

JoAnne Speers  
Local Government  
Ethics Thought Leader  
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# Ethics

## IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

**CODE OF ETHICS  
SPECIAL ELECTION**  
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# SPECIAL ELECTION ON THE ICMA CODE OF ETHICS

Vote on proposed changes  
to Tenets 1, 4, 9 and 11

**CORPORATE MEMBERS  
CAST YOUR BALLOT MARCH 1–MARCH 31**



Visit <https://icma.org/ethics> to learn more.

**ICMA** | ethics

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## ICMA

International City/County  
Management Association

# The Profession's Commitment to *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*

Proposed changes to ICMA's Code of Ethics

BY MARTHA PEREGO, ICMA-CM

**A decade after** ICMA's founding, members created and approved the ICMA Code of Ethics in 1924. Far more than a historical footnote, this was a remarkable achievement for this very new profession of city management. Along with the new Code, members amended ICMA's Constitution to enable ICMA to enforce the new standards.

The significance of this contribution to the profession should not be underestimated. A true profession is more than a body of knowledge implemented by experienced practitioners. A true profession is anchored in and guided by a set of commonly held core principles. Those principles not only guide the individual's conduct but create a set of expectations and a bond with the community they serve. The principles also establish a bond and set expectations among peers and within the professional community.

Taking that first step to create a core set of principles so early in its infancy was fundamental to the expansion and success of the local government management profession. Today, those core principles are taught in MPA programs, reflected in local government management practices, and enforced in a peer review process managed by ICMA. Not only do members hold themselves to this high standard

but they feel ethically obligated to hold their colleagues accountable when they see lapses. They do this by filing a complaint with ICMA requesting that an objective, factual, peer review inquiry be conducted.

Critical to our future is the expanded reach of a code once designed only for city managers in North America. A more inclusive membership means that professionals working throughout local governments in any number of roles share the values outlined in the Code and look to it as well for guidance.

The Code has a more global reach now as well. Local government laws, structures and culture influence the circumstances in which practitioners work. The ability to adhere to the values of ICMA is an aspirational goal in some countries. It's worth far more effort to strengthen the capacity of local government professionals to function in less corrupt environments.

The outcome of a strong ethical standard is building trust with the public, elected officials, and staff. That trust in local government serves to support a thriving democracy.

## Keeping the Code Relevant

In the decades that followed the Code's creation, members were circumspect in making changes. Only six



**MARTHA PEREGÓ, ICMA-CM**, is director of member services and ethics director, ICMA, Washington, D.C. (mperegó@icma.org).

# ICMA

International City/County  
Management Association

icma.org

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## Public Management (PM)

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**ICMA**  
777 North Capitol Street, N.E.  
Suite 500  
Washington, D.C. 20002-4201

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pm@icma.org

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## ICMA

### Creating and Supporting Thriving Communities

ICMA's vision is to be the leading association of local government professionals dedicated to creating and supporting thriving communities throughout the world. It does this by working with its more than 12,000 members to identify and speed the adoption of leading local government practices and improve the lives of residents. ICMA offers membership, professional development programs, research, publications, data and information, technical assistance, and training to thousands of city, town, and county chief administrative officers, their staffs, and other organizations throughout the world.

**Public Management (PM)** aims to inspire innovation, inform decision making, connect leading-edge thinking to everyday challenges, and serve ICMA members and local governments in creating and sustaining thriving communities throughout the world.

revisions to the Code followed in the next seven decades.

Fast forward to 2013, when the ICMA Executive Board, on the advice of the ICMA Committee on Professional Conduct (CPC), endorsed a comprehensive review of the Code. Moving methodically tenet by tenet, members were engaged in a very robust review process. Every proposal the CPC presented to the board was based on member input gathered in person during meetings and through a survey to all members. By 2020, eight of the 12 tenets were reviewed with changes overwhelmingly supported by the members. The review process paused that year as members turned their focus to managing during a pandemic.

The murder of George Floyd in June 2020 propelled the ICMA Executive Board to commit to six action steps to address systemic racism. One action step was to “revisit our Code of Ethics to better integrate our ethical commitment to racial justice and equity into the very fiber of the 12 tenets.”

## Recommended Changes to Tenets and Guidelines

In December 2022, the ICMA Executive Board approved the recommendation of the CPC to place four changes to the tenets of the Code before the members for consideration. The CPC also provided

recommended changes to the guidelines for the board’s consideration after the results of the member vote on the tenets are available.

This is the culmination of a 17-month process where 600 members participated in 17 sessions designed to gather feedback. That feedback was used to develop proposed changes to the tenets and guidelines which were vetted in a survey sent to all members. Over 2,100 members responded to the survey, offering not only their response to the proposed changes but 2,800 suggestions and comments as well.

The survey feedback was constructive and informative. The CPC used that information to develop the final set of proposed changes. The changes affect Tenets 1, 4, 9, and 11 of the Code, along with related guidelines.

In this article, we have listed the proposed changes to the tenets that will be presented for member approval via a ballot on March 1, 2023. While members will not be asked to approve the guidelines, as that is the role of the board, there is contextual value in seeing both the proposed tenets and guidelines. A brief summary of the basis for each recommendation is included.

## Cast Your Ballot by March 31

Beginning March 1, members with voting privileges will have the opportunity to vote yes or no on each of the tenets. In addition

to the short summary presented here to explain the recommendations, members are encouraged to read the entire report from ICMA’s consultant partner on the project, the School of Government at the University of North Carolina. The report includes the complete findings of their work along with the survey results, including the member comment section. This information is available at [icma.org/documents/unc-chapel-hills-final-report-icma-code-ethics-review](https://icma.org/documents/unc-chapel-hills-final-report-icma-code-ethics-review).

Final recommendations on the proposed guidelines will be refined by the CPC based on the results of the vote on the tenets. It is anticipated that final guidelines will be presented to the board for consideration at their June 2023 meeting.

## Proposed Changes to the ICMA Code of Ethics

### Tenet 1

**Current Language:** We believe professional management is essential to efficient and democratic local government by elected officials.

**Survey Language:** We believe professional management is essential to **EQUITABLE, EFFECTIVE, efficient, AND** democratic local government by **elected officials**.

### 2022–2023 ICMA Executive Board

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Marc Ott

#### Director, Equity & Social Justice and Membership Marketing

Lynne Scott [lsconfig@icma.org](mailto:lsconfig@icma.org)

#### Managing Editor

Kerry Hansen [khansen@icma.org](mailto:khansen@icma.org)

#### Newsletter Editor

Kathleen Karas [kkaras@icma.org](mailto:kkaras@icma.org)

#### Graphics Manager

Delia Jones [djones@icma.org](mailto:djones@icma.org)

#### Design & Production

[picantecreative.com](http://picantecreative.com)

**Recommended Language:** We believe professional management is essential to effective, efficient, equitable, and democratic local government.

**Basis for this Recommendation:** The first principle of the Code establishes the commitment to professional management and democratic local government. The recommended change returns the principle of effectiveness to the tenet which had been removed in an earlier review. Both the National Academy of Public Administration and the American Society for Public Administration regard equity, effectiveness, and efficiency as the three pillars of public administration.

84% of members who responded to the survey supported the proposed changes to Tenet 1.

There was far less consensus on the proposal to remove “elected officials” from the Tenet. In making final recommendations, the CPC supported the removal as Tenet 1’s primary purpose is to state the broad values of the local government management profession. Tenets 5 and 6 were revised in 2020 and together they provide clarity about the roles and responsibilities of managers working with elected officials in local governance.

#### **Tenet 4**

**Current Language:** Serve the best interests of the people.

**Survey Language:** Serve the best interests of the people COMMUNITY MEMBERS BY PROMOTING EQUITY.

**Recommended Language:** Serve the best interests of all community members.

**Basis for this Recommendation:** Fifty-eight percent of the members responding to the survey supported the proposed changes. In the feedback, members noted that serving the best interests of *all* is not solely accomplished with a focus on equity. For that reason, the CPC supported removing equity from the final recommendation.

#### **Tenet 4, Guideline 1**

**Current Language:** Impacts of Decisions. Members should inform their governing body of the anticipated effects of a decision on people in their jurisdictions, especially if specific groups may be disproportionately harmed or helped.

**Survey Language:** EFFECTS Impacts of Decisions. Members should inform their governing body of the anticipated effects of a decision. on people in their jurisdictions especially if specific groups may be disproportionately harmed or helped.

**Recommended Language:** Effects of Decisions. Members should inform the appropriate elected or appointed official(s) of a decision’s anticipated effects on community members.

**Basis for this Recommendation:** The changes reflect feedback to broaden the consideration of the effects or outcome of decisions on all community members.

#### **Tenet 4, Guideline 2 (New Guideline)**

**New Guideline: Survey Language:** PROMOTE EQUITY. MEMBERS SHOULD ASSESS AND TAKE ACTION TO ASSURE EQUALITY IN ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES AND IN THE ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS AND REGULATIONS FOR ALL. MEMBERS SHOULD ASSESS AND PROPOSE SOLUTIONS TO ELIMINATE DISPARITIES IN OUTCOMES AND CONDITIONS.

**Recommended Language:** Promote Equity. Members should ensure fairness and impartiality in accessing programs and services and in the enforcement of laws and regulations. Members should assess and propose solutions to strive to eliminate disparities.

**Basis for this Recommendation:** Serving the interests of the community requires assessing the impact of policies, programs, and services. The new guideline encourages members to be proactive in proposing solutions to eliminate disparities. Seventy-five percent of members who responded to the survey supported the addition of this guideline to Tenet 4.

#### **Tenet 9**

**Current Language:** Keep the community informed on local government affairs; encourage communication between the citizens and all local government officers; emphasize friendly and courteous service to the public; and seek to improve the quality and image of public service.

**Survey Language:** Keep the community informed on local government affairs; Encourage ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT AND CONSTRUCTIVE communication between the citizens COMMUNITY MEMBERS and all local government officials. officers. Emphasize friendly and courteous service to the public; and seek to improve the quality and image of public service.

**Recommended Language:** Keep the community informed on local government affairs. Encourage and facilitate active engagement and constructive communication between community members and all local government officials.

**Basis for this Recommendation:** Tenet 9 had not been reviewed since adopted in 1972. The proposed revisions make the language consistent with current public engagement practices in local government. It also reinforces that constructive engagement is essential in supporting equity. Seventy-nine percent of survey respondents agreed with this approach. The recommended language retains the phrase “keep the community informed on local government affairs” to provide clarity on the ethical obligation of members relative to communications with the community.

#### **Tenet 9, New Guideline**

**Current Language from Inclusion Guideline from Tenet 4:** The recommendation is to move part of a guideline from Tenet 4 to Tenet 9.

**Inclusion.** To ensure that all the people within their jurisdiction have the ability to actively engage with their local government, members should strive to eliminate barriers to public involvement in decisions, programs, and services.

**Survey Language:** ENGAGEMENT-Inclusion. To ensure that all the people MEMBERS SHOULD STRIVE TO

ENSURE THAT ALL MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY ~~within their jurisdiction~~ ARE ABLE have the ability to actively engage with their local government, ~~members should strive to eliminate barriers to public involvement in decisions, programs, and services, AND TO PROMOTE ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS.~~

**Recommended Language:** *Engagement.* Members should ensure community members can actively engage with their local government as well as eliminate barriers and support involvement of the community in the governance process.

**Basis for this Recommendation:** The actions encouraged in the inclusion guideline under Tenet 4 are more central to engagement than to inclusion. The recommendation is to update the title and move it to Tenet 9. The objective of the new guideline is to encourage members to promote the public's active engagement in governance. Eighty-six percent of members taking the survey supported this new guideline for Tenet 9.

#### **Tenet 11**

**Current Language:** Handle all matters of personnel on the basis of merit so that fairness and impartiality govern a member's decisions, pertaining to appointments, pay adjustments, promotions, and discipline.

**Survey Language:** ~~Handle~~ MANAGE all matters of personnel ~~on the basis of merit so that fairness and impartiality govern a member's decisions, pertaining to appointments, pay adjustments, promotions, and discipline.~~

**Recommended Language:** *Manage* all personnel matters with fairness and impartiality.

**Basis for this Recommendation:** Tenet 11, with its focus on merit-based personnel decisions, has remained largely unchanged since its adoption in 1938. 89% of members responding to the survey supported the proposal to emphasize the principles of fairness and impartiality in personnel and to remove the term "merit". The CPC further refined the language.

#### **Tenet 11, Guideline 1**

##### **Current Language: Equal Opportunity.**

All decisions pertaining to appointments, pay adjustments, promotions, and discipline should prohibit discrimination because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, sexual orientation, political affiliation, disability, age, or marital status. It should be the members' personal and professional responsibility to actively recruit and hire a diverse staff throughout their organizations.

**Survey Language:** ~~NON-DISCRIMINATION. Equal Opportunity.~~ All decisions pertaining to appointments, pay adjustments, promotions, and discipline should prohibit discrimination ~~UNJUST OR PREJUDICIAL TREATMENT. because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, sexual orientation, political affiliation, disability, age, or marital status.~~

**Recommended Language:** *Delete this guideline.*

**Basis for this Recommendation:** The Initial feedback from members noted that there were two distinct actions combined in the "Equal Opportunity" guideline. Therefore, the proposal outlined in the survey offered language for two guidelines. After refinements were made to Tenet 11, the CPC recommended deleting a guideline on non-discrimination finding it to be a repetition of the principle outlined in the Tenet.

#### **Tenet 11, Guideline 2**

(Will become the only Guideline for Tenet 11)

**Current Language (last clause of existing Guideline):** It should be the members' personal and professional responsibility to actively recruit and hire a diverse staff throughout their organizations.

**Survey Language:** ~~DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION. It should be the~~ A member's personal and professional responsibility to actively recruit, HIRE, PROMOTE, RETAIN, TRAIN, AND SUPPORT and hire a diverse staff ~~WORKFORCE.~~

#### **Recommended Language for new**

**Guideline 1: Diversity and Inclusion.** It is the member's responsibility to recruit, hire, promote, retain, train, and support a diverse workforce at all levels of the organization.

##### **Basis for this Recommendation:**

Eighty-four percent of survey respondents supported the changes to this guideline. Members supported the obligation to ensure diversity and inclusion at all levels of the organization.

##### **How to Vote**

On March 1, 2023, voting opens for ICMA's 2023 Special Election containing four ballot measures with proposed changes to Tenets 1, 4, 9, and 11 of the ICMA Code of Ethics. Please take the time to vote by March 31, 2023.

The link and unique credentials to access the special election ballot will be emailed to ICMA corporate (voting) members on March 1, 2023. The email comes from a third-party online voting vendor, Association Voting ([announcement@associationvoting.com](mailto:announcement@associationvoting.com)). Please be sure to check your spam folder.

##### **Who Can Vote?**

Article VIII, Section I, of the ICMA Constitution states, "The privilege of voting is limited to Corporate Members." Corporate members are:

- Full members [managers, deputies, and assistants working in local government, along with members who previously served in those roles, including Life Members].
- Affiliate members, currently serving in an appointed position in local government, who have a minimum of five years of service to a local government and five years of membership in ICMA.

Corporate members who have not provided ICMA with an email address will receive a print ballot by mail the week of March 1. Ballots will be canvassed by a committee of three Corporate members the week of April 3, 2023. **PM**

# Ethics and Servant Leadership in Local Government

BY MARC A. OTT

For nearly 100 years, the **ICMA Code of Ethics** has been a beacon for us in public service.

## City, county, and town managers

directly influence the lives of thousands of local government employees and millions of people throughout the world. Given this enormous responsibility, the most successful leaders practice servant leadership, prioritizing the needs of their teams and their communities with an emphasis on integrity, stewardship, and strong ethical values.

When we value a staff member as far more than a set of skills but as an individual with life experiences that can bring new insights and added dimensions to our workplace, magic happens. That's the only way I can explain it and I know many of our members have characterized it that way as well. In tapping into the collective creative and intellectual resources of work teams, all kinds of things become possible. I know servant leadership works not because I have read it in a book, but because I have experienced it here at ICMA and in my role as city manager.

## Lessons in Leadership

When I went to Austin as city manager, I determined that I would need to be more open, more vulnerable than I ever had been before, in order to lead the city's 14,000 employees. They would need to see all of me and know that I was committed to their success—that I would do whatever it takes whether to plow the road ahead of them, work alongside of them, or take a back seat and just get out of the way.

I will never forget the day our EMS team leader talked about how his team came to define what “being the best” meant to them. They had set their own goals, established their own ideal, and charted their own course. They didn't wait for me or anyone else to decide that



for them. With his eyes shining, he said before a group of more than 100 department heads and other key staff, “It was transformational.”

Though I was facilitating the meeting, I knew enough to shut up! He had command of the room, and it was exciting to see the energy created by people who felt truly empowered to pursue our mission in the way they believed best. When a team's motivation comes not only from the mind but also from the heart, the results can be stunning. Austin achieved most of its programmatic and budgetary goals, but I think we were most proud of Forbes ranking the city as one of the best places to work in the United States across all categories.

Another lesson I learned as a servant leader is that the climate of empowerment opens the door to feedback. Sometimes, it can be tough to hear that in spite of your best efforts, your staff or your residents are disappointed. It's really difficult when they cite your own words back to you: “That's not best managed!” But again, when you put their needs first, when you act with humility, it makes it so much easier to solve problems together and craft outcomes that have staying power.



**MARCA. OTT**  
is CEO/Executive  
Director of ICMA,  
Washington, D.C.

### Ethics and Servant Leaders

Servant leadership resonates especially well with ICMA members because we adhere to the ICMA Code of Ethics. I have come to think of the code and its underlying values as a guide by which I live my life; I would not know how to make a demarcation between applying the code to my work life and my personal life. I see these principles as essential to leading with a servant's heart.

The seeds of a career in public service were planted early in my life, born out of a sense of frustration at seeing people who wanted more but did not have resources to get there. I believe most city and county managers share some version of that desire to help others. The combination of servant leadership and the ICMA Code of Ethics have proven to me to be the best formula in achieving that dream.

The ICMA Code of Ethics acts as a beacon for us as servant leaders, but it is not static. ICMA is in the process of updating four of the tenets with the input of more than 2,100 members. That demonstrates the commitment that ICMA leaders have to making the code a dynamic, living, breathing document that continues to keep our profession relevant.

**When you know that a code that has served this profession for nearly 100 years and the ICMA membership are behind you, it's easier to find the courage to stand up.**

There are many examples in my career and from other members where a manager is being asked, by bosses or by a member of the community, to do something that is not consistent with the code. In some of these circumstances, individuals may be sacrificing themselves if unwilling to compromise their values. When you know that a code that has served this profession for nearly 100 years and the ICMA membership are behind you, it's easier to find the courage to stand up. And whether you believe it at the time or not, others are watching you—your team and your residents. They will know they are in the presence of a courageous leader, a servant leader, one who puts the greater good first. **PM**

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# A Nontraditional Path to the ACAO Role

Being open to **new opportunities** can do wonders for your career development. | **BY CHRIS HUOT**

**After hanging up the phone**, I did a quick search. City budget. Councilmembers. Development. Capital projects. Labor negotiations. Tax measures. All topics that existed far outside the scope of my college education and work experience. It was just a handful of years prior to this call that I was finishing up grad school and working in local media. I was intentionally seeking to establish myself in the public relations and marketing industries. As part of that journey, I embraced the unknown—moving nearly 1,500 miles away from family to take a job as a marketing specialist in a newly formed, city-run destination marketing organization in California.

In this role, our division was irrefutably on the farthest fringes of the city's organizational radar. Yes, I was technically working in local government, but public safety, new development, parks, major capital projects, and the hot button topic of the day all took centerstage in California's ninth largest city. Unlike many other city staff members, my interactions with the city manager's office were typically brief and uneventful.

Down the street from city hall and outside of that day-to-day universe, I was developing marketing plans, launching websites, and doing my part to help visitors spend their money. At the time, I gave myself a three-year window to evaluate the next chapter in my marketing career. I thought I would head to Los Angeles, the Bay Area, or the east coast doing marketing and public relations work in the sports industry. Core government functions, politics, and public administration were in no way part of my future. Or so I thought.

Back to that phone call, on the other end of the line was one of the assistants to the city manager. Was I interested in applying for a senior analyst position within the city manager's office? Without much hesitation, I said yes, I'd consider it. I could always choose not to apply for the job. However, in the moment, I once again embraced the unknown. Evidently the work I was doing was being noticed and someone thought it could be translated into the city management world. It was not quite the flashy marketing job I had envisioned. However, after a few more hours of research and a competitive recruitment process, I was all in. Within a few months short months, my career path was completely and drastically reset.

With a lean staff (no filled ACAO positions) and a new budget season underway, I was thrown into the deep end of the pool immediately. Lots of mistakes were made. (True story: as the new senior analyst in charge of budget development, I may have unknowingly and accidentally

deleted some critical budget information from a database.) I left the office many nights wondering what I had gotten into. I started sketching out a path back into a marketing job. However, through stubborn curiosity, remarkable colleagues, professional development opportunities (thanks, ICMA!), and some very supportive mentors, I started to find my way. From a senior analyst, I was promoted to assistant to the city manager, and then later, I was appointed to assistant city manager.

In the 12-plus years since I received that phone call, I've reflected many times on a handful of small but meaningful things that played a big part in carving my nontraditional career path to ACAO.



## CHRIS HUOT

is assistant city manager for Paso Robles, California. He is an ICMA member and serves on the Assistant Chief Administrative Officers Committee. (CHuot@PRCity.com)



### You're Always Interviewing

Regardless of where you are currently on the organizational chart or if you're actively looking for a new gig, you're being interviewed. Your actions, attitude, resourcefulness, and willingness to learn are all evident to leaders regardless of the context in which those traits are presented. We are told that one of the greatest indications of your success is what you do when no one is watching. That's true. Equally as important is knowing good leaders are always recognizing talent and potential. Regardless of the setting or topic, something as simple as a routine memo to the manager or presentation to a citizen committee are incremental interview opportunities!

### Get Involved Early

Prospective local government leaders in any field or position should seek to maximize involvement in regional, state, and national organizations such as ICMA. Many of these organizations provide no- or low-cost options for memberships and/or participation in sponsored events, regardless of position, department, or years of service. In hindsight, I was not as involved as I could have been early in my career. As I've increased my participation, I've been able to develop new peer connections, establish a network of mentors, and have access to more resources to be a better local government leader. Don't wait for these opportunities

to be presented to you. Propose that your organization sponsors your membership or conference attendance as part of your professional development plan.

### Embrace the Unknown

To borrow an analogy from one of my favorite government innovators (and past ICMA Conference game changer speaker) Nick Kittle, don't let your river of experience stop you from changing courses. When the phone rings, pick it up (mostly figurative these days). Be excessively curious. Seek out mentors to provide insight, support, and perspective. Ask for stretch assignments that may lead to new opportunities that you never knew existed! When "no" creeps into your mind, fight the urge, and say yes instead. It's easier than you think to carve that new path. Don't worry about the unknowns along the way.

Regardless of where you started or where you may be in your professional journey, there is a path to becoming a local government leader. The path is not going to be well-marked or mapped clearly. There will be a few dead ends and one or two false summits, but keep going. Seek out those new experiences and opportunities. Recognize the power you hold in setting and changing your path. **PM**

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# THE SCIENCE OF ETHICAL MISSTEPS

Why letting organizational  
ethics “take care of itself”  
is a risky leadership strategy

BY JOANNE SPEERS

One of the “myths” about ethics<sup>1</sup> is that people who do unethical things are somehow different from the rest of us: that they are psychopaths or other kinds of individuals who simply do not care about doing the right thing. In other words, the myth is that people are generally the problem. While certainly there are people who do not care about doing the right thing, thankfully, they tend to be a very small slice of humanity. They are an even smaller slice of the group of people that choose public service as a career.



If so, with all the other important tasks agency leaders juggle, can we assume ethical behavior is a given, that public agency team members will do the right thing?

Unfortunately, both experience and science say the answer is “no.” The science of behavioral ethics offers interesting insights into why even well-intended individuals fall short of our intentions to act ethically. The reason often is because many ethical missteps are situational. They are an unfortunate combination of circumstances

and how we as humans react to such circumstances.

This article explains what we as management professionals can learn from that science and what it means for encouraging ourselves and others to act on our ethical intentions. It does so through the lens of three public administration tragedies. (These tragedies are part of the “experience” element of the equation.)

### **A Bit of Context: Behavioral Psychology**

Behavioral ethics is an extension of psychologist Daniel Kahneman’s research into how humans really process information and decide what to do. This research was so ground-breaking that it received a Nobel Prize for economics in 2002. Dr. Kahneman summarizes his findings in his bestselling book, *Thinking: Fast*

*and Slow*.<sup>2</sup> He invites us to think of the human brain as operating in two modes.<sup>3</sup>

- The first is “system 1,” which we do with little effort. In fact, this system operates virtually automatically, often drawing on intuition and emotion. This kind of “thinking” occurs quickly (hence the moniker “fast” thinking).
- The second kind of thinking is “system 2,” which is slower, more effortful, and more deliberative. What are the practical implications of the two

systems? Dr. Kahneman's answer would be that system 1 thinking is "error-prone." Put another way, when we are operating in system 1 mode, our brains tend to react in ways that cause us to make decisions that don't serve us as well or match our good intentions.

This includes decisions with ethical dimensions. Scholars Bazerman and Tenbrunsel observe that system 1 thinking often dominates decision-making with ethical dimensions. The net result is that what they describe as our "want" (emotional and self-interested) selves can override our "should" selves. In fact, system 1 "want self" thinking can cause us to miss the ethical dimensions of a situation entirely. This is why the scholars' book on this subject is called *Blind Spots*.

The practical takeaway: sometimes intuition can serve one well, such as when one gets an uncomfortable "gut" feeling about a contemplated course of action. That "gut feeling" may be signaling that the action could be inconsistent with one's values.

However, the obverse is not always true. The *absence* of a "gut feeling" does not necessarily mean that there is no ethical issue. Let's discuss what kinds of dynamics can block those signals.

### Brain Dynamics to Be Aware of

Decision-making experiments indicate that humans suffer from a number of cognitive tendencies that affect how we react to situations. For example, humans often use decision-making short cuts to help us make decisions more easily. Situational factors, like being overworked, can play a

role as well. Finally, even when we think that we are acting/deciding something rationally, we can actually be reasoning backward (or rationalizing) to justify a decision made more emotionally (in system 1 by our "want selves").<sup>4</sup>

While not exhaustive, the following are examples of these dynamics that are especially likely to present themselves in the workplace. They are presented in the contexts of a variety of case study situations involving seemingly well-intended public agency staff making decisions they likely came to regret.

The descriptions of behavioral ethics concepts draw on information in a helpful website developed by the University of Texas' McCombs' School of Business: [ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu](http://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu). The school developed the website to help the business community understand the implications of behavioral ethics for private sector ethics efforts.

### The Veterans Administration Scandal Self-Serving Bias and Unrealistic Goals

The 2014 Veterans Administration (VA) scandal illustrates the power (and

corrosive effect) of self-serving bias.<sup>5</sup> Self-serving bias is the tendency people have to process information that supports their own self-interests or pre-existing views.<sup>6</sup> (This is one of the drivers of the "want self" that Bazerman and Tenbrunsel describe.)

Self-serving bias can also discourage people from speaking up if they fear adverse consequences.

In the VA scandal, performance incentives at the agency rewarded work units that met specified targets for seeing patients in a timely manner. But, because the agency was understaffed, employees falsified records about how quickly patients were in fact being seen. This obscured the problem that the agency was understaffed, with the tragic result that patients actually died while waiting for appointments.<sup>7</sup>

A video on the University of Texas site (see bottom of page for transcript of narration) delves deeper into the role that unrealistic targets and workloads can play in eroding employees' commitment to values and ethical action.<sup>8</sup> It notes that when employees feel mistreated, they are more likely to mistreat others (customers or, in the case of

public agencies, the public or agency clients) and engage in other misconduct (for example, lying, which is what those that participated in the records falsification basically did).

### The Space Shuttle Disasters

#### Status Quo Bias, Framing, and More Unrealistic Goals

*Status quo bias* is the human tendency toward inaction.<sup>9</sup> A manifestation of this is *moral muteness*, which can occur when people remain silent when observing unethical behavior.<sup>10</sup> *Diffusion of responsibility* can be a related dynamic, which involves people not taking action because people around them are not taking action.<sup>11</sup> They conclude action is either not appropriate or someone else will take action if it is appropriate.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) learned in a very tragic and public way what happens when leaders do not receive information necessary to make a good decision. In the *Challenger* disaster, engineers had warned mid-level NASA management that cold temperatures forecast for the launch day posed a serious hazard to the space shuttle and its seven crew members. Sadly, the engineers' warnings proved prophetic when the shuttle broke apart shortly after launch, killing all seven crew members in front of a nation and its school children as the television cameras rolled.

There are a number of lessons to be learned (and illustrations of behavioral ethics concepts) given what happened. NASA reportedly had an overall organizational culture that discouraged unwelcome information up

the chain of command (which sadly produced another deadly disaster years later when the space shuttle Columbia broke apart on reentry to the Earth's atmosphere).<sup>12</sup> The contractor's engineers reportedly assumed that their concerns would be communicated up the chain of command, which proved untrue (a variation on moral muteness/status quo bias). With no one speaking up, the countdown to launch (the status quo) continued, with tragic consequences and damage to the public's and others' trust in NASA's competency.

In addition, the private sector contractor's management team overrode the engineers' recommendation to postpone launch. The engineers' unit leader on the management team was reportedly told to "take off his engineer's hat" and look at the situation from a business perspective. This is an example of how framing a decision too narrowly can obscure the ethical dimensions of a decision.<sup>13</sup> Research indicates that how an issue is framed powerfully influences the factors people take into consideration. Research also demonstrates that when we are laser focused on making one thing happen, we block out other sensory and other inputs.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, those NASA mid-level managers that were pressuring the contractor to override the engineers' concerns were under budgetary pressures that led to an unrealistic launch schedule,<sup>15</sup> not unlike those involved in the VA scandal.

The takeaway is our tendency toward inaction is one of the reasons organizational leaders need to take affirmative steps

to encourage people to speak up when they have concerns about proposed actions (sometimes called fostering a "speak-up culture").<sup>16</sup>

### **The Blind-Sided County Administrator** **Conformity, Obedience to Authority and Overconfidence Biases, and the Importance of Organizational Culture**

*Conformity bias* describes our human tendency to take behavioral cues from our surroundings.<sup>17</sup> In other words, we respond to social norms and pressures. The good news is if those around us are acting in positive and pro-social ways (actively looking for and evaluating the values dimensions of their workplace actions), we will likely follow suit.

The reverse is unfortunately true as well: if others are cheating or acting unethically, we may be tempted to do likewise. A related concept is *group think*, which describes a desire to maintain group loyalty, even when it conflicts with one's personal standards. In short, as social animals, we are strongly motivated to go along to get along.

The leadership takeaway from this insight about human nature relates to the importance of being intentional about shaping organizational culture. Organizational culture has been described as "the way we do things around here"—the norms, values, and traditions that shape how employees behave and do their work.<sup>18</sup>

We are also strongly influenced by what sometimes is referred to as the "tone at the top" of our work units or organizations. *Obedience to authority bias* is a tendency to

## When employees feel mistreated, they are more likely to mistreat others and engage in other misconduct.

comply with superior's wishes or directions, even if it conflicts with one's own judgment.<sup>19</sup> People tend to respect and follow those they perceive to have legitimate authority. The dynamic extends to actions people take to please those in authority, even without expressly being directed or asked to act unethically.

In short, leaders send signals, whether intentionally or not, on what matters. This public administration case

study (based on an actual situation and used in public administration textbooks) is potentially illustrative.<sup>20</sup> The organization's leader ensured that his agency had a code of ethics and he was a member of ICMA. He trusted his management team and reportedly had a hands-off leadership style. The administrator also reportedly took pride in his organization's performance in getting work accomplished efficiently.

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The administrator was well-regarded by both his board and the community.

That all unraveled, unfortunately, when the local newspaper reported that a 55-year-old public works employee took some \$15,000 in gifts from a company whose contract the employee helped supervise. This may be an example of *self-serving bias* insofar as the longtime public servant accepted nice gestures from those trying to curry favor. (The employee may have also rationalized, as humans do, that there was a genuine relationship motivating the gestures or that his good work made him deserving of such gestures.)

The situation got worse, however, for the administrator. As is often the case when scandal hits, closer scrutiny revealed other procurement improprieties that seemed to be efforts to get around procurement process requirements. What might have caused the employees to think that would be okay?

We do not conclusively know, of course, but a lesson going forward is the importance of leaders—particularly those in the public sector—communicating *how* the work gets accomplished is just as or even more important than simply getting the work done. A tool for doing this is an organization's values statement, ideally incorporating core values (see sidebar) of trustworthiness, fairness, and responsibility (including responsibility to adhere to laws and rules designed to promote fairness and trust in the agency's processes).

There is a strong consensus in the literature that leaders ignore organizational culture

**Overconfidence bias can cause us to neglect to look for the ethical dimensions of a decision, based on a flawed assumption that we will always act ethically.**

at their peril. Conversely, effective leaders—particularly those concerned about ethics—are intentional in shaping organizational culture to promote values-based decision-making. They work to keep themselves and others in their organization from falling prey to our human tendency toward overconfidence bias. *Overconfidence bias* is a tendency people have to be more confident in their abilities, including the ability to act ethically, than is objectively reasonable.<sup>21</sup> As in Lake Wobegon, we all consider ourselves to be above average (in fact, well above average) when it comes to ethicality.

The cruel irony is that overconfidence bias can cause us to neglect to look for the ethical dimensions of a decision based on a flawed assumption that we will always act ethically. This is one of the reasons that scholars counsel ethics educators to help learners understand our shared human cognitive tendencies. Even more alarming, research indicates that leaders in particular fall prey to this

overconfidence dynamic, often with ethically and professionally disastrous results.<sup>22,23</sup>

### **Finance Officers Embrace Behavioral Ethics in Recent Ethics Initiatives**

The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) recently launched an effort to “reinvent” its approach to ethics, expressly embracing behavioral ethics concepts.<sup>24</sup> The organization represents over 20,000 finance officials in the United States and Canada.

In deciding to do so, GFOA concluded that the real impediment to public finance professionals' ethical behavior is situational factors or organizational pressures. GFOA developed a values-based code of ethics and is developing training programs and implementation guides to support its members in embracing the code.

### **Conclusion**

In terms of leadership takeaways, several have already been identified, including:

- Make sure performance targets are realistic.

- Encourage “sharing up” of important and even unwelcome information (foster a “speak up culture”).
- Mind your messaging: getting work done is important in public service, but so is how that work gets done.

Having an organizational code of ethics and demonstrating one's commitment to ethics by being a member of ICMA are important first steps. However, these steps must be reinforced by leadership actions and messages that underscore the importance of including ethics and values (“is this the right thing to do?”) as an important criterion in decision-making. Such efforts can have a powerful effect on organizational culture, which in turn shapes employee behavior.

Leaders are also well advised to model the behavior of slowing down (engaging in system 2 thinking) in decision-making and actively looking for the values dimensions of situations. Sometimes the analysis involves competing “right values,” which in turn leads to an analysis of which value is most important in a given situation. Another reality is that appearances matter when it comes to public service ethics issues. This means that erring on the side of caution and avoiding even the appearance of impropriety is often a wise default.

Is it an administrator's job to concern themselves with organizational ethics? The American Society for Public Administration unequivocally says “yes.” Principle 7 of the organization's code of ethics encourages people in public

service to “promote ethical organizations.”<sup>25</sup> While the code’s accompanying practices offer ideas on how to do this, an additional practice is to understand what the science says about human nature and ethical decision-making. This reduces the likelihood of falling prey to ethical blind spots. It can also create positive situational dynamics that support others in doing the same.

The benefits of doing so include fostering an organization that operates in a way that promotes public trust and confidence in your agency. More practically, it can mean keeping one’s job, which means continuing to do the good work you are already doing. **RM**

## ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

<sup>1</sup> See Epley, N., & Tannenbaum, D. (2017). Treating ethics as a design problem. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 3(2), 73–84 at 74–75. <https://behavioralpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/BSPvol3no2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.amazon.com/Thinking-Fast-Slow-Daniel-Kahneman-ebook/dp/B00555X8OA/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?crid=Q62YA HQ8D46N&keywords=kahneman+thinking+fast+and+slow&qid=1672713300&s=books&prefix=kahneman%2Cstripbooks%2C151&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.com/Thinking-Fast-Slow-Daniel-Kahneman-ebook/dp/B00555X8OA/ref=sr_1_1?crid=Q62YA HQ8D46N&keywords=kahneman+thinking+fast+and+slow&qid=1672713300&s=books&prefix=kahneman%2Cstripbooks%2C151&sr=1-1)

<sup>3</sup> There is a helpful (and short—6 minutes) online video in which Dr. Kahneman explains these concepts in a very accessible manner: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PirFrDVRBo4>

<sup>4</sup> <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/rationalizations#:~:text=Rationalizations%20are%20invented%20explanations%20that,to%20their%20own%20ethical%20standards.>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.vox.com/2014/9/26/18080592/va-scandal-explained>

<sup>6</sup> <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/self-serving-bias>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2014/04/23/health/veterans-dying-health-care-delays/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/video/ethical-leadership-part-2-best-practices>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.behavioraleconomics.com/resources/mini-encyclopedia-of-be/status-quo-bias/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/moral-muteness>

<sup>11</sup> <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/diffusion-of-responsibility>

<sup>12</sup> <https://patimes.org/building-ethical-cultures-public-service-agencies-critical-importance/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/framing>

<sup>14</sup> For an interesting example of the effect of focus on our perceptions, see this video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGQmdoK\\_ZfY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGQmdoK_ZfY).

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRPT-99hrpt1016/pdf/GPO-CRPT-99hrpt1016.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> For ideas on how to constructively and effectively engage colleagues in conversations about the values dimensions, see this piece: <https://patimes.org/a-tripodal-approach-to-supporting-values-based-decision-making-third-leg-action/>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/conformity-bias>

<sup>18</sup> Treviño, L. K., Haidt, J., & Filabi, A. E. (2017). Regulating for ethical culture. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 3(2), 57–70, 60–61, available at <https://behavioralpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/BSPvol3no2.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/obedience-to-authority>

<sup>20</sup> <https://patimes.org/blindsided-what-should-you-do-part-i/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/overconfidence-bias>

<sup>22</sup> <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/video/ethical-leadership-part-1-perilous-top>

<sup>23</sup> This University of Texas video (see transcript at bottom of page) further explains the importance of leaders prioritizing a culture of ethics within their organization: <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/video/ethical-leadership-part-2-best-practices>. This article explains some of the tools and techniques available for doing so: <https://www.westerncity.com/article/promoting-culture-ethics-city-hall>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.gfoa.org/materials/gfoa-reinvents-our-professions-approach-to-ethics>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.aspanet.org/ASPA/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics.aspx>

<sup>26</sup> For a video summary, see <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/video/pillar-1-values>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.ca-ilg.org/post/codes-ethics-adopted-associations-public-agencies-and-public-agency-professionals>

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/ijsl/new/volSiss2/IJLS\\_vol5\\_iss2\\_dunn\\_integrity\\_matters.pdf](https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/ijsl/new/volSiss2/IJLS_vol5_iss2_dunn_integrity_matters.pdf)

## A Working Definition of Ethics and Integrity

Research by the Institute for Global Ethics indicates that humans share certain universal or core values. These values transcend differences in nationality, religion, and culture. The institute’s founding director, Rushworth Kidder, explains that these universal values include trustworthiness (including honesty), responsibility, respect, fairness, and compassion in his book, *Moral Courage*.

These values are a useful starting point in deciding what the “right thing to do” really is. Mary Gentile adopts these values in her *Giving Voice to Values* framework.<sup>26</sup> She also notes that “values conflicts” are a regular and predictable part of professional life—hence the importance of learning to navigate such conflicts.

Framing “ethics issues” as “values issues” has several advantages. Some of them include:

**Discussion Language.** The core values framework provides a language for analyzing and discussing situations presenting ethical issues. This can be especially helpful in situations involving competing core values (another Kidder concept). It also can be a tool for discouraging conclusory statements relating to a course of action being “wrong,” “immoral,” “unethical,” or “corrupt.” A shared discussion language leads to more productive, analytic, and civil exchanges.

**Relationship to Codes of Ethics.** A core values approach naturally segues into discussions about professional and personal codes of ethics. Various public agency professionals have adopted codes that flesh out what kinds of behaviors reflect these core values, including of course, ICMA.<sup>27</sup> For example, Tenet 7 of the ICMA Code of Ethics relating to political activity maps to the core value of trustworthiness.

The concept of core values ties into a helpful working definition of integrity. Integrity is a concept often included in organizations’ values statements but not always defined. Craig Dunn, in his article, “Integrity Matters,” tackles this task.<sup>28</sup> After an extensive literature analysis, he also identifies socially positive values as a key touchstone. Paraphrased, Dunn concludes integrity is acting consistently with positive values, across time and across roles.

**JOANNE SPEERS, MPP, JD**, trains and consults on public service ethics as principal of S<sub>2</sub> (as in “System 2”) Ethics Strategies. She previously served as chief executive of the Institute for Local Government, where she developed and directed its ethics program, and has also taught ethics as an adjunct professor at the graduate school level.



# Both Public Servants and Residents Are Responsible for Promoting Accountability in Government



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Ensuring accountability in government, developing meaningful attachments through civil society, and investing in the success of the community are actions incumbent upon all of us.

**BY MICHAEL HULING**

In September 2022, *Las Vegas Review-Journal* investigative reporter Jeff German was murdered while in the midst of an investigation of Clark County Public Administrator Robert Telles. Telles, whose elected position was one of significant power and authority, has been charged with the murder of German. In the aftermath of German's death, details of Telles's corruption and abusive behavior—both in and out of the workplace—surfaced, revealing how far he was willing to go to maintain his power.<sup>1</sup>

Between harassment, threats, retaliation, financial schemes, and more, Telles's record of corruption spans over a decade in which he repeatedly abused his positions to enrich and advance himself. Many people were aware of his unethical behavior but were unable or unwilling to intervene, which speaks to deeper, more systemic issues. Stories like this infuriate us because we entrust our public leaders with the responsibilities of public service. Furthermore, such unaccountability erodes the trust that is necessary for governments to function and

for communities to flourish.

A suspicion of government is deeply embedded in the American character, serving as, among other things, a bulwark against the potential excesses of those who may abuse their political power. This implicit distrust lends itself to a spirit of unruliness, by which I mean an unwillingness to be ruled by authorities we deem illegitimate. We can trace our unruly roots back to the Puritan settlers who fled religious and political persecution in England to establish their own self-governing communities in America. As Ted McAllister and Bruce Frohnen explain in *Character in the American Experience: An Unruly People*, when the English Puritans were “forbidden to enter most professions and told what and to whom they could sell, where and when they could travel, and where and how they could worship, dissenters refused to give up their faith or their way of life.”<sup>2</sup>

From our founding, Americans have been a distinctly unruly people who object to illegitimate claims of authority and unjustified exertions of power. It follows

that those who betray the public's trust are held accountable, which requires a commitment among citizens to assert our sovereignty. Yet, we often fail to show that we truly value accountability, meaning we don't respond to the absence—or presence—of accountability in ways that will encourage it. From aggressively shouting at public officials over policy disagreements to showing complete disinterest in local politics, our actions sometimes indicate that we expect too much or too little of those serving in government. We either demand perfection or dismiss corruption as “the way things are,” but neither extreme is conducive to promoting accountability. So, what should we be doing instead?

A good starting point is to identify the reasonable expectations we should have of public servants. We should expect honesty, transparency, responsibility, prudence, and other virtues that reflect good character. These expectations are tied to the roles and responsibilities of public service. First and foremost, public servants are obligated to prioritize the common good

over their personal interests. Refusal to do so should be understood as disqualification from public service—plain and simple. It's also important for public servants to recognize their residents principally as *people*, not customers or clients or some other generic label. Holding other public servants accountable is also crucial, as corruption is too often tacitly sanctioned by those who are capable of preventing it.

All of that said, we must also understand that those who serve in government—whether elected or hired—are human, which means that they will make mistakes. When this happens, we expect accountability while also recognizing the opportunity for improvement moving forward. In this regard, a good member of the community is much like a good parent, coach, or boss: tough, but fair. As James Madison famously wrote in Federalist 51, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.”<sup>3</sup> As community members, we can have high expectations while also encouraging well-intentioned public servants doing their best to navigate the challenges inherent to public service.

The general public also has roles and responsibilities, the abdication of which allows corruption—and, in more extreme cases, tyranny—to go unchecked. Our responsibilities as members of a community emanate from our very nature as humans. We are, as

Aristotle recognized, political animals, meaning that we naturally belong to families, neighborhoods, and cultures, which are essential to the formation of our character.

As Carl Trueman notes in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, the political man “finds his identity in the activities in which he engages in the public life of the *polis*.”<sup>4</sup>

The private man, by contrast, directs his energy inward to attend solely to his own interests, neglecting his obligations to the community. The temptation to withdraw from public (political) life is particularly strong in an era characterized by the isolating forces of atomized individualism and technological advancement, but it comes with significant costs.

As individuals recede from the public sphere and into their personal lives, the “middle institutions” of civil society are inevitably weakened. These institutions, which include churches, book clubs, sports leagues, historical societies, conservation groups, and other associations, exist between individuals and governments as the life force of community. Edmund Burke described these “little platoons” as the source of our public affections, as they distinguish our community as *ours*. This is *our* church, *our* book club, *our* community and so on. These organizations, which tend to be very active in local politics, are indispensable in promoting the interests of their members and ensuring

**Public servants are obligated to prioritize the common good over their personal interests. Refusal to do so should be understood as disqualification from public service, plain and simple.**

that public servants remain accountable. Beyond that, they allow us to properly orient ourselves as belonging to a “political community,” to borrow another term from Aristotle.

By being engaged in our communities and involved in the activities of public life, we develop the habits and virtues necessary for self-government. In practice, this means that we are not only informed about the actions of their

government—and other matters relevant to the community—but invested in them insofar as they promote the common good. Investment of this sort is a constitutive element of attachment, which may

be the ultimate hallmark of citizenship. In his seminal work, *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville observes that “the inhabitant of New England is attached to his township not

so much because he was born there as because he sees in that township a free and strong corporation that he is a part of and that is worth his trouble to seek to direct.”<sup>5</sup>

Tocqueville adds that through this active participation in self-government, the resident of the township “assembles clear and practical ideas on the nature of his duties as well as the extent of his rights.”<sup>6</sup> Residents who are invested in their community do not allow their local leaders to abuse their authority—they demand and enforce accountability because doing so is imperative to preserve the integrity of our representative governments.

Public servants and their residents have distinct yet closely related responsibilities in ensuring that governments are accountable, responsive, and advancing the common good. Understanding these obligations is a prerequisite for creating the conditions necessary for accountability.

If the field of behavioral economics has taught us anything, it’s that incentives play a major role in human behavior from infancy through adulthood. Our political institutions too often reward self-serving individuals whose misguided ambition leads them astray to the detriment of those they serve. On the flip side, public servants who demonstrate the virtues of public service are not always recognized and rewarded as they should be. Aligning incentives with the kind of character we want and need in government is crucial. Unsurprisingly, residents and public servants both have a role to play in reshaping our incentive structures. We can do so by being both mindful

and prudent in who we elect, hire, promote, demote, criticize, praise, punish, and reward. If we want justice, we must first be capable of exercising good judgement.

Ensuring accountability in government, developing meaningful attachments through civil society, and investing in the success of the community: these are the actions of people committed to self-government. The same applies to public servants, who have the privilege to serve the community in which they live. We have no business complaining about corruption, abuses of power, and other political vices if we are unwilling to engage in the hard work that citizenship entails. As McAllister and Frohnen note, “To be free, a people must demand, protect, and above all exercise self-government.”<sup>7</sup> Whether we do so or not, the choice is *ours*. **RM**

#### ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reviewjournal.com/investigations/a-reporters-killing-revealed-a-decade-of-robert-telles-toxic-behavior-2679171/>

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<sup>4</sup> Trueman, Carl R. *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. Crossway, 2020.

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<sup>6</sup> Tocqueville.

<sup>7</sup> Frohnen and McAllister.

**MICHAEL HULING** is a city planner for Clark County, Nevada, and an advisory councilmember at the Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership.





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# THE FOUR PILLARS OF ETHICAL DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

While each community's digital public engagement process varies, these key principles can guide the process in an ethical manner.

BY BILLY TRAKAS

**E**thical digital engagement, when designed properly, can create a more inclusive, collaborative, and sustainable public engagement strategy. But it is becoming increasingly difficult to define what exactly ethical digital engagement looks like,

and subsequently, what the planning process entails. A large part of that comes from the ubiquitous use of equity, and other connected terms, in the local government space.

These terms are becoming buzzwords in the community engagement process across the globe—and justifiably so. The popularity of these

words is certainly a positive advancement given the history of exclusion of marginalized residents in the decision-making process. One of the first steps that local governments can take toward inclusive public engagement is to establish an ethical engagement approach, particularly in the space of ethical digital engagement.



However, going digital can pose concerns to an ethical engagement strategy. More people are creating noise in the “wild wild west of Facebook,” which can lead to the vocal few wielding disproportionate power.<sup>1</sup> Fewer people trust their government with personal data and protecting privacy.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, there also might be a digital equity imbalance that may lead to bias in the results.<sup>3</sup>

Designing an ethical digital engagement process is community specific and is not easy. While no digital public engagement process looks the same, there are some key principles, described here as the four pillars, that can guide the process.

### Understanding the Role of Digital in Ethical Engagement

With seemingly more tools at local government’s disposal,

and govtech companies marketing themselves as a “community engagement” solution, it starts to get confusing to define what good, effective digital engagement actually is.

Community engagement “is the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people.”<sup>4</sup>

But what does that look like? How can it be achieved ethically and feasibly within limited resources and staff amidst public engagement burnout?

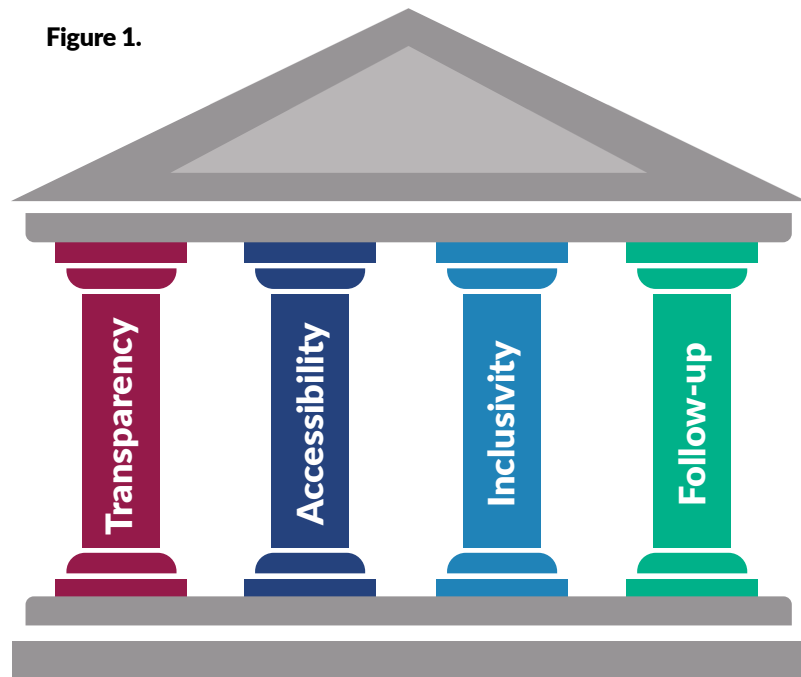
From community engagement platforms to surveys/maps and social media, local governments can provide more channels to inform and engage residents. As local governments explore

these different options, it’s important to distinguish two things: (1) how different tools will be incorporated and (2) in what capacity during the public participation process, which defines the public role from inform to empower.<sup>5</sup>

The Davenport Institute uses a modified version of this spectrum, which moves from inform to consult to incorporate to empower in their public engagement training. Both versions rest on the same foundation of public engagement with the goal of building stronger communities through relationships between local governments and their communities.

When preparing to design an ethical digital engagement strategy, I recommend organizing your approach with the following four key principles: transparency, accessibility, inclusivity, and follow-up.

Figure 1.



## ETHICAL DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

It is no secret that digital adoption has accelerated ever since the COVID-19 pandemic and continues with the current economic climate. The shift to an almost entirely digital space has facilitated a more transparent and accessible engagement process for many cities and counties.

The Four Pillars listed in Figure 1 are the foundation of bringing an ethical approach to digital engagement. When properly built, this foundation will create a more inclusive, collaborative, and sustainable approach to your ethical digital engagement strategy. However, if managed poorly, cracks could begin to form, leading to greater distrust and lower outcomes for cities and counties.

## THE FOUR PILLARS

### 1. Transparency

With the rise of engagement platforms and survey companies, social media is still seen as a primary source of online engagement for local governments. Social media provides a great way to broadcast a message in the “inform” stage of the public engagement spectrum, but is it ethical and viable to use social media listening tools as your residents move across the public engagement spectrum?

According to the OECD, only four out of 10 people trust their government.<sup>6</sup> This begs the question, is listening when residents are unaware a collaborative and transparent way to conduct community engagement to increase trust?

Given that trust and credibility are outcomes that must be earned, it is important to consider how to design a digital strategy in a transparent and accountable way. Before creating a digital engagement framework, ask yourself:

- How will data be collected?
- How is data being managed to influence decisions?
- Are you getting consent from the community to collect that data?

## Is it ethical to use social media listening tools as your residents move across the public engagement spectrum?



It’s fundamental to explore these questions at the beginning stages. It’s best to clearly state why and how you will collect information and how it will be used to make decisions. An ethical digital engagement strategy facilitates prompt updates from organizations and enables residents to easily observe the transparent process, and participate. Remember that actual engagement is inviting all residents to be a part of the conversation where decisions can be made *with* the community, not *for* the community.

### 2. Accessibility

When designing a digital engagement strategy, local governments must consider the end user with regard to accessibility in all forms, including but not limited to: ability, digital literacy, ease of access, and time.

Ensuring everyone has equal access to information, and can participate in the decision-making process, creates a more inclusive and diverse environment. Allowing an open environment for your community to engage allows residents to engage 24/7, giving them the opportunity to engage on their own time. For the residents with disabilities, having a digital strategy that is WCAG 2.1 compliant—a globally recognized standard for making web content accessible—is crucial.<sup>7</sup>

As communities look to adopt technology into the community engagement process, one of the final questions you should consider is: Does the level of digital literacy and digital accessibility in the community match the requirements of this new technology?<sup>8</sup>

The use of traditional methods of engagement (face-to-face, town halls, events, partnerships) is the first step in understanding the levels of literacy and accessibility in the community. Without the proper understanding of the access limitations, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic minorities will continue to be left out of the conversation. Creating pop-up events to collect feedback on new and existing digital tools is a good way to measure community interest and digital literacy. Regardless of current digital literacy levels, cities and counties should always provide print and digital guides on how to use digital tools. These guides should be designed to meet the diverse needs of the community. That translates to providing print text-only guides, videos,

and versions in different languages. These are just some of the ways in which communities can increase the effectiveness of digital tools and improve their digital engagement strategy.

### 3. Inclusivity

Inclusivity is the cornerstone of ethical public engagement, regardless of the modality. When thinking about inclusivity, it is important to stop and assess your knowledge of the community. Communities change over time and it is important to be mindful of the impact of those changes. The same processes that were effective five or 10 years ago might not reach your community today. In order to ensure *all* voices are heard, digital engagement processes, specifically outreach, need to be designed with all residents in mind.

There are various methods—such as social media, email, and newsletters—that can be used to market a project online. Those methods require a database that is already intact.

Cities and counties that don’t have a database to work with should look to utilize traditional methods to market. Partnerships with nonprofits, homeowners associations, community leaders, and local media can provide assistance in communication efforts. Another underutilized method is using a city or county database to either create a QR code or a web-accessible link on utility bills.

These communication efforts should keep in mind that one in five U.S. homes speak a second language in addition to English.<sup>9</sup> While the language make-up of

each community will be different, we must be aware of the language that our community members feel most comfortable in. A better understanding of our community can help provide that knowledge. One way to collect that data is through flyers or posters in multiple languages in public buildings, schools, and community centers.

Extensive research has been done on inclusivity in public engagement and it continues to be a leading focus area in local government. These are just some suggestions to help guide your digital engagement



strategy towards being more inclusive, but by no means is it an exhaustive list.

#### 4. Follow-up

One of the last steps of creating an ethical engagement process is to close the loop by reporting back to the community. By regularly providing updates on project progress, sharing results, and addressing feedback, local governments can demonstrate their commitment to transparency and accountability. This helps to establish a relationship based on mutual trust and respect and can encourage greater community involvement and participation in future digital engagement initiatives. Additionally, reporting back and demonstrating accountability helps to ensure that digital engagement projects are not only delivering the intended outcomes and benefits for the community, but can also help identify areas for improvement and future development.

These insights can inform and improve

engagement strategies, tailor communications and content to the community's interests, and measure the effectiveness of engagement efforts going forward. Data and analysis can help organizations identify and address barriers to engagement and to make informed decisions about the allocation of resources.

There is no one-size-fits-all formula to approaching an ethical digital engagement strategy, but there are some foundational principles that ring true across the board. An ethical digital engagement strategy must be transparent, accessible, inclusive, and have a level of follow-up. While these four pillars are designed to help guide the process of designing an ethical digital engagement strategy, they can be applied to all public engagement processes. **PM**

#### ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

<sup>1</sup><https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/vocal-few-on-social-media-now-wield-disproportionate-power-1.4307213>

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<sup>3</sup><https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/digital-equity-and-public-engagement>

<sup>4</sup><https://aese.psu.edu/research/centers/cecd/engagement-toolbox/engagement/what-is-community-engagement>

<sup>5</sup>[https://iap2.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2018\\_IAP2\\_Spectrum.pdf](https://iap2.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2018_IAP2_Spectrum.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>[https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/b407f99c-en/1/3/2/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/b407f99c-en&\\_csp=c12e05718c887e57d9519eb8c987718b&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/b407f99c-en/1/3/2/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/b407f99c-en&_csp=c12e05718c887e57d9519eb8c987718b&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book)

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<sup>8</sup><https://www.law.georgetown.edu/your-life-career/campus-services/information-systems-technology/digital-accessibility/#:~:text=Digital%20accessibility%20refers%20to%20the,technologies%2C%20by%20people%20with%20disabilities.>

<sup>9</sup><https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/in-5-in-us-homes-speaks-a-second-language-after-english/6914204.html>

**BILLY TRAKAS** is the founder of A Community Engagement Company, which specializes in building capacity for local governments to adopt an online strategy for all its projects. Billy has over five years of experience in digital community engagement working at various firms in the local government space. (billy@communityengagement.co)



Racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic minorities will continue to be left out of the conversation without the local government's proper understanding of the access limitations.

# Rebuilding PUBLIC TRUST:

When an Ethical  
Breach Shatters  
Public Confidence



Buncombe County Courthouse  
in Asheville, North Carolina



## How an incoming county manager took major steps to restore the community's trust from the inside out

BY AVRIL PINDER,  
ICMA-CM

In 2017, news broke that a former county manager of Buncombe County, North Carolina, was under federal investigation, and for the next two years the headlines rocked local governments across the state. Headlines like this one from the U.S. Attorney's Office in August 2019, "Former Buncombe County Manager, Three Former Employees, and a County Contractor are Sentenced to Prison for Embezzling Public Funds," devastated the mountain community. Adding to the corruption, a former county commissioner was also

sentenced. One thing that could not be prosecuted was the culture of fear, retaliation, mental anguish, and low-grade consistent trauma that I walked into as the incoming county manager in March 2019.

Across the country we are seeing more and more transgressions like the ones that played out in Buncombe County. The steps we took to focus on rebuilding the public's trust were multi-faceted and started at the core of our own operation. My hope is that sharing our journey might help another organization facing a similar situation.

### Rebuilding Trust from the Inside out

With the prevailing heads-down mentality, I embraced the old adage "charity begins at home." My first priority was creating an intentional internal communications plan.

### Inside-out Transparency and Communication

Make this commitment to your organization and repeat it often: If there is news about the organization and/or the employees, they will hear it from you first, not the five o'clock news or the local headlines. Promise them that

good or bad, you will give them the facts.

Where do employees find the facts? Our internal web page was rebranded as “Employee Focus” and served as a one-stop place for everything that’s employee centric, such as policies, a calendar of events, shared accomplishments, news, and more. A staff of 1,500-plus employees have a wider sphere of influence that one manager can ever reach; equipping them with information empowers them to be ambassadors for the county and help them share with their network.

We created a “Manager’s Message” blog that is posted on the intranet. Messages are created and posted straight from the county manager’s desk on proposed policy changes, upcoming events, acknowledgements, and other county happenings. I invite comments, ideas, and feedback from all employees through a new comment feature. One caveat: Before sharing policy issues, I spend time ensuring that department directors are aware and understand what’s going on so employees have an outlet beyond the public forum to get answers. It’s important to make sure that the trusted voices have the information to respond and do so with one accord.

I asked employees to talk about issues and provide their perspective. Previously, retaliation was a mode of operations in the county; therefore, drawing out responses and feedback took intentionality. One example I’ll share was around a change to our health care plan. After much analysis, I communicated a proposed change, held several in-person and virtual town halls explaining the

change. However, at a board of commissioners meeting, two employees attended and challenged the proposal and bashed the idea during general public comment. In that moment, I had the opportunity to live up to my no-retaliation policy. I realized the employees did not feel safe speaking up internally and needed that buffer in the public arena to disagree or raise questions. Human Resources researched answers, posted them on the intranet, and shared the answers at the next board meeting. That public response went a long way in opening dialogue internally. Always look for opportunities to model the behavior you want to see in your staff.

Another early and important action I took was to schedule a visit with every department and meet with every available employee to hear directly from frontline staff on their ideas and issues, as well as to give them a chance to ask any questions on their minds. Themes and comments are collected and reported to the leadership team. Items that we will work to resolve are then communicated back out on the intranet with anticipated timelines and regular check-ins on progress. We celebrate accomplishments or share obstacles, all while keeping employees informed on status.

Regular team building and informational meetings with all department directors serve to shore up the communication reservoir. Our leadership team works together to establish the rules of engagement, and we hold ourselves accountable. Our agendas are available for all county staff to access as another effort to be open and transparent. Directors are asked to schedule team

meetings so we can cascade information to the organization. These are regular practices, but I focus on them as part of a comprehensive plan that strengthens internal communication.

### **Internal Control**

Fiscal responsibility is an important part of rebuilding trust. Our external auditors shared no significant findings with the board for our fiscal year ending June 30, 2021, and that paints a picture of the progress made. In 2018, the audit reported six material weaknesses and nine significant deficiencies over financial reporting, one instance of non-compliance, and three significant deficiencies over internal control and compliance—a total of 19 findings.

### **Setting Expectations**

When I came on board in 2019, I could not find an enterprise-wide strategic plan. Coupled with the heads down mentality, this individualistic approach led staff to silos and fragmented service delivery.

An opportunity was formulated quickly with the board of commissioners to create a five-year strategic plan. Through a facilitated board process and 13 community public input meetings, participants shared what success would look like for Buncombe County. The commissioners took that input and finalized four focus areas that would become the “what” we focus on. Employee engagement sessions heavily focused on frontline staff to discuss “how” we would accomplish community expectations.

Like most strategic plans, we reviewed our mission and

vision and decided they were still relevant and appropriate. Our defined values drive the organization. A large part of the strategic plan, of course, is dedicated to our goals and focus areas. It was important to me and the board that every department and employee could quickly see themselves in the plan and how their role helps us to achieve our mission and vision.

With that in mind, we took time to have every department create a business plan that built on the strategic plan through specific initiatives, actions, and performance measures. Our philosophy in creating business plans was “One Buncombe, One Vision.” Departmental business plans also help drive a transparent budget process that invests in advancing projects and programs to achieve our strategic goals.

Our commissioners prioritize funding of services and projects that are clearly linked to our strategic plan. Our employees know what the community expects of us and how their role impacts our performance on meeting those expectations. This process was documented and recognized recently with a NACO Achievement Award.

### **Defining Our Values**

Regardless of the county’s overarching initiatives and goals, foundational values will always guide us in the right direction. As part of the strategic planning process, the board defined our county values as respect, integrity, collaboration, and honesty. Residents reviewed the proposed plan and weighed in. The board’s guiding principle for the five-year period is rebuilding trust, and after the



Downtown Asheville, North Carolina

partnered with them to allow employees to experience a night of Christmas decorations and refreshments. We partnered with Asheville's minor league baseball team to host a night of baseball for our employees. We created an annual SK for employees and family members at a county-owned Park. Explore the resources in your community. We plan on building a calendar of events so employees can see what's coming up and can plan accordingly. All after-hours events are family-friendly and well attended. These events are about comradery, breaking down silos, and most importantly, employee resiliency and stress relief.

### Service Delivery

Every interaction with the public is a chance to make Buncombe County shine. The answer may not always be "yes," but how we deliver that message is extremely important, and it is an opportunity to build trust.

When creating the strategic plan, we reviewed the existing mission and reaffirmed that it is still very relevant and appropriate. It states we will deliver needed service through a responsible workforce committed to excellence, integrity, and teamwork. That language allowed us to elevate and engage all employees. It's crucial that all employees—part-time, full-time, contract, or otherwise—must commit to excellence in what we do. Every new employee orientation includes a session about commitment to customer service and the expectation we hold for everyone.

It's critical that we provide the resources to achieve excellence, and the strategic

community told us that they felt equity was important to include, the board amended our core values and added equity as a value and goal.

With values approved by the board and endorsed by the community, we engaged our employees to tell us what comes to mind when they hear "respect, integrity, collaboration, honesty, and equity." We received hundreds of responses. From those responses, department directors worked together to create definitions and examples of the values in action. Taking a step further, our learning and development team now offers a "Living Our Values" class to educate, inform, and provide awareness of our values to employees.

### Deconstructing Silos

Corruption can sometimes go unnoticed when organizations are siloed, when departments focus exclusively on their own work, and employees have a heads-down mentality. With a communication strategy in place, renewed focus on internal controls, strategic plan completed, values defined, and departmental goals aligned, we turned our focus to deconstructing silos and working as one.

### Cross-departmental Goals

Using the strategic plan and departmental business plans, we are able to identify broad categories for cross-departmental collaboration. Buncombe's Strategic Plan 2025 has five broad focus areas or pillars:

1. Resident well-being.
2. Environmental and energy stewardship.
3. Educated and capable community.
4. Vibrant economy.
5. Foundational focus.

Workgroups are created for these broad categories to identify touchpoints where departmental work overlaps. Focus group meetings are facilitated by our strategy and innovation team to establish a pattern and practice, compile and analyze data to identify trends, and determine root causes or recommendations to change course. Ultimately, data is shared on a public dashboard, fostering accountability and partnership.

### The Team Approach

An organization that is open to inter-departmental flexibility can also help break down silos. What this looks like at our organization is employees volunteering to help other departments. During the pandemic, we offered

employees who were sent home the chance to learn a new job. Our public servants stepped up to the challenge and we saw property appraisers learning to drive ambulances, and librarians manning call centers and donation banks. Following the pandemic, a spot was created on the intranet for departments to ask for help. Organizationally, it was a temporary assignment for the day, labeled as volunteering. The election services department was the first to pilot this project, offering employees a chance to give back (and earn a day off) to work a polling place on Election Day. The solid waste department creates a volunteer opportunity for Earth Day. I now have staff asking about other opportunities to help across departments so much so that we are looking to formalize an employee loaner program.

### Employee Appreciation

Traditional employee appreciation may look like an annual gathering or luncheon. We have committed to creating more opportunities for employees to interact with each other, and we look to our local resources for inspiration. For example, the Biltmore Estate, which is located in Asheville, is the largest private home in the country. Human Resources

plan incorporates foundational focus areas in addition to community focus areas. Operational excellence, resources, and equity are our building blocks. To drive change while improving performance and culture, I restructured the human resources department. Creating programs and divisions for recruitment and retention, employee relations, employee engagement, and learning and development allows us to meet and address employee needs more holistically.

Our business intelligence team was restructured as strategy and innovation. This group has transitioned from working with departments on creating their operating budgets and determining staffing needs to providing the organization with data-driven solutions. Coordinating and aligning strategy throughout the organization equips and empowers employees to be adaptive to tackle the various challenges they are facing.

Internal controls are at the core of operational excellence, and it was an important step after financial corruption to shore up internal controls around department purchasing and installing software on county computers. A cross-departmental review team now vets the business need of any information technology request. This has allowed collaboration and sharing of existing software that we already had in one department but can serve a different need for another department. Ultimately, multiple points of cross-departmental collaboration and awareness, in addition to departmental business plans, has helped bridge gaps, curbed

the heads-down mentality, and empowered department directors to be leaders of the organization.

### **Board Relations**

Shifting focus from internal operations, I turned to rebuilding the governing body's relationship with leadership, staff, and the community. Within my first week, I met with each board member to hear concerns and priorities, establish reporting guidelines, and learn the kind of updates preferred. I wanted to make sure I clearly understood their expectations. When reporting to the board, it is my preference to have staff—the subject matter expert—make that report. We review and prep employees before they present to make sure they are prepared and confident. Over the past few years, the board has come to recognize staff's ability and trust their expertise, and conversely we see that staff has come to appreciate their support.

Rebuilding trust is an ongoing process. I meet monthly with each commissioner to continually assess those priorities, share feedback, and maintain an open line of communication.

### **Focus on the Community Communication and Engagement**

To rebuild trust in any failed relationship, we must begin with talking, and like our internal focus, we start with communication. Residents needed a conduit to the board and management. They wanted answers. Using a "Let's Talk" platform—a mailbox to email or call in questions or concerns—I tasked our

communications team to monitor the platform and follow up on every submission within 24-48 hours. The internal audit team is notified of each submission and any allegations of wrongdoing are reviewed and investigated by internal audit.

Resources were allocated to have a full-time communications and public engagement team, to include a public information officer, webmaster, information specialists, and community development specialists. This team proactively shares county news with local media, through our social media channels, and via our own website. They make sure we have a presence at local events, they created a brand guide to unify our internal and external messaging, and they conduct media training for all departments to ensure our subject matter experts are competent and comfortable in our interactions with the media.

A focused and proactive approach to sharing county news allows us to own our narrative. Creating a structured media relations policy and a point of contact enables the media to reach a person who can connect them with the best spokesperson, follow up on data, and pull together an entire picture, adding resources and outside contacts. This strategy was initially met with some resistance, as the media no longer had wide-open access to every staff member, and they felt I was creating a gatekeeper. But we stuck with it and now have a more timely, wrap-around professional relationship with our media partners.

Communicating government processes starts in the board

room. To keep commissioners updated and abiding by open meetings rules, many organizations divide their policy makers into small groups below a quorum and spend several hours before board meetings briefing Commissioners. With that practice, our elected officials have only a few hours to think about the issues they will vote on. One of the first changes I proposed to the board was to conduct briefings in a public meeting. We discuss upcoming items at least two weeks prior to a regular meeting, giving the board and the community more time to research, ask questions, and fully understand the issues. The media also has time to get questions answered. This process has allowed the commissioners to hear from constituents and advocacy groups. Carving out time and space to review and get input in a public forum has given the board and community a sense of better oversight and transparency.

Communication should also include two-way conversation, and to that end, we invested in public input software. This platform is designed to gather input via surveys, comments, livestream meetings, and gather demographic and location data allowing us to target specific areas to ensure we are reaching a large cross section in addition to the typical active residents.

### **Transparency**

Key to rebuilding trust is being open and transparent. To that end, we created and continue to expand a set of transparency dashboards. For example, an open checkbook is a searchable record of every check posted. We share a position and salaries dashboard, as well as a budget

explorer, among others. An open-data platform allows users to access public data, search, filter, and export to suit their needs. Transparency initiatives include:

1. **One stop for public records.** Members of the public can submit a request through an online portal and view responses to other requests for public information.
2. **Transparent boards and commissions.** With over 30 advisory boards and commissions, the goal is that each one will have a presence on the public input portal, where we can livestream meetings and the public can stay involved and informed in that work.
3. **Public budget work sessions.** One of the most important and impactful tasks that the board takes on is approving the annual budget. From a board retreat in early December for priority settings, each budget work session is open to the public and livestreamed. Each component of the budget—revenues by source, expenses by function, personnel, capital projects, education funding, partnership funding for nonprofits—is discussed to ensure the board has the information needed, and the public understands where and how their tax dollars are invested. Decisions are openly discussed and debated.

## Operational Excellence

You may be wondering why operational excellence falls under community

focus. I believe the internal work we have done has built the foundation for operational excellence:

- A clear strategy and goals.
- Communication throughout the organization.
- Training.
- Two-way conversations.

But in time, unless we are projecting that from the inside out and others are seeing and recognizing the change, we are not making progress.

Operational excellence is defined by our organization as proactively managing an infrastructure that contributes to best-in-class performance. As we strive to meet that goal, we are gaining recognition from our peers. Over the past three years, we have submitted eight programs for NACO recognition and received eight awards. The MacArthur Foundation has reinvested in our equity and jail reduction strategies. At the state level, the North Carolina attorney general has highlighted our detention center's medication assisted treatment (MAT) program as a best practice.

The cornerstone of operational excellence is training and creating an innovative culture. We teach that every employee is a leader: they are empowered to make decisions as they interact with our clients and customers, and they are in charge of that interaction. This cultivates a new mindset and an organization with exceptional operational excellence.

## Service

The culmination of all the work to rebuild trust comes down to service. Are we meeting or even exceeding our residents' expectations? How do we

make sure our employees are equipped to help us succeed in building up?

After three years of intentional focus and effort on rebuilding trust, we launched a community survey to get a baseline on the sentiment remaining after the fraud. The results showed that when residents have an interaction with county staff, it is overwhelmingly positive. Specifically, 85 percent of survey respondents stated they agree, strongly agree, or were neutral.

Surprisingly, the results show that 53 percent of respondents get their information about the county from word of mouth. This was critical information for us to receive, bringing an awareness to connect on an individual level with our residents.

To improve on these results and build our innovative culture, we have embraced piloting programs instead of longer-term analyzing. Rolling out pilot programs helps employees know it is OK to try, and if it does not work, we can change course. The community sees that we are nimble and responsive to their issues and needs, and it allows them to give feedback and be engaged in the creation of new programs. For example, in response to increased opioid use and overdoses on the rise, we piloted a community paramedicine and post-overdose response team. In the first six months, we responded to 478 and successfully connected 315 people to services. The program has continued, and we have had 795 intakes connected to various recovery services. Working with participants, service providers, and family members, we implemented

changes to enhance the program, and through word of mouth the program has grown and is considered a success that others in the state are looking to replicate.

And finally, I restructured the organization reporting structure to ensure that all departments (amenable to the manager) report to an assistant manager or myself. This ensures there is no intermediary—every department has direct access and hears directly from my office on plans, vision, and expectations so we are all working toward one goal: one Buncombe County unified to rebuild trust.

## Conclusion

In summary, our journey encompassed:

- Robust and intentional communication—both internal and external.
- Clarity of purpose—our strategic plan and goals as our north star.
- Competence—training and allowing our subject matter experts to lead and innovate.

As we have strived to rebuild trust with the public, I am heartened to know that Buncombe County will always answer the call, and that we've also been able to support our board of commissioners in achieving some amazing policies, bring more jobs and investments to our region, and advance our mission of promoting a healthy, safe, well-educated, and thriving community with a sustainable quality of life. **PM**

**AVRIL PINDER, ICMA-CM,** is county manager of Buncombe County, North Carolina.



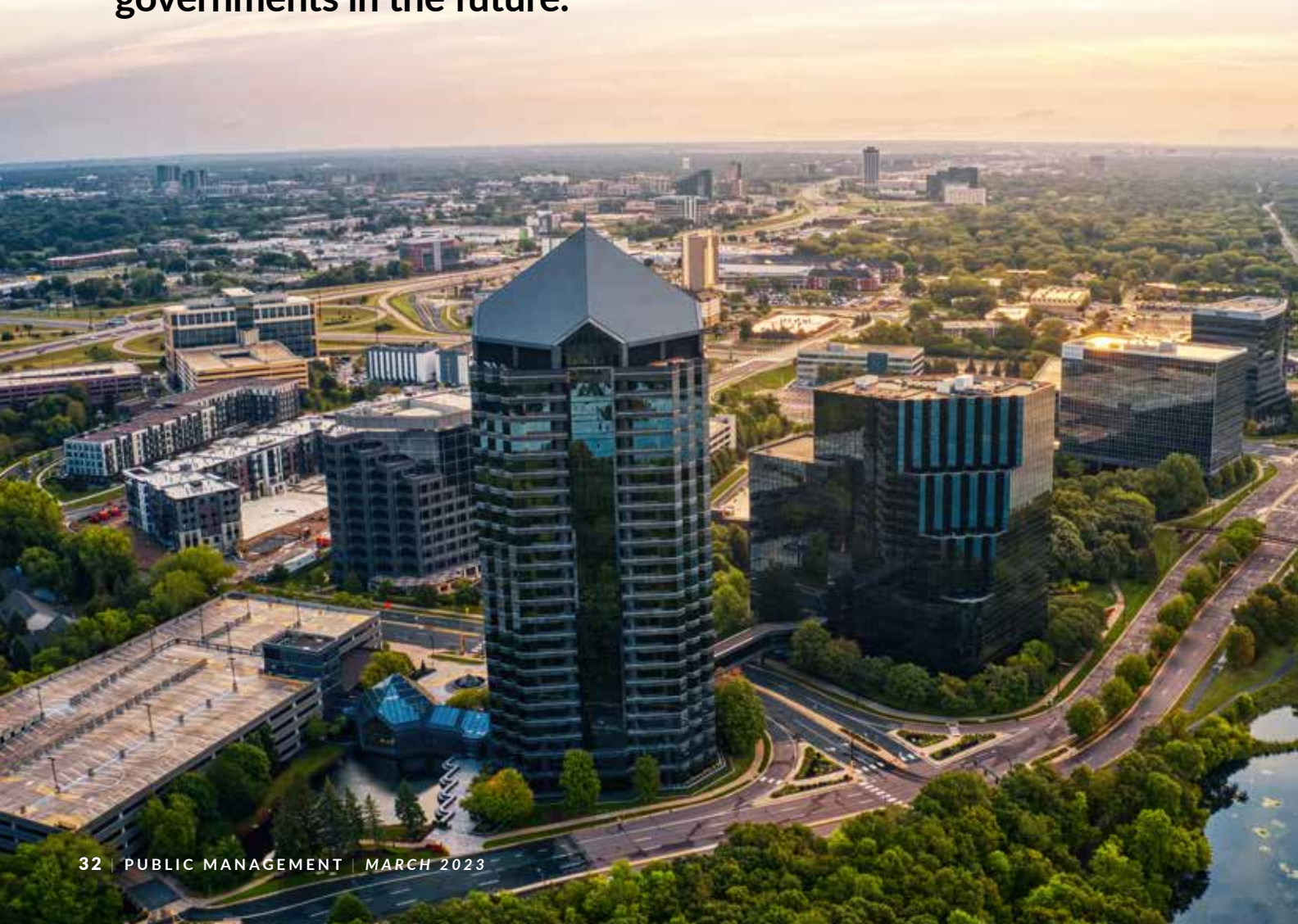
# Lessons Learned in Ethical Public Engagement

BY ALEXANDER  
DESANTIS

**Cities across the globe demonstrated innovative and intuitive approaches to engaging their residents during the pandemic, setting an example for local governments in the future.**

Effective, ethical public engagement can help build strong relationships between local governments and their communities. Founded on trust, the strength of these relationships can help communities endure unprecedented, challenging times.

High levels of trust stem from ethical public engagement that is transparent, collaborative, and equitable. While ethical public



engagement is foundational for public engagement in all areas, we have especially seen it at the forefront of engagement in the last three years during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we look back, we see cities and counties that had strong pre-pandemic relationships with the community being successful in their public engagement processes *during* the pandemic. Their focus on transparent, collaborative, and equitable engagement pre-pandemic provided a foundation for an unprecedented time in which local governments were at the frontlines of sharing important information.



Edina, Minnesota

## Building Trust with the Community

Having the trust of the public is crucial to not only local government success, but also to help build stronger communities. Trust is the backbone of the relationship between the community and their government, and without it the best-intentioned programs are at a high risk of failure. Local governments can build this trust through effective, ethical public engagement that keeps local government accountable and transparent, while fostering a collaborative relationship that can empower residents to improve their community.

Central to public trust is an ethical, accountable, and transparent local government. Ethical governance requires robust engagement practices that go beyond informing residents to also inviting them to join in the decision-making process. This type of public engagement also clearly communicates how much the community's feedback can affect the process or project.

## Elements of Ethical Public Engagement

Ethics goes beyond what is legally required as a public servant. It is about doing what's right and engaging in behaviors that would make the world a better place. A shared internal understanding of ethical public engagement is a good place for teams to start. By thinking in terms of values, local government officials can engage residents where they are and focus on common ethical values that guide the public engagement process.

Transparency in local government is foundational to ethical public engagement. Residents of the community have a key role to play in the process and are crucial to the success of any initiative. Transparency goes beyond the legal requirements of state transparency laws. When done right, a local agency should make a commitment to public engagement and a concerted effort to share information with the public about local agency operations and decision-making processes.

By promoting access to information, local government agencies can empower their residents and better engage and foster private sector partnerships and relationships. Increased levels of transparency have been shown to improve trust between local government and civil society. As an effect, accountability improves and local government agencies experience increased responsiveness.

Involving all stakeholders in the engagement process regardless of historical or economic backgrounds is a crucial component to ensure equitable engagement across the community. The United Nations Human Settlement Program and Transparency International has produced a practical toolkit to help local governments to enhance and implement transparency in their engagement practices.<sup>1</sup>

Community buy-in is a crucial component of any successful policy initiative at the local level. Often, without previous relationships and a high degree of trust between residents and local government

staff, even the most well-thought-out plan can fail. By incorporating these ethical and transparent engagement practices, cities and local government agencies can have meaningful relationships that are better positioned to tackle both simple and complex issues within their communities.

## Ethical Engagement During a Global Pandemic

There are many examples of local governments that have been practicing ethical, meaningful public engagement, and as a result, had robust authentic relationships with the community pre-pandemic. These relationships were instrumental in helping those communities trust their local governments and overall be more resilient during the past few years. Because these cities and counties had invested time and resources in ethical and transparent public engagement prior to the pandemic, they were able to "cash in" all of that goodwill during an unprecedented time. Furthermore, they continued to practice ethical public engagement during the pandemic, despite the challenges we all were facing.

For Edina, Minnesota, a landing page provided easy access to key information for residents navigating the then-unfamiliar landscape of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> The website served as a tool on the public engagement spectrum to inform and empower residents. The city portal was simple to use for all ages and provided the latest updates on the pandemic. The engagement didn't stop

there as the city still sought to empower residents and inspire them with activities and ideas that residents could implement to enjoy their time and stay safe.

Similarly, Arvada, Colorado, sought to empower its residents through digital public engagement tools designed to not only increase transparency and inform residents about the ongoing pandemic, but also came complete with a social feature for residents to share ideas and create socially distanced group activities to preserve community.<sup>3</sup> Using a variety of public engagement tools together can be a powerful way to build authentic relationships with residents and create better policy outcomes for the community.

In the United Kingdom, the London Borough of Enfield took a unique spatial approach to public engagement. The government created an interactive map that residents



London Borough of Enfield

could use to identify places in the borough where they felt social distancing measures needed review.<sup>4</sup> This direct consultation empowers residents, and makes them feel that their voice is being heard at a crucial time. As a result, this helps the local government build invaluable trust when it is most needed.

Even in times of crisis, such as a natural disaster

or pandemic, there is an opportunity and ethical responsibility for local governments to communicate how they will proceed and to what extent residents can influence that decision. A number of cities across the globe demonstrated innovative and intuitive approaches to engaging their residents during the first global pandemic in 100 years. The lessons learned

will successfully guide local governments in the future.

One of the greatest lessons learned is strength through trust. Our communities are only as strong as the bonds holding them together. Local governments that make the effort to collaborate with their residents, and build meaningful relationships through transparent and ethical public engagement processes are successful in building stronger communities. The backbone of this community strength is the trust between residents and their local government. Ethical public engagement is key to building that trust. **PM**

#### ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

<sup>1</sup> <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/tools-to-support-transparency-in-local-governance/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bettertogethersedina.org/covid-19>

<sup>3</sup> <https://speakup.arvada.org/we-can-do-this>

<sup>4</sup> <https://letstalk.enfield.gov.uk/covid-19-streetspace-plan/maps/ideas-map>



Arvada, Colorado

**ALEXANDER DESANTIS** is a graduate assistant with the Davenport Institute at Pepperdine University.



# New city-level data uncovers the toll of gun violence and offers **solutions.**

A person with their back to the camera, holding a large cardboard sign that reads "WE NEED A CHANGE" in bold, black, hand-painted letters. They are at a protest or rally, with other people visible in the background.

City-level data available on the City Health Dashboard, through a partnership with Everytown for Gun Safety, reveals the impact of gun violence in cities as well as factors leading to the rise of gun suicides and homicides, such as:



Cities in states with the strongest gun violence prevention laws have about **half the rate of gun suicides** as those in states with the weakest laws.



Cities with the most gun shops experience nearly **four times higher gun suicide rates** than those with the fewest



Cities with the most parks or walkable neighborhoods have **half the gun suicide rate** of cities with the least.

With the City Health Dashboard, city leaders and advocates can:

- ▶ **Make data-driven decisions to reduce gun violence and bolster community connection**
- ▶ **Explore the factors that shape health, and the drivers of health equity**
- ▶ **Use data to focus resources and enlist partners to allow all communities to thrive**

Explore and learn more about your city at:

**CITYHEALTHDASHBOARD.COM**

# ICMA Code of Ethics with Guidelines

The ICMA Code of Ethics was adopted by the ICMA membership in 1924, and most recently amended by the membership in June 2020. The Guidelines for the Code were adopted by the ICMA Executive Board in 1972, and most recently revised in June 2020.

The mission of ICMA is to advance professional local government through leadership, management, innovation, and ethics. To further this mission, certain principles, as enforced by the Rules of Procedure, shall govern the conduct of every member of ICMA, who shall:

**Tenet 1. We believe professional management is essential to efficient and democratic local government by elected officials.**

**Tenet 2. Affirm the dignity and worth of local government services and maintain a deep sense of social responsibility as a trusted public servant.**

## GUIDELINE

Advice to Officials of Other Local Governments. When members advise and respond to inquiries from elected or appointed officials of other local governments, they should inform the administrators of those communities in order to uphold local government professionalism.

**Tenet 3. Demonstrate by word and action the highest standards of ethical conduct and integrity in all public, professional, and personal relationships in order that the member may merit the trust and respect of the elected and appointed officials, employees, and the public.**

## GUIDELINES

**Public Confidence.** Members should conduct themselves so as to maintain public confidence in their position and profession, the integrity of their local

government, and in their responsibility to uphold the public trust.

**Length of Service.** For chief administrative/ executive officers appointed by a governing body or elected official, a minimum of two years is considered necessary to render a professional service to the local government. In limited circumstances, it may be in the best interests of the local government and the member to separate before serving two years. Some examples include refusal of the appointing authority to honor commitments concerning conditions of employment, a vote of no confidence in the member, or significant personal issues. It is the responsibility of an applicant for a position to understand conditions of employment, including expectations of service. Not understanding the terms of employment prior to accepting does not justify premature separation. For all members a short tenure should be the exception rather than a recurring experience, and members are expected to honor all conditions of employment with the organization.

**Appointment Commitment.** Members who accept an appointment to a position should report to that position. This does not preclude the possibility of a member considering several offers or seeking several positions at the same time. However, once a member has accepted a formal offer of employment, that commitment is considered binding unless the employer makes fundamental changes in the negotiated terms of employment.

**Credentials.** A member's resume for employment or application for ICMA's Voluntary Credentialing Program shall completely and accurately reflect the member's education, work experience, and personal history. Omissions and inaccuracies must be avoided.

**Professional Respect.** Members seeking a position should show professional respect for persons formerly holding the position,

successors holding the position, or for others who might be applying for the same position. Professional respect does not preclude honest differences of opinion; it does preclude attacking a person's motives or integrity.

**Reporting Ethics Violations.** When becoming aware of a possible violation of the ICMA Code of Ethics, members are encouraged to report possible violations to ICMA. In reporting the possible violation, members may choose to go on record as the complainant or report the matter on a confidential basis.

**Confidentiality.** Members shall not discuss or divulge information with anyone about pending or completed ethics cases, except as specifically authorized by the Rules of Procedure for Enforcement of the Code of Ethics.

**Seeking Employment.** Members should not seek employment for a position that has an incumbent who has not announced his or her separation or been officially informed by the appointive entity that his or her services are to be terminated. Members should not initiate contact with representatives of the appointive entity. Members contacted by representatives of the appointive entity body regarding prospective interest in the position should decline to have a conversation until the incumbent's separation from employment is publicly known.

**Relationships in the Workplace.** Members should not engage in an intimate or romantic relationship with any elected official or board appointee, employee they report to, one they appoint and/or supervise, either directly or indirectly, within the organization.

This guideline does not restrict personal friendships, professional mentoring, or social interactions with employees, elected officials and Board appointees.

**Influence.** Members should conduct their professional and personal affairs in a manner that demonstrates that they cannot be

improperly influenced in the performance of their official duties.

**Conflicting Roles.** Members who serve multiple roles – either within the local government organization or externally – should avoid participating in matters that create either a conflict of interest or the perception of one. They should disclose any potential conflict to the governing body so that it can be managed appropriately.

**Conduct Unbecoming.** Members should treat people fairly, with dignity and respect and should not engage in, or condone bullying behavior, harassment, sexual harassment or discrimination on the basis of race, religion, national origin, age, disability, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

**Tenet 4. Serve the best interests of the people.**

## GUIDELINES

**Impacts of Decisions.** Members should inform their governing body of the anticipated effects of a decision on people in their jurisdictions, especially if specific groups may be disproportionately harmed or helped.

**Inclusion.** To ensure that all the people within their jurisdiction have the ability to actively engage with their local government, members should strive to eliminate barriers to public involvement in decisions, programs, and services.

**Tenet 5. Submit policy proposals to elected officials; provide them with facts, and technical and professional advice about policy options; and collaborate with them in setting goals for the community and organization.**

**Tenet 6. Recognize that elected representatives are accountable to their community for the decisions they make; members are responsible for implementing those decisions.**

**Tenet 7. Refrain from all political activities which undermine public confidence in professional administrators. Refrain from participation in the election of the members of the employing legislative body.**

## GUIDELINES

### Elections of the Governing Body.

Members should maintain a reputation for serving equally and impartially all members of the governing body of the local government they serve, regardless of party. To this end, they should not participate in an election campaign on behalf of or in opposition to candidates for the governing body.

**Elections of Elected Executives.** Members shall not participate in the election campaign of any candidate for mayor or elected county executive.

**Running for Office.** Members shall not run for elected office or become involved in political activities related to running for elected office, or accept appointment to an elected office. They shall not seek political endorsements, financial contributions or engage in other campaign activities.

**Elections.** Members share with their fellow citizens the right and responsibility to vote. However, in order not to impair their effectiveness on behalf of the local governments they serve, they shall not participate in political activities to support the candidacy of individuals running for any city, county, special district, school, state or federal offices. Specifically, they shall not endorse candidates, make financial contributions, sign or circulate petitions, or participate in fund-raising activities for individuals seeking or holding elected office.

### Elections relating to the Form of Government.

Members may assist in preparing and presenting materials that explain the form of government to the public prior to a form of government election. If assistance is required by another community, members may respond.

**Presentation of Issues.** Members may assist their governing body in the presentation of issues involved in referenda such as bond issues, annexations, and other matters that affect the government entity's operations and/or fiscal capacity.

**Personal Advocacy of Issues.** Members share with their fellow citizens the right and responsibility to voice their opinion on public issues. Members may advocate

for issues of personal interest only when doing so does not conflict with the performance of their official duties.

**Tenet 8. Make it a duty continually to improve the member's professional ability and to develop the competence of associates in the use of management techniques.**

## GUIDELINES

**Self-Assessment.** Each member should assess his or her professional skills and abilities on a periodic basis.

**Professional Development.** Each member should commit at least 40 hours per year to professional development activities that are based on the practices identified by the members of ICMA.

**Tenet 9. Keep the community informed on local government affairs; encourage communication between the citizens and all local government officers; emphasize friendly and courteous service to the public; and seek to improve the quality and image of public service.**

**Tenet 10. Resist any encroachment on professional responsibilities, believing the member should be free to carry out official policies without interference, and handle each problem without discrimination on the basis of principle and justice.**

## GUIDELINE

**Information Sharing.** The member should openly share information with the governing body while diligently carrying out the member's responsibilities as set forth in the charter or enabling legislation.

**Tenet 11. Handle all matters of personnel on the basis of merit so that fairness and impartiality govern a member's decisions, pertaining to appointments, pay adjustments, promotions, and discipline.**

## GUIDELINE

**Equal Opportunity.** All decisions pertaining to appointments, pay adjustments, promotions, and discipline should prohibit discrimination because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, sexual orientation, political affiliation, disability, age, or marital status.

It should be the members' personal and professional responsibility to actively recruit and hire a diverse staff throughout their organizations.

**Tenet 12. Public office is a public trust. A member shall not leverage his or her position for personal gain or benefit.**

## GUIDELINES

**Gifts.** Members shall not directly or indirectly solicit, accept or receive any gift if it could reasonably be perceived or inferred that the gift was intended to influence them in the performance of their official duties; or if the gift was intended to serve as a reward for any official action on their part.

The term "Gift" includes but is not limited to services, travel, meals, gift cards, tickets, or other entertainment or hospitality. Gifts of money or loans from persons other than the local government jurisdiction pursuant to normal employment practices are not acceptable.

Members should not accept any gift that could undermine public confidence. *De minimus* gifts may be accepted in circumstances that support the execution of the member's official duties or serve a legitimate public purpose. In those cases, the member should determine a modest maximum dollar value based on guidance from the governing body or any applicable state or local law.

The guideline is not intended to apply to normal social practices, not associated with the member's official duties, where gifts are exchanged among friends, associates and relatives.

**Investments in Conflict with Official Duties.** Members should refrain from any investment activity which would compromise the impartial and objective performance of their duties. Members should not invest or hold any investment, directly or indirectly, in any financial business, commercial, or other private transaction that creates a conflict of

interest, in fact or appearance, with their official duties.

In the case of real estate, the use of confidential information and knowledge to further a member's personal interest is not permitted. Purchases and sales which might be interpreted as speculation for quick profit should be avoided (see the guideline on "Confidential Information"). Because personal investments may appear to influence official actions and decisions, or create the appearance of impropriety, members should disclose or dispose of such investments prior to accepting a position in a local government. Should the conflict of interest arise during employment, the member should make full disclosure and/or recuse themselves prior to any official action by the governing body that may affect such investments.

This guideline is not intended to prohibit a member from having or acquiring an interest in or deriving a benefit from any investment when the interest or benefit is due to ownership by the member or the member's family of a *de minimus* percentage of a corporation traded on a recognized stock exchange even though the corporation or its subsidiaries may do business with the local government.

**Personal Relationships.** In any instance where there is a conflict of interest, appearance of a conflict of interest, or personal financial gain of a member by virtue of a relationship with any individual, spouse/partner, group, agency, vendor or other entity, the member shall disclose the relationship to the organization. For example, if the member has a relative that works for a developer doing business with the local government, that fact should be disclosed.

**Confidential Information.** Members shall not disclose to others, or use to advance their personal interest, intellectual property, confidential information, or information that is not yet public knowledge, that has been acquired by them in the course of their official duties. Information that may be in the public domain or accessible by means of an open records request, is not confidential.

**Private Employment.** Members should not engage in, solicit, negotiate for, or promise to accept private employment, nor should they render services for private interests

or conduct a private business when such employment, service, or business creates a conflict with or impairs the proper discharge of their official duties.

Teaching, lecturing, writing, or consulting are typical activities that may not involve conflict of interest, or impair the proper discharge of their official duties. Prior notification of the appointing authority is appropriate in all cases of outside employment.

**Representation.** Members should not represent any outside interest before any agency, whether public or private, except with the authorization of or at the direction of the appointing authority they serve.

**Endorsements.** Members should not endorse commercial products or services by agreeing to use their photograph, endorsement, or quotation in paid or other commercial advertisements, marketing materials, social media, or other documents, whether the member is compensated or not for the member's support. Members may, however, provide verbal professional references as part of the due diligence phase of competitive process or in response to a direct inquiry.

Members may agree to endorse the following, provided they do not receive any compensation: (1) books or other publications; (2) professional development or educational services provided by nonprofit membership organizations or recognized educational institutions; (3) products and/or services in which the local government has a direct economic interest.

Members' observations, opinions, and analyses of commercial products used or tested by their local governments are appropriate and useful to the profession when included as part of professional articles and reports.

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**ICMA** | ethics

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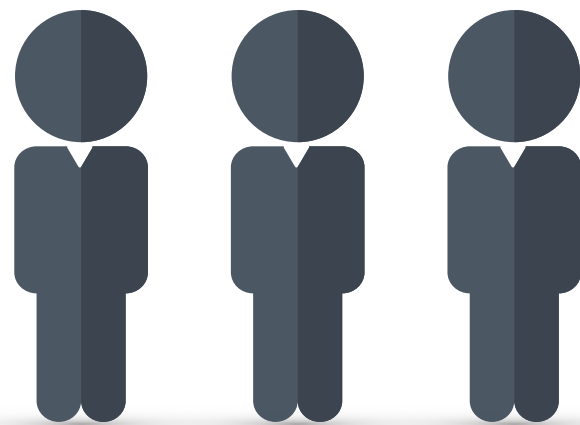


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# Let's Think Differently About... How We Implement Almost Everything!



Too often we rush to implement new ideas when really we should go slow, test our ideas, and learn how to improve them prior to implementation.

BY ED EVERETT, ICMA-CM  
(RETIRED)

How does local government implement most things?

Unfortunately, we come up with a new idea or a significant improvement—whether in a program, policy, regulation, or design—and proceed with an organization-wide or community-wide implementation. We often don't test our ideas to see if they work or can be improved. This approach is completely wrong and adds to our risk averse culture. I strongly recommend that you stop this old approach to implementation and instead use beta testing.

## What Is Beta Testing?

Originally, this term was applied to the second phase of testing computer code. It was expanded to testing computer programs,

systems, or computer applications.

Over time, this term has come to refer to the testing of almost anything—ideas, programs, policies, regulations, marketing strategies, or designs. Beta testing can be synonymous with the terms *pilot* or *experimental program*.

Beta testing is a smart, logical, and efficient way to implement new programs or significant changes. It is simply taking a new idea or change and testing it in the marketplace, whether the marketplace is within an organization or within the community.

Beta testing isn't complicated and can be used at any level of an organization. A city council, city manager, department head, or anyone who comes up with a new idea for significant change



or improvement should beta test it. I don't care how good the idea is or sounds, the first step is to test the idea.

### What I Learned from the Private Sector

After retirement, I went to work for a private sector start-up. I was one of the first 20 employees and we were trying to figure out the most effective and useful way for neighbors to connect with each other through a mobile application. We were also trying to figure out how to get local governments to use the app as a way to keep neighbors informed. I wish I had known as a city manager what I learned at Nextdoor.

Nextdoor beta tested almost everything, including different visual formats, application menus, marketing strategies, and connection tools. Nextdoor had lots of smart people with lots of ideas, but all ideas had to prove themselves in the market. We sometimes killed ideas after testing them or we learned how to improve them before rolling them out to every neighborhood. We were driven by real world feedback.

### Why Should Local Government Mimic the Private Sector?

There is a lot wrong with the private sector's lack of ethics and its myopic focus on making the greatest profits; however, there are some things we can

learn from the private sector. Beta Testing is one of them.

Unfortunately, local government is very risk averse. Beta testing allows an organization to do a small test of an idea, program, or regulation without:

- Taking a big risk.
- Putting up major money.

- Committing to a particular change.
- Deciding to recommend a program/change to the city manager or city council.

Beta testing grants organizations the opportunity to try new ideas, programs, policies, regulations, or designs without the council, city manager, or department head having to risk a possible large failure.

We in local government try hard to come up with good ideas; however, we fall in love with our good ideas and implement them organization-wide. Several different things can then happen:

1. Our brilliant idea is a failure, and we have the embarrassment and ego-crushing experience

Not all ideas will pass the beta test. You are trying to be innovative without the risk of a big failure.

- of having to cancel something that has been implemented systemwide.
2. Our idea is good, but we realize there are necessary changes, which cause headaches and heartaches when we must make systemwide changes.
  3. We realize that our idea could have been better, but our ego or bureaucratic rigidity prevents us from making necessary improvements. We then settle for a mediocre program or policy.

Implementing a program or plan without knowing how well it will work is arrogant and reckless. No matter how smart people are, there is no way to know how something will work until it is tested.

Figure 1 is a visual presentation of the beta test process.

### Simple Beta Test Steps

There is no one way to beta test. You can experiment, but the following are some useful guidelines.

1. Be clear about what you propose to change and why.
2. Set up a predetermined time frame to test your idea.
3. Establish straightforward metrics for evaluation. Qualitative input is as important as quantitative data.
4. Test your idea. If it is a change in an organization, test it in a subsection of the organization. If it is a change in the community, test it within a small neighborhood.
5. Test your idea with a subgroup that will be open to the experimentation.
6. Obtain feedback from the beta test and apply your predetermined metrics to

determine the efficacy of your pilot.

7. If the feedback is promising, try a larger test to work out any additional bugs. If that is not possible, learn from the first test, improve the program, and then implement it organization-wide.
8. If the feedback is negative, decide whether to do a major revision or just kill the idea.

Not all ideas will pass the beta test. You are trying to be innovative without the risk of a big failure.

### Beta Test = Pilot or Experiment

It is very difficult to make necessary changes or implement new programs without significant resistance inherent in our risk averse environment. So, never again implement a new program or policy without a beta test. Title your beta test a “pilot” or “experiment.”

The naysayers, idea killers, and negative employees or bosses in your organization don’t have the time or energy to worry about every pilot program. Usually, your pilot program will fly under the radar. If someone raises

Implementing a program or plan without knowing how well it will work is arrogant and reckless. No matter how smart people are, there is no way to know how something will work until it is tested.

issues, your best response is to say that it is just a pilot or an experiment and it may or may not work.

If the idea is bad, the pilot program quietly goes away. If the idea is good, then the group that beta-tested/ piloted the idea will become your new advocates. If you “pilot” a second time with a larger group, you will develop more supporters prior to full implementation.

### Where To Start?

Start anywhere, but start small. Help your organization

learn how to beta test and then expand its use.

Beta test a new performance evaluation system that focuses on employee development (see last month’s article). Beta test a change in policy, a new street design, a zoning regulation change, a new budgeting process, a parking ordinance, or new operating hours.

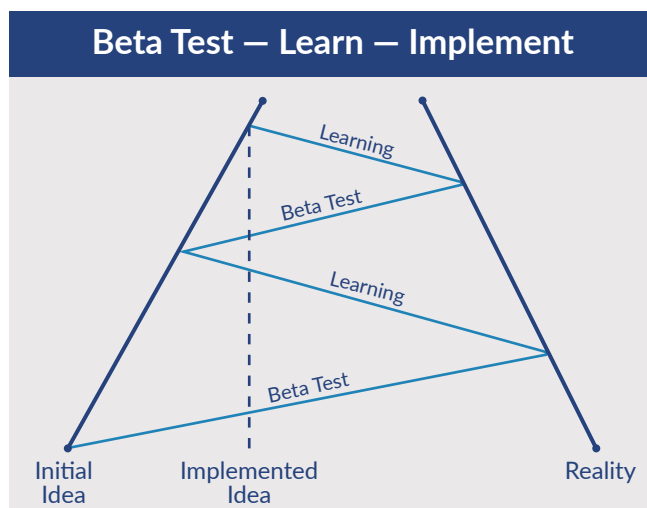
An upcoming article in this series will describe a pilot program that is beta testing a different way to think about and respond to certain types of calls for service.

### Closing Comments

It takes arrogance, hubris, or stubbornness to believe that one’s untested ideas must be brilliant and hence immediately implemented organization- or community-wide. It takes thoughtfulness, humility, and patience to test one’s ideas in the marketplace.

A wise person once told me to “go slow to go fast.” I am impatient and it took time for me to understand the wisdom of this saying. Too often, we rush to implement new ideas; however, our initial idea is never the best version of the idea. If we go slow, test our ideas, and learn how to improve them, then we will have a smoother, successful, and faster system-wide implementation.

So, go forth. Test, pilot, and experiment. Make significant changes without as much resistance and negativity. Try it, you will like it...innovation without hesitation, heartaches, or disasters. I will freely consult with anyone trying a beta test for the first time. **RM**



**ED EVERETT, ICMA-CM (RETIRED)**, is a retired city manager (everett@comcast.net).



# Emerging Leaders Recognized

ICMA is pleased to award this year's Local Government Management Fellowship Judy L. Kelsey Scholarship to two current fellows. | **BY ERIKA COOPER**

**ICMA is happy to announce** this year's winners of the Judy L. Kelsey Scholarship, which was established in August 2019. This award is named in honor of Judy Lyn Kelsey, a pioneer in the local government management profession and long-time ICMA member, who generously gifted \$109,000 to ICMA in her estate. With her gift, ICMA established the Local Government Management Fellowship Judy L. Kelsey Scholarship to assist emerging women leaders who have been accepted into the ICMA Local Government Management Fellowship (LGMF) program, which places a fellow in a manager's or department head's office in a council-manager community.

This year's winners of the Judy L. Kelsey Award are fellows Audrey Ables and Melody Barger.

## **Audrey Ables** is

currently a fellow with Pinellas County, Florida, where she works as a special project analyst who rotates through different departments

providing administrative support. She is developing a hybrid curriculum allowing Pinellas County Citizen's University to go partially virtual. By adopting this hybrid model, she hopes more citizens can participate in the program. Audrey graduated from Auburn University with a master's in public administration.

In Audrey's essay, she shared, "Like Judy, I want to see women in this profession thrive. That is why I have begun working with one of my mentors to start a Women Leading Government chapter here in Florida. I truly believe leading happens at all levels, and as such, we are trying to attract women from various backgrounds and skill levels." Audrey is dedicated to the profession, committed to being a mentor, and strives to help build a better community. She plans on using the scholarship to take a step closer to financial recovery after a year of making a big career move.



## **Melody Barger** is currently

serving in her second year as a fellow in Lewes and Milford, Delaware. She has had the unique experience of working under city managers in two different cities, allowing her to work on various projects and programs.

In Lewes, she is developing a capital improvement plan and communications plan. In Milford, she is administering an ARPA subgrant program, where she has awarded almost \$300,000 in grants to nonprofits in the community. She also spearheads the update of Milford's strategic plan. She graduated from the James Madison University with a master's in public administration. Melody applied to the LGMF program because she is passionate about making a difference for residents and wants to maximize her experience as a young professional in the field. Her goal in local government is to help people, and she aspires to be a city manager one day for an organization that values public service beyond all else.

As she said in her essay, "Judy Kelsey understood, when she gifted the funds from her estate, that women in government tend to make less than men in government and that starting in the field requires a good education and commitment to the field." Melody shows commitment to improving the profession and plans on using the scholarship to supplement personal costs and savings to remove barriers that will take her career to the next level. **PM**



*Since the publication of this article, Audrey Ables accepted a full-time position as a budget analyst with Pinellas County, Florida, and Melody Barger accepted a full-time position as an assistant program manager with ICMA.*

Learn more about ICMA's Local Government Management Fellowship program at [icma.org/lgmf](https://icma.org/lgmf).



**ERIKA COOPER** is program manager of career advancement at ICMA ([ecooper@icma.org](mailto:ecooper@icma.org)).

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**Jeffrey Stonehill, ICMA-CM**

Borough Manager and Director of Utilities  
Chambersburg, Pennsylvania  
ICMA Member Since 1995

**Celebrating Ethics  
Awareness Month****The Importance of the ICMA  
Code of Ethics**

It sets guidelines, but also gives us challenges to improve ourselves both as individuals and as city managers. I have taken to heart the importance of the Code of Ethics. I re-read it several times a year. In any local government role, we are going to be faced with ethical challenges. Being prepared and knowing how to move forward in an ethical way is the only way to address those challenges as they arise.

**Ethics Starts from the Top**

It starts with recognition by the CAO, department heads, and the assistants that they are going to operate in the professional, ethical way that ICMA and the Code of Ethics outlines. We conduct internal training to ensure our supervisory employees are aware of the Code of Ethics, what our requirements are, and our expectations for their performance. It's important to talk out scenarios. We often have roundtable discussions on what we would do if faced with different challenges.

**My Career Highlight**

I'm very blessed to be in a community that's innovative and on the cutting edge of a lot of great ideas. In addition to owning and operating all of our own utilities, Chambersburg borough is also extremely involved in the economic development of our community. One of our most interesting projects is the acquisition of a dilapidated downtown shopping center. We've had this eyesore for many years, but we've been able to muster the resources and attack it by buying it ourselves. We really hope it becomes the centerpiece of new economic development.

**Proud to Be an ICMA-CM**

What I find most special about the ICMA credentialing program is the commitment to lifelong learning. At no point will I stop learning how to be a better manager. My entire career is guided by absorbing the trends and fundamentals of local government and owning those skills.

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