

Leading With Respect Handguides

**AMO's Handguide 8
Professional Development
and Education**

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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8.0 Professional Development and Education

The role of a municipal member of council has become a complex, 24/7 position requiring high-level decision-making and personal resilience. While elected officials bring valuable diverse life experiences to the table, they are not expected to be immediate experts in land use planning, municipal finance, or conflict mediation upon taking the oath of office. This section argues that continuous professional development is not a "perk" or a luxury item to be cut when budgets are tight, but a critical risk management strategy necessary for good governance and organizational stability.

Investing in professional development protects the municipality by:

Supporting Council and Staff to Work to Their Highest Scope:

Clarifying the critical distinction between council's strategic role and staff's role in operational implementation.

Enhancing Decision-Making: Moving from reactive decision-making to strategic oversight requires specific skills in analyzing data and understanding governance roles.

Preventing Toxicity: Training in conflict management and code of conduct compliance can prevent the breakdown of council relations, which is often costly to repair.

8.1 Comparative Models: Professional Development as a Core Council Practice

In Ontario, professional development is largely discretionary. It is typically funded through municipal operating budgets, often with a specific allocation per member of council for the term or year. Support is provided through associations like the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), which offers user-pay workshops and conferences.

When budgets are tight, professional development is often among the first items reduced or deferred. This approach contrasts with practices in other jurisdictions that treat councillor education as a structural requirement for democratic health.

Comparative models for consideration:

Mandatory Model

(Victoria – Australia)

The state government mandates that all mayors, deputy mayors, and members of council complete specific training within set timeframes (e.g., one month for mayors, four months for members of council). This includes mandatory annual professional development. Failure to complete training results in the withholding of allowances. Councils must report training completion in their annual reports, ensuring total transparency.

Academy Model

(Georgia, Colorado, Iowa – USA)

These jurisdictions utilize a "Municipal Leadership Academy" model. This is a structured, multi-part curriculum (e.g., Parts 1, 2, and 3) that guides officials from basics to advanced strategic thinking, treating the role as a profession requiring certification.

Capped Policy Model

(Cardston, Alberta – Canada)

To manage costs while ensuring access, some municipalities implement strict policies where members of council are entitled to a specific cap (e.g., \$2,000 per term). This creates a "use it or lose it" incentive without open-ended liability for the municipal budget.

The Case for Improvement:

Ontario municipalities should consider formalizing professional policies that protect training budgets from ad-hoc cuts, and empower members of council to take ownership of their own learning, ensuring that training is viewed as essential work rather than a luxury.

8.2 Recommended Training Topics: An Annotated Guide

Effective councils approach professional development deliberately. The goal is not to “train for everything,” but to ensure that high-risk areas—where conflict, incivility, or public mistrust often arise—are addressed early and revisited over time. Strong councils balance technical competence, relational capacity, and leadership judgement.

The categories below are intended as a practical menu. Councils should consider training and workshops on core topics and procedures within the first year of a term and to reinforce them through refreshers. Additional topics may be suitable for specific roles or council situations, as the context dictates.

A Core Orientation

(Early in the first year of the term)

Roles, authorities, and boundaries (council vs. staff): Prevents operational interference, reduces internal conflict, and protects staff from becoming targets when boundaries blur.

Meeting procedure and decision-making basics: Procedural missteps are a frequent source of public flashpoints. Strong procedural literacy supports orderly debate and reduces escalation.

Integrity, ethics, and accountability systems: Codes of conduct, conflict of interest rules, and the role of the Integrity Commissioner set expectations for respectful behaviour.

Strategic planning: Dos and don'ts of setting strategy that help shore up role clarity between council and staff.

B Governance, Finance, and Legal Risk

Municipal finance and asset management: Financial literacy reduces suspicion, misinformation, and conflict over spending decisions.

Procurement and value-for-money basics: Transparent decision-making reduces allegations of favouritism or misconduct.

Land use planning and quasi-judicial decision-making: Planning files are among the most contentious and emotionally charged; training supports defensible decisions and calmer public engagement.

Human and health services: Ontario has a distinct model in the delivery of human and health services with a centralized funding model and local delivery of services.

Human resource management: Collective bargaining and other staffing decisions that councils need to navigate.

C Civility, Conflict, and Public-Facing Conduct

De-escalation and difficult interactions: Practical boundary-setting skills help prevent harassment from becoming normalized.

Social media and communications risk: Charter-aware moderation and message discipline reduce online escalation and staff exposure to abuse.

Media relations and crisis communications: Scenario-based training prepares officials to communicate under pressure without inflaming conflict.

Community engagement: Good practice on how to effectively engage residents in your community.

D Safety, Security, and Information Protection

Personal and workplace security basics: Training helps identify early warning signs of escalation and supports appropriate responses.

Cybersecurity and account hygiene: Reduces impersonation, doxxing, and digital harassment risks.

E Equity, Human Rights, and Accessibility

Human rights and respectful service: Understanding systemic barriers reduces harm and conflict rooted in exclusion or misunderstanding.

Accessible meetings and communications: Improves participation and lowers frustration that can fuel incivility.

Indigenous–municipal relations: Protocol awareness helps avoid missteps that escalate tensions or damage relationships.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: How to bring consideration for those historically excluded from decision making to the council decisions and deliberations.

F Leadership Development

Chairing and meeting management: Strong chairs set the tone for respectful debate and protect staff and delegations.

Council–CAO relationship training: Role clarity reduces internal dysfunction that often spills into public conflict.

Coaching and peer learning: Coaching and cohort-style programs reduce isolation and improve judgement under sustained pressure.

8.3 Tips for Making Professional Development Practical

Training only reduces risk if it is planned, visible, and taken up by council. The following practices help translate professional development from an aspirational goal into a routine part of municipal governance.

AMO is currently exploring these approaches and you can reach out to them for more information.

Create a dedicated council learning line item

Establish a clearly named budget line for council education and training, rather than burying costs within general conference or travel accounts. This increases transparency, protects learning funds from ad hoc cuts, and reinforces that training is essential governance work.

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Use shared and regional training models

Partner with neighbouring municipalities to deliver joint sessions, particularly for specialized or high-risk topics such as land use planning, integrity systems, and media or social media risk. Shared training reduces costs, builds peer networks, and supports consistency across regions.

Adopt a term-based learning plan



Structure professional development across the council term. For example:

Year 1: Core orientation and high-risk topics (roles and boundaries, integrity, planning, finance).

Years 2–4: Targeted refreshers, leadership development, and deeper dives into emerging risks (communications, conflict, security).

A shared plan helps normalize learning and reduces the perception that training is remedial or optional.

Leverage sector and association resources



Make routine use of offerings from municipal associations and trusted providers to avoid reinventing content and to ensure training reflects current legal and governance standards. These are great resources that can support smaller, less-resourced municipalities

Document participation and revisit annually



Track training uptake and review learning priorities annually to ensure coverage of core risks and responsiveness to new challenges.

Councils that treat professional development as infrastructure—planned, budgeted, and revisited—are better equipped to manage complexity, prevent dysfunction, and sustain effective leadership over a full term.

Learn More

Organization	Links
Association of Municipalities of Ontario <u>Education Workshops</u>	amo.on.ca
Cardston Ontario (Canada) <u>Professional Development Fund for Councillors Policy (PDF)</u>	cardston.ca
Action! Chinese Canadians Together Foundation (Canada): <u>Aspire to Act Leadership Training Program</u>	acctfoundation.ca
Victoria State Government (Australia) <u>Guidance on the Mandatory Training for Mayors, Deputy Mayors and Councillors (PDF)</u>	localgovernment.vic.gov.au
Municipal Association of Victoria (Australia) <u>Citizen to Councillor Guide (PDF)</u>	mav.asn.au
Georgia Municipal Association (USA) <u>Certificate Programs</u>	gacities.com
Civic Results - Colorado (USA) <u>Municipal Leadership Academy</u>	civicresults.org
Iowa League of Cities (USA) <u>Municipal Leadership Academy</u>	iowaleague.org

Organization	Links
International City/County Management Association (USA) <u>Practices for Effective Local Government Management and Leadership</u>	iowaleague.org
Local Government Association (UK) <u>Councillor Development Courses</u>	local.gov.uk
South West Councils (UK) <u>Councillor Development Courses</u>	swcouncils.gov.uk
City of York Council (UK) <u>Member Training & Development Policy</u> (PDF)	york.gov.uk
Improvement Service (Scotland) <u>Elected Members Development</u>	improvementservice.org
University of Birmingham Public Service Academy <u>The 21st Century Councillor</u> (PDF)	21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com



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