

Building a Strong Council–CAO–Staff Relationship

Best practices for leadership, teamwork, role clarity and trust

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WHAT WE WILL COVER

- 1 Model** Who governs, who manages, and how direction flows.
- 2 Boundaries** Where Council–staff interactions become risky.
- 3 Trust** No surprises, candid advice, and respectful disagreement.
- 4 Culture** Civility, protocols and habits that keep the system healthy.
- 5 Panel** Practical relationship solutions for Mayors, CAOs and Councillors.

Outcome: practical takeaways for local governance

CORE PREMISE

The relationship is the operating system for the local government order

When the Council–CAO–Staff relationship works, the municipality moves with clarity, discipline and confidence.

When it breaks down, even basic work becomes harder, slower and riskier.



Democratic choices becomes community results only when governance and administrative roles are clear & respected.

Role confusion and incivility are not just messy. They are costly.

TOP 10 GOVERNANCE PITFALLS

What Undermines Effective Council–CAO Relationships

1. Governance vs Operations;
Directing staff instead of working through CAO
2. Undermining the CAO =
Mixed signals, bypassing authority
3. Public Criticism of Staff =
Erodes trust and candor
4. Loss of Civility:
Tone, interruptions, personal remarks & attacks
5. Role Confusion;
Acting without Council authority

6. Poor Meeting Discipline =
Inefficient, unfocused meetings
7. Decisions Without Information =
Increased risk, weak outcomes
8. Micromanagement =
Losing strategic focus
9. Inconsistent Direction =
Staff confusion, delays
10. Breach of Confidentiality =
Legal and reputational risk



Effective governance = Clear roles + Respectful conduct + Disciplined process

The model



Authority belongs to Council as a body — not to individual members acting alone.

MODEL

The chain of accountability



Accountability is clear only when direction flows through the Council/CAO/Staff system.

ROLE CLARITY

The Mayor sets tone and protects the system

The Mayor is not the CAO's supervisor acting alone. The Mayor leads Council and helps Council function well.

Sets tone

Models disciplined, respectful debate.

Focuses Council

Keeps attention on governance priorities.

Works with CAO

Maintains regular check-ins and no-surprises communication.

Protects process

Helps Council speak collectively after decisions.

Effective Mayors do not replace the Council-CAO model. They reinforce it.

ROLE CLARITY

The CAO leads the administration

- Chief administrative advisor to Council.
- Translates Council direction into operational plans.
- Leads people, systems, finances, risk and service delivery.
- Ensures professional advice comes forward.
- Accountable for implementation and results.

A strong CAO tells Council what it needs to hear — not only what it wants to hear.



ROLE CLARITY

Staff provide advice and deliver services through the CAO

Staff do not work for individual councillors. They work for the organization through the CAO.

Expertise

Professional, technical and operational knowledge.

Delivery

Implementation of Council decisions and service standards.

Neutrality

Advice grounded in evidence, legislation, policy and risk.

Integrity

Transparent, ethical and consistent administration.

The goal is not to insulate staff from questions — it is to protect impartial advice and clear accountability in a psychologically safe environment.

WHEN IT WORKS

What a strong relationship looks like

COUNCIL / CAO/STAFF

- Clear Council priorities and focused agendas.
- Work plans aligned to strategic plan, budget and capacity.
- Candid staff advice and transparent risk discussion.
- Decisions made in the long-term interest of the community.

CULTURE

- Respectful debate and curiosity.
- No personal attacks; psychologically safe; conduct consistent with the code.
- Operational excellence and institutional integrity.
- A municipality that is strategically aligned and trustworthy.

Common Boundary Violations



Calling staff directly for work



Giving direction outside meetings



Asking for “small favours”



Getting involved in HR issues



Attending staff meetings uninvited



WHAT GOES WRONG

Common pressure points

- Individual Councillors directing staff.
- Staff being drawn into political debate.
- CAOs not keeping Council sufficiently informed.
- Council surprising the CAO or staff in public meetings
- Unclear expectations around information requests.
- Weak agenda management or poor briefing practices
- Small trust issues left unaddressed.

Most challenges are not caused by bad intentions. They are caused by unclear expectations, weak protocols or poor communication habits.

The governance / administration test

WHAT / WHY

Should Council decide the direction, policy, priority or funding?

HOW / WHO / WHEN

Is this an operational method, staffing decision, implementation detail or individual service request?

THROUGH WHOM?

Should the question or concern go through the CAO to preserve accountability?

If it feels operational, it likely is so pause and ask: “Should this go through the CAO?”

Council and the CAO depend on each other

COUNCIL DEPENDS ON THE CAO

- Turn political direction into achievable plans.
- Provide professional advice unfiltered by politics.
- Deliver services efficiently, ethically and legally.
- Manage staff and operations free from political interference.

THE CAO DEPENDS ON COUNCIL

- Provide clear, consistent direction.
- Maintain a unified voice once decisions are made.
- Uphold good governance principles.
- Protect the CAO's ability to manage without interference.

Neither partner succeeds without the other.

COUNCIL-CAO RELATIONS

Mutual commitments keep the partnership healthy

Clarity Priorities, direction and expectations are understood.

Candour Difficult advice is welcomed, not punished.

No surprises Bad news comes early and through the right channels.

Unified voice Debate at the table; respect decisions after.

Accountability Council evaluates CAO; CAO leads organization.

COUNCIL-STAFF RELATIONS

Council-Staff relations: respect the expertise, protect the line

Council behaviour shapes the quality of advice it receives.

- Staff must feel safe to raise risks.
- Professional advice should be evidence-based, neutral and candid.
- Disagreement with a recommendation is normal. Personal criticism is not.

If staff feel unsafe, advice gets filtered.

Filtered advice = weaker decisions + higher risk.

Trust is the Currency

Staff must feel safe to:

- ✓ Speak candidly
- ✓ Raise risks
- ✓ Bring bad news

How Trust Breaks



Public criticism of staff



Undermining advice



Political interference



Leaks/confidentiality breaches

What High Trust Looks Like

- ✓ No surprises
- ✓ Disagreements handled professionally
- ✓ Staff advice respected (even when not followed)
- ✓ Clear direction

What Council Should Expect from Staff



Professional, unbiased advice



Responsiveness (through CAO structure)



Implementation aligned with Council direction



Integrity and transparency

What Staff Need



Clarity



Consistency



Respect



Professionalism

COUNCIL-STAFF RELATIONS

Ask hard questions. Do not give direction.

ASK

- “Can you explain the options?”
- “What are the risks?”
- “What would implementation require?”
- “Through the CAO, can we receive more information?”

DIRECT

- “I want you to do this.”
- “Please change the report before the meeting.”
- “Do not bring that recommendation forward.”
- “Call me before you speak to the CAO.”

Positional power changes the conversation

Staff cannot respond politically. Council members can.



That imbalance makes public criticism, sarcasm or pressure especially damaging.

TRUST + BOUNDARIES

Trust is built through habits

No surprises

Bad news is shared early.

Consistency

Council direction is clear and stable.

Respect

People and roles are protected.

Candour

Advice includes risks, trade-offs and inconvenient facts.

Follow-through

Commitments are tracked and closed.

A strong relationship is built through repeatable practices, not occasional goodwill.

COMMUNICATION PROTOCOLS

Communication protocols reduce confusion

Mayor–CAO check-in	Regular, structured, agenda-aware, no surprises.
Council information requests	Routed through CAO; shared where useful to all of Council.
Agenda management	CAO not surprised in public; Council receives timely briefings.
Constituent issues	Council raises concerns; CAO assigns follow-up; staff report back appropriately.
Public meetings	Challenge ideas and options, not staff motivation or competence.

Protocol is not bureaucracy. It is how trust becomes repeatable.

Culture Is Set at the Council Table

Culture
is not
written...
it is
observed

What Council Shows (Visible Behaviour)



Tone



Respect



Discipline



Civility

Staff watch **EVERYTHING** Council does

Council
Behaviour

Council behaviour =
Organizational culture

Civility

Trust

Culture

Performance

Culture is built by what leaders tolerate and repeat

Mayors / Chairs

Set tone; intervene early;
protect the table.

Councils

Debate vigorously; decide
collectively; respect the line.

CAOs

Tell truth to power; manage
the organization; protect
staff.

Senior staff

Provide candid advice; serve
residents; uphold
professionalism.

Structure matters. Behaviour determines whether the structure works.

When Conflicting Information Comes to the Table

Mayor–CAO partnership: pause, verify, route, return



Mayor protects the decision process

Do not let Council decide on untested information.



CAO protects the integrity of advice

Clarify what is known, unknown and needs verification.



Council protects collective accountability

Questions are welcome; direction still comes from Council as a body.



Useful Chair Language

“Through the CAO, can we verify that information and bring Council a clear answer?”



Decision options



Proceed if immaterial



Amend if clear



Defer if material



Refer through CAO if operational

Triage Negativity Without Dismissing Oversight

Separate the signal from the noise



Oversight concern

Evidence, risk, policy, legality, budget, service impact.



Process concern

Timing, missing information, unclear recommendation, public transparency.



Behaviour issue

Repetition, personal attacks, motives, staff criticism, refusal to accept Council decisions.



Mayor's leadership test

"Are we improving the decision — or damaging the process?"



Clarify



Route
through CAO



Get
facts



Debate at
Council



Decide
collectively

When One Member Grinds the Process to a Halt

Mayor's role: protect the table, not win the argument



1 Name the behaviour, not the person

"This is becoming repetitive / personal / outside the motion."



2 Bring Council back to the decision point

"What decision is Council being asked to make today?"



3 Use procedure as a leadership tool

Time limits, relevance, order, motions, deferral only when warranted.



4 Invite constructive input

"What specific amendment, question or alternative are you proposing?"



5 Protect collective Council authority

One member can question, challenge and oppose — but cannot paralyze the body.



Disagreement is legitimate. Paralysis is not.

RESPECTFUL LEADERSHIP CULTURE

Meeting culture is leadership culture in public

Residents assess not only what Council decides — but how Council decides.

Before

Briefings; clear reports;
no public ambushes.

During

Issue-focused
questions; disciplined
debate; chair
intervention when
needed.

After

Respect the decision;
communicate
consistently; follow up
through CAO.

The Council table is the place for collective direction — not personal supervision.

Civility is a governance competency

It does not mean avoiding conflict. It means managing disagreement with respect, discipline and focus.

More perspectives heard;
better tested ideas.

Psychological safety; reduced
burnout and turnover.



WHY CIVILITY MATTERS

THREE CORE PILLARS:

- **Decision Quality** — More perspectives heard; robust, well-tested ideas; less groupthink.
- **Organizational Health** — Trust, psychological safety, reduced burnout and turnover among staff & elected officials. • +
○
- **Public Confidence & Legitimacy** — Residents evaluate not just what you decide — but how you decide and how you treat each other.

Supported by national research across Canadian municipalities.

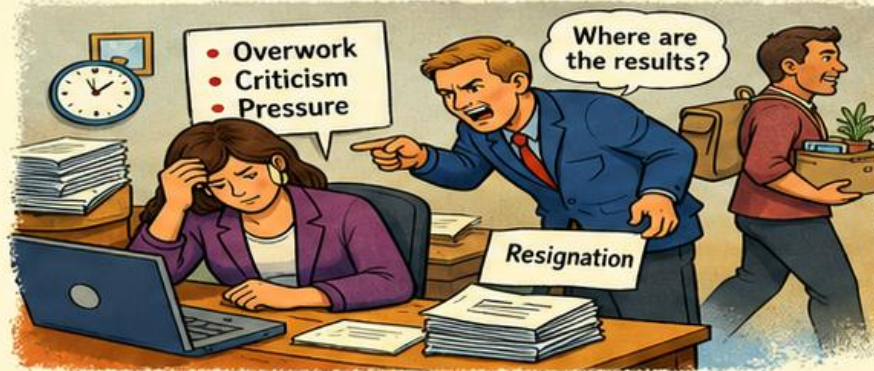
Risks When Incivility Takes Hold



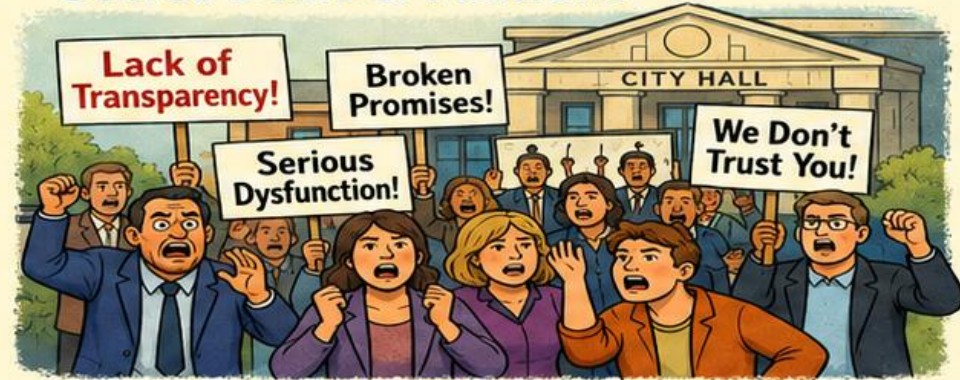
Narrowed Ideas



Secret Deals & Factions



Staff Stress & Turnover



Public Distrust

- Ideas get narrowed — only “safe” proposals get voiced.
- Decision-making shifts to informal backrooms, deals, or factions.
- Increased staff stress, higher turnover, risk-averse culture.
- Erosion of public trust; perception of dysfunction, regardless of outcomes.

CIVILITY

Disagreement is healthy. Workplace & personal harm is not.

Governance conflict is normal

- Strong disagreement
- Challenging questions
- Public debate on issues
- Procedural tension

Workplace harm

- Personal attacks
- Humiliation of staff
- Questioning integrity or competence
- Behaviour continuing after boundaries are set

CAO intervention is required when public conduct crosses into workplace harm.

Where is your Council and where do you want to be?

A practical risk dashboard

Area	GREEN	YELLOW	RED
Council behaviour	Respectful debate	Occasional tension	Personal attacks
Council → staff	Professional questioning	Frustration visible	Public criticism
Staff confidence	Speak freely	Selective input	Defensive / silent
Meeting tone	Structured, calm	Some disruption	Loss of control
Public perception	Trust in governance	Mixed signals	Perception of dysfunction

Reflection: where are we today — and what behaviour should we strengthen?

PRACTICAL TOOL

A Council–CAO–Staff MOU or protocol makes expectations explicit

Roles

Who owns what decisions and responsibilities.

Information

How questions, briefings and updates flow.

No surprises

How bad news, media issues and sensitive items are handled.

Meetings

How reports, debate and staff questions are managed.

Respect

How concerns are raised without public harm.

Review

How norms are checked and refreshed.

The protocol should be short, clear and useable — not a binder on a shelf.

RESPECTFUL LEADERSHIP CULTURE

Everyday micro-habits that strengthen culture

- Pause before responding — think, do not react.
- Use “I” statements and issue-focused language.
- Summarize another person’s point before disagreeing.
- Ask “what are the implications?” before rejecting advice.
- Address concerns privately first when appropriate.
- Recognize constructive contributions — even when you disagree.

Simple rule

**Challenge ideas.
Protect people.
Respect the roles.**

SUSTAINING THE RELATIONSHIP

When to reinforce the model



● Start of term	Orientation, role clarity, protocol, shared expectations.
● Weekly	Check-in between Mayor & CAO
● Quarterly	Council–CAO check-in on priorities, risk and relationship norms.
● Annually	CAO performance evaluation and work plan alignment.
● After conflict	Debrief what happened, reset norms and clarify future protocol.

Do not wait until trust is broken to talk about how the relationship is working.

Bridge to the panel

Three questions to carry forward:

- 1 Where does the governance–administration line blur most often in practice?
- 2 What does a real “no surprises” culture look like from both sides?
- 3 What one protocol or habit most strengthens the Council–CAO–Staff relationship?

The Council-CAO-Staff model is simple. The discipline is in living it every day.