

Developing Your Political Acuity: Public Servants and Politics

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My goal for this session

To suggest how public servants can improve their effectiveness by developing a better understanding of the political environment in which they work

Overview

- Political role of public servants
- Political acuity in practice
- Developing political acuity competencies

Political role of public servants

Definition of political acuity

The ability of senior public servants to understand the political environment in which they work without crossing the line into the overtly political role reserved for elected legislators

Shared overarching goal, but . . .

- Begin by focussing on areas of agreement
 - Improve the quality of life for residents in the municipality
 - Ensure the sustainability of the municipality
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. . . different perspectives

Councillors

- Assist constituents' interactions with the municipality
- Maintain a positive public image
- Get re-elected

Staff

- Provide high-quality service in an equitable manner
 - Focus on economy, efficiency, and effectiveness
 - Focus on long-term perspective
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Politics and public servants

- Public servants should not become involved in electoral politics, but
- Public servants live in a political environment
- Public servants need to understand their political environment well enough to navigate this political environment

Two meanings of politics

Politics of power	Politics of governing
Electoral politics, including run-up to the election and immediate aftermath	Defining issues, identifying solutions, choosing the best policies, and implementing
<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Public servants not involved✓ Weakens credibility of advice provided by public servants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Public servants must be involved✓ Provide advice✓ Proactively guide council

Political neutrality

- Public servants must serve the current council in a loyal and conscientious manner
- Public servants work for council collectively
- Avoid close relationships with any councillor or group of councillors
- Does not necessarily mean neutrality between policies

Importance of political neutrality

- Public servants must remain neutral in electoral politics
- Councillors must have confidence in the advice provided by public servants
- Public servants must serve the current council in a loyal and conscientious

Politics of governing

- Public servants have substantive, technical knowledge
- Public servants must become involved in the politics of governing
- Provide best rational, technical advice without regard to views of councillors

Political acuity

- Public servants will be drawn into the political process - politics of governing
- Ensure that this occurs in a conscious and positive manner
- Ensure that it produces a positive outcome for the community

Competencies associated with political acuity

- Personal
- Interpersonal
- Organizational
- Legal-institutional

Personal

- Self-awareness; understand your natural tendencies
- Establish your credentials
- Develop a reputation for competence and fairness

Interpersonal

- Exhibit empathy, understand the needs of others
- Develop personal relationships
- Handle conflict in a positive manner

Organizational

- Manage up and out as well as down
- Understand the broad environment - organizations are like living organisms
 - You need resources - \$, people, legitimacy
 - You get resources by providing desirable outputs

Legal-institutional

- Understand council rules and procedures
- Understand the municipal act and other provincial legislation

Political acuity in practice

Understanding and interacting with council

- Staff members work for council as a whole
- Put yourself in the position of a councillor
 - Lonely, and
 - Sometimes under siege in public view
 - Competition
 - Part-time
 - Limited knowledge
 - Limited experience as an employer

Understanding and interacting with council

- Develop a personal, but arm's-length, relationship with councillors
 - Do not over-interpret the idea of not becoming too close to councillors
 - Friendly, but not friends
- No surprises
 - Know which issues are sensitive
 - Keep councillors informed

Understanding and interacting with council

- Deal with every councillor in a respectful manner
- Listen carefully to every concern or complaint of a councillor regardless of how trivial or misguided it might seem
 - Early warning of feelings building in the community
 - Show respect for the councillor

Preparing for a new council

- Follow the election campaign
 - Prepare a plan for the new council
 - This does not violate political neutrality
 - You work for the duly elected council
- Public servants must bend to accommodate the needs and working style of councillors

Preparing for a new council

- Councillors need to get re-elected
 - Councillors need to be seen to be serving their constituents
 - Let councillors take credit
 - Grandstanding and parochialism will happen
- The way that you respond to a councillor's request is important
 - Accept small changes
 - Help councillors explain why decisions are made

Providing advice to council

- Communicate with council as a whole
- Staff members must always provide their best professional, administrative advice to council
 - Be able to defend your position
 - Speaking truth to power
 - Framing can be helpful

Providing advice to council

- Provide advice that benefits the municipality and helps councillors solve their problems
 - Council is not interested in solving staff problems
- Be present when your views are needed to support council
 - Councillors appreciate support on technical issues

Providing advice to council

- Good ideas do not get themselves approved; staff members must lay the proper groundwork
 - Identify supportive councillors
 - Don't lobby, but
 - Make sure that councillors understand your position

Handling difficult issues

- Timing is important
- Know your councillors
- Be prepared for opposition
- Speaking truth to power
- Fallback proposals

**Developing political
acuity competencies**

How to develop political acuity

- Focus on leading up and out
- Find a mentor
- Use your networks
- Learn by example (good and bad)
- CAMA Political Acumen toolkit (camacam.ca)

Conclusion

Importance of political acuity

- Political acuity is a skill set that helps public servants navigate their political environment in a safe and productive manner
- Allows council, staff, and stakeholders to work together in a manner that furthers the goals of the municipality

Additional reading

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