

Are You Part of the Incivility Problem?

By Matt Lehrman

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In nearly 20,000 cities and towns across America, elected council members swear to fulfill their duties “faithfully and impartially.” The exact words vary, but the oath of office signals a shift from “campaign mode” to the responsible work of governance in a representative democracy.

As a professional facilitator and mediator, I’ve witnessed countless examples of negative attitudes and behaviors that obstruct productive teamwork and healthy disagreement, whether involving the general public, fellow council members, or municipal staff.

Allow me to, respectfully, call out some of the common challenges. It may sound cliché, but it’s true: If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem. Do any of the following council types sound familiar — maybe even a little too close to home?

The Know-It-All: If you already have all the answers, you may be your council’s greatest barrier to pragmatic compromise and innovative ideas. Winning an election doesn’t make you omniscient. Your job is to be a single voice in a vigorous dialogue with select others, in which everyone brings unique knowledge, experiences, and values. Slow down. Listen. Open yourself to the possibility of learning.

The Devil’s Advocate: Are you really “asking tough questions” because “somebody has to”? Or are you purposefully slowing every policy discussion and procedural vote to a crawl? Playing the devil’s advocate for the sake of political gamesmanship is nothing but destructive. True critical thinking is grounded in your own experience and understanding, not in contrived antagonism. If your knee-jerk response to new ideas is always negative, you’re not a leader, you’re a roadblock.

“Bleed the Beast”: I’m not arguing against fiscal conservatism or the need for improved efficiency; there’s plenty of room to “tame it” or “put government on a diet” when allocating scarce resources. But “bleeding the beast” on principle? That’s a particularly troubling metaphor that deserves swift condemnation, so I’ll say this as bluntly as possible: Advocating to undermine the functioning of a governing body to which you’ve been elected to serve violates your oath and displays a troubling lack of integrity. Focus instead on advocating the outcomes that your community expects and be accountable for pursuing those objectives.

“My Way or the Highway”: Never confuse winning with serving the interests of your community. While your passion for advocacy is valuable — even necessary — it must be balanced with a willingness to consider other perspectives. Democratic governance shouldn’t look like children squabbling over a ball; it should be a mature, deliberative process aimed at finding common ground.

Personal Agendas: Gathering consensus around a policy or change in the community is hard enough, but it can become impossible when elected officials put their political ambitions, their business connections, or even personal vendettas ahead of the public interest. Whose agenda were you elected to serve? Your own? The people who voted for you? Or your entire community? Sometimes you'll win arguments, sometimes you won't, but compromise is essential. Your goal, along with every council member, should be the betterment of the community as a whole.

The Naysayer: Check your attitude: Constantly predicting failure or dismissing initiatives surrounds you in a negative environment. While constructive criticism is important, endless pessimism slows progress and demoralizes others. Instead of simply pointing out flaws, offer specific solutions you can contribute to. Don't just say no; take the initiative and find something to which you can say yes.

The Grandstander: There's an old joke in local politics. Question: What's the most dangerous place in town to be standing? Answer: Between the Mayor and a microphone. Visibility is an undeniable part of public service, but don't give in to the temptation to let the show overshadow substantive work. Learn to moderate your presence so that you're seen as promoting meaningful discourse rather than merely seeking attention.

The Micromanager: As a policy maker, you help set the overall goals for your community, but you don't belong in the day-to-day decision-making of your city or town's professional staff. Trust your administrators to find the best ways to achieve those goals and hold leadership accountable for the results. Some tension between elected officials and staff is natural, but you've entered into a partnership where you ultimately have to depend upon each other. Any council member who doesn't respect and support the municipal staff, especially in public meetings, is undermining good governance.

Be Part of the Solution

When a fellow council member fails to embrace their team-oriented role, you and your colleagues need to address this dysfunction. Hiring a professional mediator can help with these sensitive conversations, exploring ways to ensure an inclusive and thoughtful decision-making process in the future.

As a community leader, it is your responsibility to exemplify behaviors that foster a welcoming and respectful culture on your municipal council.

Matt Lehrman is Managing Director of [Social Prosperity Partners](#), an Arizona-based firm that works nationally to help municipal leaders understand their own leadership styles and commit to the possibility of producing greater outcomes together.

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