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Breaking the cycle: Steps for reducing negative discourse and incivility in public meetings

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According to a recent report from the National League of Cities, more than 80% of local government officials have experienced some form of harassment, abuse, or violence while in office. **That same report** states that 87% of public officials have observed an increase in such behavior, with many noting a dramatic increase since the beginning of the pandemic.

Representative participation and open and transparent meetings are the foundation of our democracy. If left unchecked, this increased vitriol and incivility threaten to weaken that foundation. This leaves many local officials and staff asking the same question: “How do we maintain public access and participation while ensuring the safety of elected officials, staff, and community members?”

Civility matters

The type of discourse in public meetings has far-reaching effects. Negative comments can derail and prolong council meetings, impacting the council’s ability to conduct the public’s business.

“Lack of civility is occurring everywhere, including on the roads, in social media, and at city council meetings,” says Judy Mitchell, a former mayor and council member from Rolling Hills Estates. “The real work doesn’t get done when you are fighting amongst each other. You need to keep your focus and operate in the best interest of your community.”

Incivility in public meetings and other aspects of public service can also impact a city’s ability to attract and retain talent. In an informal survey conducted by the **International City/County Management Association**, 25% of respondents indicated they had left public service because of the lack of civility. Without talented staff, cities will not be able to provide the level of service our communities need and have come to expect. Without high-quality staff, cities will not be able to tackle the range of complex and ever-changing issues facing local government.

There are growing fears that continued negative discourse could discourage broad community engagement with local governments. The general public may be less inclined to participate in meetings that frequently turn negative or violent. This could result in councils only hearing

from a very vocal minority of their community, who may not represent the thoughts, feelings, or preferences of the community as a whole.



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Improving civil discourse: Codes of conduct

While there is no simple solution for improving civility overnight, there are several actions local governments can take to incrementally improve public discourse. For starters, remember that local officials are role models and should act accordingly.

“Civility starts with the council. As leaders, we need to model the behavior we expect from the community,” says Carlsbad Council Member Teresa Acosta. “We set the tone. When we are on the dais, we are recorded, and our behavior and what we say can be referred to and referenced in articles, videos, or even future meetings.”

To encourage and model civility, elected leaders can:

- collaborate and operate as a team.
- demonstrate honesty and integrity in every action.
- prioritize strengthening relationships and building trust.
- accept personal responsibility.
- focus on civil discourse; disagree agreeably and professionally.
- work for the common good, not personal interest.
- attack the problem, never the person.
- be open-minded and embrace diverse points of view.
- strive for a win-win; work toward consensus and seek common ground.
- practice active listening.
- think about shared values and find common ground.

Some cities, such as Carlsbad, have identified shared values and created a set of agreed-upon norms with a documented civility policy, code of conduct, or rules of decorum. These documents set expectations for how the city council will model the behavior it expects from the public. ILG has compiled [a list of sample codes and policies](#) for city officials online. Some common elements in these policies include variations of the following expectations:

- Treat everyone courteously.
- Be inclusive.
- Show respect.
- Exercise self-control.
- Take responsibility.
- Give consideration to all viewpoints.
- Focus on the issues and avoid personalizing debate.
- Disagree agreeably and professionally.

These policies can include provisions against conduct by meeting attendees that could provoke violent or riotous behavior or disturb the orderly management of the meeting. Examples

include physical or verbal threats, vulgar or boisterous language, refusing to abide by time

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limits, throwing objects, or other disorderly conduct. Adopting an official policy for all attendees can also allow for enforcement measures such as warnings, ejections from meetings, or even suspension from government buildings.

“In my experience, the good balances out the bad,” said Acosta. “We need to try to focus on the positive, celebrate success, and find ways to decompress after challenging meetings and interactions. For me, engaging with Cal Cities and connecting with my fellow council members has been essential to my ability to do that.”

Improving civil discourse: Engaging the community in equity conversations

No city is exempt from discussions about social justice and equity. By seeking clarity on these complex issues and committing to civility, councils can work together to determine how best to explore these challenging issues productively and respectfully. Some jurisdictions are actively exploring how best to embed the principles of equity and authentic engagement in their codes of conduct and apply an equity lens to their decision-making processes.

“COVID-19 has illuminated a lot of injustices throughout the state,” says Maywood Mayor Pro Tem Heber Marquez. “As elected leaders, we need to not just hear people’s complaints, we need to acknowledge what might be fueling them.”

Relatedly, providing opportunities for community engagement and input outside standard city council meetings can potentially offset the volume of public comments received in official council meetings. Consider employing different public engagement efforts for the community to provide feedback and be heard on hot button issues. Approaches such as town halls, coffee chats, surveys, websites, public workshops, and emails can allow for an additional, broader range of public input.

“As a teacher, an educator, and an elected official, I’ve seen a lot of people speaking out of frustration,” said Marquez. “We need to identify and model the difference between communication and complaining. When we demonstrate how to have a constructive, respectful

conversation and acknowledge that others are often coming from different experiences, we have better and more civil outcomes.”

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Improving civil discourse: Meeting design

If a community decides to hold a public workshop, there are several key things to consider before and during the meeting to limit grandstanding and provide space for more balanced conversations.

Before the workshop:

- Be strategic about meeting design. Consider the room’s setup and the incorporation of small and large group discussions, different ways to provide input, or real-time polling.
- Clearly define the roles of staff and elected officials.

- Establish a clear facilitation and governance process in advance. Discuss how decisions, if applicable, will be made, determine who is leading the meeting, and identify any follow-up activities or engagement opportunities that need to be shared.
- Consider language access and accessibility needs to ensure that key stakeholders can participate in the process. Addressing this early will minimize frustration.
- Understand hot button issues in advance.
- Draft and rehearse sample verbal prompts or scripts for various scenarios in advance so that electeds and staff can be prepared for challenging topics.

During the workshop:

- Manage expectations. Explain the process, meeting design, and timelines, including how community feedback will be used and how participants can remain engaged throughout the process. This will reduce the uncertainty of nonparticipation.
- Publicly clarify the roles and responsibilities of staff and elected officials so that participants know which city officials can address which issues.
- Offer multiple formats for public comment. Some participants may not be comfortable providing verbal comments, so consider surveys, notecards, or other options for nonverbal feedback.
- Take breaks as needed to reset. This strategy may help defuse tense situations.
- Consider using a neutral facilitator to lead the meeting — an expert that does not have a stake in the outcome of the meeting.

Since city council meetings are regulated by the Brown Act, elected officials and staff have limited options when changing the format of meetings and responding to public comments. However, there are still options to consider when officiating a council meeting.

- Agree on a process in advance. Does each council member have an option to speak on every agenda item? Does your city use Robert's Rules of Order or Rosenberg's Rules of Order? Do you have a code of conduct that the council and community are expected to abide by? How are those rules enforced?

- Manage expectations. Residents may not understand all the intricacies of the local government decision-making process. When possible, explain engagement opportunities and the limitations elected leaders may have when responding.
- Make sure your chair understands the meeting format, process, and options.
- Be thoughtful and deliberative; use scripts as appropriate to ensure an accurate, respectful, and courteous response.
- Take a break if things get heated and only use ejection as a last resort.
- Consistently enforce your code of conduct or civility policy.

While there is no easy solution to the increase in incivility and harassment, it is important to remain committed to finding ways to increase civility, build bridges, and design a governance model that reinforces positive and equitable outcomes for the city and the community.

As John F. Kennedy said, “Let us begin anew — remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof...Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us.”

As the League of California Cities’ nonprofit education and training affiliate, the Institute for Local Government offers resources and training to help city officials operate more effectively as a team and better engage with each other, city staff, and the community. When it comes to improving civility, ILG offers resources on responsibilities and powers, decision-making, effective meetings, and community engagement. Visit ILG’s [leadership](#) and [public engagement](#) web pages for more information about these opportunities.

ILG can also customize tailored training sessions and private, facilitated discussions for jurisdictions throughout the state. Whether your team is struggling with maintaining civility in public meetings or is looking to go from good to great, ILG can help you meet those goals. Sessions are offered in both virtual and in-person formats.

ILG also has a recurring thought leadership forum, “[Leading Local](#)”, which focuses on addressing difficult topics and sensitive issues local government leaders face. These free webinars cover a wide range of issues and share expert guidance from leaders from academia,

government, and beyond. The content for each session is curated for elected officials and staff at California cities, counties, and special districts. ILG also recently hosted its first virtual training for individual council members and executive staff on topics such as effective councils, civility, and community engagement. Another workshop will be offered in the spring.

For more information about how ILG can help increase civility and effective communications in your community, contact Melissa Kuehne at mkuehne@ca-ilg.org.

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