



LOCAL GOVERNMENT SOLUTIONS

LOCAL GOVERNMENT CIVILITY WHITE PAPER



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Working Together at the Top: Why Board Relationships Matter and How to Improve Them



In December of last year, political discourse in Gladwin, Michigan deteriorated to the point that city staff felt compelled to address the council publicly. Ongoing incivility, strained relationships among council members, and persistent indecision had made it increasingly difficult for staff to move projects forward. Employees reported that the tone and behavior of the council were creating a hostile work environment, contributing to burnout, heightened stress, absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction, declining public trust, and increased turnover intentions.¹

Unfortunately, this situation is not an isolated incident. A brief online search reveals hundreds of similar examples across the United States over the past several years. While democracy depends on respectful disagreement about how government should operate and what role it should play, local governments will struggle to function effectively, attract, and retain high-quality employees if incivility continues to flow from the highest levels of their institutions.

Why should elected officials care about their own working relationships?

Residents mainly see the outcomes of local government: clean water, safe neighborhoods, responsive customer service, and long-term infrastructure decisions. However, a consistent body of research on cities and counties shows that how a governing board works together, including its trust, civility, and ability to manage disagreements, strongly affects those outcomes.



Studies of municipal councils and governing boards in the United States find that when elected members work as a team, they are more likely to:

- Provide clear direction to staff,
- Support innovation and problem-solving,
- Maintain stable leadership and avoid costly turnover, and
- Signal a culture of respect and professionalism throughout the organization.²

In contrast, boards marked by frequent public conflict, factionalism, and personal attacks tend to send mixed signals, create uncertainty for staff, and reduce the organization's capacity to respond effectively to community needs.²

Stable Teams:

- Provide Clear Direction
- Support Innovation
- Minimize Turnover
- Enhance Professionalism

Tumultuous Teams:

- Send mixed signals
- Create uncertainty
- Reduce effectiveness

What research says about conflict and council effectiveness

Several studies look directly at local elected bodies as small work groups. In terms of effectiveness, a study in 2011 found that councils perceived as most effective were characterized by cooperative group processes, respectful interactions, and the ability to work through disagreements without personalizing them. Councils with higher conflict and lower trust were rated as less effective, even when members were experienced or knowledgeable.³ Similar research found that positive board-administrator relationships and credible, respectful board behavior were associated with higher levels of administrative innovation. In contrast, strained relations and persistent conflict were linked to lower innovation.²

While research has shown that strained board relationships and incivility is associated with negative organizational outcomes, it has also shown possible solutions to enhancing board relationships and reversing those negative outcomes on their organizations. For example, a 2013 study showed that boards that learned to manage conflict constructively by focusing on issues rather than personalities, clarifying roles, and using shared goals, became more accountable and higher performing over time.⁴ An earlier study in 1999 showed that councils that invest early in clarifying norms, roles, and expectations (often through retreats or facilitated sessions) are more likely to develop into cohesive, task-focused bodies. However, those that did not, often became mired in recurring conflict over process and personalities.⁵

Effective Workgroups Are...



When Conflict is Helpful and When It's Harmful

Disagreement about policy or strategy is normal and healthy in a democracy. The issue is how that conflict is handled. Research on work groups shows that task conflict (disagreement about ideas) can improve decisions, but relationship conflict (personal animosity, disrespect, or public belittling) reliably harms performance and satisfaction.⁶ Relatedly, research on conflict management found that teams benefitted from disagreement only when conflict was actively managed with cooperative, respectful behaviors; unmanaged or hostile conflict lowered performance and satisfaction.²

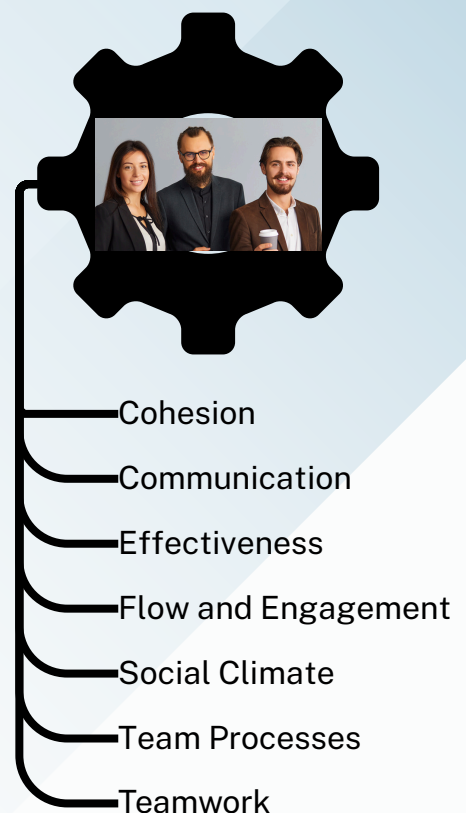


Do Team Building Activities Work?

Evidence from multiple sectors, including public organizations, indicates that structured team-building and team training can improve communication, cohesion, and effectiveness, especially when done over time. One field study conducted in 2019 showed that teams that received structured team training showed improvements in teamwork processes and shared understanding, and these gains emerged and strengthened as teams had multiple opportunities to practice together.⁷

Similarly, a quasi-experimental study in 2016 found that a series of team-building sessions significantly improved communication and teamwork scores compared to a control group. These were not single events, but rather multiple sessions in which progress emerged across the program, suggesting that repeated interaction was necessary for measurable change.⁸ Other research has shown that effective team building techniques over time can improve team flow, engagement, and positive social climate, but that these sessions need to be repeated over time to maintain reinforced workflow.⁹

Repeated Team Building Activities Improve...



The research highlighted above indicates that fractured elected teams can improve their working relationships. These gains can be sustained over time through multiple, structured sessions. Stronger working relationships at the elected level, in turn, contribute to broader organizational effectiveness, including increased leadership credibility, more visibly positive relationships, and greater innovation within the administration.¹⁰

How Local Government Solutions Can Help

Local Government Solutions (LGS) has supported numerous local governments in addressing relationship conflict within workgroups through structured team-building interventions grounded in proven relationship-management assessments and techniques. LGS associates collectively bring more than 100 years of experience working in local governments across the United States, both as internal leaders and external consultants, often in high-stress organizational environments. This experience informs LGS's practical, results-oriented approach to building high-performing organizations.



Alan Rosen, CEO of Local Government Solutions, has more than 20 years of local government experience, including service as Assistant City Manager and Interim City Manager in Port Orange, Florida, and County Manager in Lake County, Florida. He founded LGS in 2021 with the goal of improving local government efficiency and effectiveness while strengthening leadership capacity and emotional intelligence. Mr. Rosen is certified in multiple executive coaching and leadership frameworks, including EQ-i 2.0, LeAD Labs, and the Five Archetypes, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Organizational Behavior with a focus on leadership and emotional intelligence.



Additional information about Local Government Solutions, including clients and associates, is available at www.localgovsolutionsllc.com.

Endnotes

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