how to intervene and, finally, taking action.

The 5Ds of Bystander Intervention

The "5Ds" are a set of versatile strategies designed to help bystanders safely intervene in situations of harassment or incivility.

① Direct

Intervene by directly addressing the situation or the individuals involved. This can involve setting boundaries by telling the aggressor, "That is not okay.", or checking in with the person being targeted by asking, "Are you okay?". When using this method, be firm, clear, and concise, focusing on the behaviour rather than attacking the person to avoid escalating the conflict.

2 Distract

De-escalate the situation by creating a diversion that interrupts the harassment or shifts attention away from the conflict. This is a subtle approach that ignores the aggressor and engages the target, such as asking for the time, pretending to know the person, or accidentally dropping an item to create a commotion.

3 Delegate

Seek assistance from a third party who may be better positioned or have more authority to intervene. In a municipal or public meeting context, this could involve alerting a supervisor, security personnel, or a presiding official to help you intervene.

4 Delay

Check in with the person who experienced the harm after the incident is over. This action validates their experience and shows them they are valued; support can include listening without judgement, offering resources, or simply asking if they need anything.

5 Document

If it is safe and someone else is already assisting the victim, create a record of the incident by taking notes, photos, or video. Always ask the person who was harmed what they want to do with the documentation, such as share it with meeting officials or law enforcement. Never post or share it without their explicit consent, as doing so can cause further trauma or harassment.

Learn More

Organization	Links
Ombudsman Ontario <u>Codes of Conduct and Integrity Commissioners - Guide for Municipalities</u>	<u>ombudsman.on.ca</u>
University of Western Ontario Ivey Executive Education <u>Understanding and Counteracting Incivility in Canadian Municipal Politics</u>	<u>ivey.uwo.ca</u>
iBABS (Euronext) <u>The 7 Chairing Meetings Skills That Every Chair Should Develop</u>	<u>ibabs.com</u>
City Clerk's Office (City of Toronto) <u>Meeting Processes and Simplified Rules of Procedure</u>	<u>toronto.ca</u>
Government of Ontario <u>The Ontario Municipal Councillor's Guide on Council Meetings</u>	<u>ontario.ca</u>
Institute for Local Government (USA) <u>Tips for Promoting Civility in Public Meetings (PDF)</u>	<u>ca-ilg.org</u>
Local Government Association (UK) <u>Councillor Workbook – Chairing Skills (PDF)</u>	<u>local.gov.uk</u>
GagnonStrategix (for the New Brunswick Government) <u>Governance Best Practices (PDF)</u>	<u>gnb.ca</u>
Western City Magazine (League of California Cities, USA) <u>Essential Tips for Effective City Council Meetings</u>	<u>westerncity.com</u>

Organization	Links
<p>National Association of Counties (USA) The Right Way to Run A Meeting – A Guide for Council Officials (PDF)</p>	naco.org
<p>Strong Cities Network Policy Brief – City Leadership in the Face of Rising Incivility and Polarisation: Ten Considerations for Mayors and Local Governments</p>	strongcitiesnetwork.org
<p>Elect Respect (Ontario) Civility Pledge</p>	electrespect.ca
<p>National Association of Local Councils (UK) Civility and Respect Pledge</p>	nalc.gov.uk
<p>City of Whitehorse (Yukon) Civility Policy</p>	whitehorse.ca
<p>Institute for Local Government Everyday Ethics for Local Officials – Promoting Civility at Public Meetings: Concepts and Practices (PDF)</p>	ca-ilg.org
<p>Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (USA) De-Escalation Tip Sheet (PDF)</p>	cisa.gov
<p>States United Democracy Center (USA) De-Escalation: A Toolkit for Election Officials (PDF)</p>	statesunited.org

Organization	Links
<p>Princeton University Bridging Divides Initiative (USA)</p> <p><u>Resource on De-Escalation and Communication Around Contentious Meetings for Local Elected Officials (PDF)</u></p>	<p><u>statesunited.org</u></p>
<p>American Psychological Association</p> <p><u>Bystander Intervention Tip Sheet</u></p>	<p><u>apa.org</u></p>
<p>Wilfrid Laurier University</p> <p><u>5Ds Direct, Delegate, Delay, Distract and Document</u></p>	<p><u>students.wlu.ca</u></p>
<p>University of Waterloo Office of Equity, Diversity, and Anti-Racism</p> <p><u>Bystander Intervention Resource Sheet (PDF)</u></p>	<p><u>uwaterloo.ca</u></p>



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