



Towards Excellence in a Council Work Culture

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The Realities

- The power you exercise as an elected official is as **part of the governing body** – you act together, in concert, as a body, and you do not have power outside that body (exception: certain Mayoral responsibilities)
- Each of you holds **one-seventh** of the power of the body
- You exercise your power only at a **duly noticed public meeting** of the body
- The body's **majority vote** carries the day on every issue that comes before it
- A key measure of your **individual success** is **where your position stands** in relation to each majority vote
- Your powers include “**actual powers**” and “**perceived powers**”

Agree or disagree with any of these “realities”?

Digging a little deeper: “Part of the governing body”

- There is nothing in your home rule charter that calls for the exercise of individual powers as an elected official (certain Mayoral responsibilities excepted)
- This means you act only as part of a **collaborative decision-making body** – “we, not I”
- Collaboration implies a sense of teamwork – give and take – working together – trust in one another’s good faith and best intentions
- Collaboration *doesn’t* imply that you are seven separate islands, each unto yourself, with seven different interests either intersecting or conflicting
- A governing body is, in essence, like a marriage (or similar partnership)...but it’s been arranged by the citizens!
 - So, congratulations on your new “family”!
 - More about the personal conduct aspects of collaboration later

“Part of the governing body”

- One liability point about “I” behavior:
 - The charter provisions concerning your powers and responsibilities form a part of your “job description”
 - If your “job description” empowers you to act only as part of the body, then acting as “I” rather than part of the “we” means you’re may be straying outside your “job description”
 - State law (the Governmental Immunity Act) confers protection for your acts and omissions as a public official, but not when you stray outside your job description – conduct outside the scope of your authorized duties is unprotected
 - Likewise, liability insurance protections apply only when you’re “within the scope”

Digging a little deeper: One-seventh

- The fact that each of you holds one-seventh of the power of the body means that there is an “equality of power” on the body that needs to be acknowledged and respected
- That power can become “unbalanced” in many ways
- “Equality of information” is a required precondition for “equality of power”
 - Inequality can happen if everyone doesn’t have the same opportunity to get the same information at the same time
 - Staff responding selectively; one member doing CORA requests
 - It can also happen when members view themselves (or are viewed) as “subject matter experts” and given undue deference (“I’m the architect on the Council, and every issue is an architectural issue”) (or insert your favorite occupation)
 - Your subject matter expertise *is* important – it forms part of your perspective on the issues, and may be part of why you were elected – but at the end of the day, all of you were elected to be generalists – “all-purpose” decision-makers -- so no one area of expertise requires a special or undue deference from the other members

“One-seventh”

- Meeting time is a limited resource -- if one member dominates the discussion, then that member is TAKING AWAY time from the other members
 - Extreme example: one member taking 3 hours (!) during Council comments
 - Discussion time doesn't need to be divided exactly into sevenths, but each member should be respectful about using time efficiently: avoid repetition; express agreement with a prior speaker rather than repeating the point, “go around the room” before speaking again, avoid filibustering, stay on-topic, reduce personal asides and anecdotes, etc.
 - If you have work sessions in addition to meetings, more expansive discussion opportunities could be saved for work sessions
 - The choices you make individually can also enhance or negate your own “equality of power” - not showing up at all, not being prepared, being disconnected or distracted from the discussion – are ways in which you could give up your own 1/7th of the power
 - And the group suffers, too – a governing body works best when it's running on all cylinders

Digging a little deeper: “Duly noticed public meeting”

- Transparency is a key value in municipal government – citizens expect it, the media expect it, and public officials must expect and honor it
- When the letter or the spirit of the Open Meetings Law and/or Open Records Law are not honored, citizens will lose faith in the openness of Town government
- We’re seeing instances where it’s not only citizens, but also factions on the governing body that are accusing each other of a lack of transparency
 - “This appears to be choreographed – did three of you meet before the meeting, or hash everything out via text or email before the meeting? Because it sure looks that way.”
- Transparency laws not only secure the ability of citizens to know what’s going on in their government, but they also contribute to **equality of information** among members of the body
- Breaches don’t need to be deliberate – but either way, they are corrosive of the public trust, and trust among and between governing body members

Digging a little deeper: “Majority vote” carries the day

- Your job is one of relatively few that have a pretty concrete measure of success: **How often are you on the prevailing side of the vote?**
- But how is this accomplished? Do you fight it out, argue it out, yell it out, until there’s “one person (or position) standing”? Do there always have to be winners and losers? Does politics have to be a zero-sum game?
- “Politics is the art of compromise” – trite, but TRUE!
 - It is possible to collaborate on solutions that don’t leave the losing end of the vote going away mad, and to look at, consider, and center issues from the margins that could otherwise be ignored or excluded
 - One councilmember’s plea: “Why does it have to be majority rule all the time? Why can’t we have some minority rule?”
 - You may laugh, but it was an inartful way to say, “how about looking at my perspective, too?”
 - Look for points of commonality between differing perspectives

“Majority vote” carries the day

- Another dimension of the “majority vote” is that, once the body arrives at a decision, it’s important for each member to honor that decision
 - You may not agree with the decision, you may look for future opportunities to revisit it if/when appropriate
 - But if you choose to undermine the decision of the body because you were on the other side of the vote, then expect that to happen the next time, when you’re on the prevailing side! That’s why there has to be a mutual pact to honor a decision once made.
 - You don’t have to toe “the party line” on a decision you didn’t vote for, but you can and should avoid bad-mouthing, sabotaging, and undermining

A little more about collaboration

- What are the elements of an effective collaborative relationship?
 - Mutual respect?
 - Mutual trust?
 - Leaving egos behind?
 - Being willing to participate?
 - Not allowing the “residue” of the last discussion, debate, or disagreement to “infect” the next issue?
 - Not assuming others’ motives or questioning others’ motives?
 - Listening more than talking?
 - Coming into the discussion with a positive attitude?
 - Not coming into the discussion with the intent to “win”?
 - Hanging in there even when the going gets rough?
 - Listening to each others’ perspectives with an open mind?
 - **What else?**

A little more about collaboration

- Take a look at the prevailing culture on the governing body, and how you're individually contributing -- positively or negatively -- to it
- Especially if your makeup has changed, make sure that the prevailing culture isn't inhibiting full participation, or making any member feel like less than an equal participant on the governing body
- Often, these kinds of dynamics happen at a subconscious or unintentional level
- Everyone on the governing body has the right to an equal voice; make sure that these dynamics aren't interfering
- Make sure you're not unconsciously engaging in behaviors that can become barriers to finding common ground
- Male v. female meeting dynamics:
 - NY Times, "The Universal Phenomenon of Men Interrupting Women:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/14/business/women-sexism-work-huffington-kamala-harris.html> "Academic studies and countless anecdotes make it clear that being interrupted, talked over, shut down or penalized for speaking out is nearly a universal experience for women when they are outnumbered by men."
- Similar dynamics can exist between other groups – older vs younger, newbie vs veteran, "old town vs new development," etc.
- Examine the dynamics – these barriers are often difficult to detect and/or may be happening on an unconscious level

And a little more about trust

- Can you really be a “team” if you don’t all trust one another?
- What are some of the things that cause distrust?
 - Not being truthful
 - Not keeping commitments
 - Communicating in a way that embarrasses or humiliates another – deliberately *or* unintentionally
 - Saying one thing in public, and another in “private”
 - Passive-aggressive communications; using others to do your “dirty work”
 - Questioning others’ motives
 - Undermining decisions
 - Taking credit where credit may not be due

And a little more about trust

- What are some more things that cause distrust?
 - **Using social media as a weapon to do one or more of the above!** It may be satisfying to “clap back,” gain sympathy, or have “the last word” on social media, but what is it doing to the “team”? Is this effective behavior? Does it really work for you?
 - **Being perceived as the “outlier”**
 - See Chapter 2 of the CIRSA-CML Ethics, Liability & Best Practices Handbook
 - An “outlier” is not just someone who’s perpetually on the wrong end of a 6-1 vote
 - The outlier is someone who’s actively oppositional to the majority, in a way that’s calculated to create the separation
 - The outlier’s purpose seems to be to hold himself/herself out as “the only ethical one,” “the only transparent one,” “the only one looking out for the citizens,” “the only one looking out for the business community,” etc.
- What else?

And a little more about trust

- The ability to trust one another is critical! If you haven't yet built a relationship of mutual trust, or if trust has been allowed to erode, make an INDIVIDUAL commitment to:
 - Listen more than you talk, and do your best to see things from the perspective of others
 - Avoid weaponizing communications, especially social media
 - Give others the benefit of the doubt!
 - Is this true:
“We judge ourselves by our intentions, and others by their actions”
 - You can overcome this natural tendency by **assuming good faith and best intentions on the part of everyone on the body**

And a little more about trust

What else can you do as an individual?

- Avoid demonizing others
- See if you can meet others MORE than halfway in trying to build a bridge: your generosity may reap benefits
- Ask questions before reaching a conclusion about the perspectives of others, paraphrase your understanding to make sure you understand correctly –this is especially important if you're feeling that the other person isn't articulating their views very well
- Utilize the postures and body language of respect and engagement, even if you're not feeling it – don't let your body language add a negative message – remove the frown, the disgusted look away, the crossed arms, the turned back, the eyeroll

And a little more about trust

What else can you do as an individual?

- Avoid the automatic, hair-trigger, knee jerk reaction to someone else's seemingly inflammatory remarks, or responding in kind
- Keep your voice DOWN, even if others are yelling or raising theirs
- Search for points of agreement, and emphasize and build on them
- Acknowledge and appreciate when you see others making the same effort
- Look for ways to develop and build on a sense of inclusiveness and mutual trust/understanding, perhaps in a retreat setting
 - Team building?
 - "Communications style" assessment?
- If you're an experienced member, mentor the newer members!
 - Show them the ropes, "model" the behavior that reflects the "Council Chambers Culture" you want
- Others??

Actual power vs perceived power

- As an elected official, you have both actual powers and “perceived powers”
 - “Perceived power” includes being viewed as **the center of the municipal universe** – you may not think of yourself that way, but everyone else in the organization does!
 - Your words and actions carry a special weight because of that perception
 - What you may have thought of as a question to obtain more information, voicing of a comment or concern, or a lighthearted or joking remark, may be perceived as an order, a sharp, cutting, or unfair criticism, or a shockingly terrible thing to say
 - And remember that, where others below you in the chain of command are concerned, there may be no fair opportunity to question you back, call you out, or clap back – **never punch down!**
 - “Praise in public, correct in private”

Conclusion

- The problems and suggestions identified here come from observations of the common challenges other councils and boards around the state have faced... and may or may not have relevance to your situation!
"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." ~Tolstoy
"Happy councils are all alike; every unhappy council is unhappy in its own way." ~Tanoue
- To ensure that this “arranged marriage” works for each of you, the body as a whole, and the citizens you serve:
 - Stop the small discords and discomforts before they become big ones
 - Identify them, look inward at how you may be contributing to them individually, and adapt your own behaviors accordingly!