

## Inspiring Calm and Respectful Discussion

### Everyone thinks they are a good person, fighting the good fight.

- Anger is often fear in disguise. Find out what a person is afraid of and help to address that, if you can.
- Demonstrate the behaviour you want to see in others – inspire people to be the best versions of themselves.

### It's up to you to keep calm and stay strategic – you'll be defined by your weakest moments.

- If a message or action feels good, it may not be the strategic choice. Park your emotions and make choices that get you where you want to be.
- Focus on behaviour – not opinions.
- Use positive language. You won't inspire civility through regulation or restriction.
- Acknowledge feelings, but stay out of back-and-forth debates. Focus on maintaining good governance and good service delivery.
- Use statements that are hard to disagree with and easily understood.
- Speak and write like you're talking to a crowded room. Remember your words could be recorded, repeated, or quoted.

### Choose your battles wisely.

- Develop user-friendly tools to help navigate when and when not to respond.
- Share facts clearly, keep answers short, and link to good information sources.
- Talk with people, not at them. Avoid telling people what to do.
- Remember that complaints can help improve services.

### Good communication takes confidence.

- Providing effective communications advice is about helping the organization respond in a thoughtful, professional, and credible way.
- Good communication is helpful. It reduces stress and helps solve problems.
- The right messages will survive public scrutiny, protect the municipality's reputation, and build trust.
- Strong messaging helps communicators avoid overstating, or over-responding, and helps to de-escalate anger.

## Tips for difficult interactions

- 1 **Set boundaries early:** "We welcome many views. Please speak to ideas, not people."
- 2 **Start with empathy:** "I hear your concern. Here is what we can do."
- 3 **Stay neutral:** Focus on behaviour and facts. Avoid blame and long debates.
- 4 **Protect privacy:** Move service issues offline when personal details are needed.
- 5 **Use pre-approved messages:** Be consistent across teams and with council.
- 6 **Create thresholds with leadership:** Know when to disengage. Map out when to escalate to CAO, Clerk, Legal, or security. Create internal guides for online interactions.
- 7 **Document key details:** Record dates, in-person or online interactions, platforms / links, and action(s) taken. Focus forward. Avoid re-engaging, unless required by policy.
- 8 **Actions speak louder than words:** Finding the right message is easy when you are doing the right thing.

## Tips for Online Engagement

The following tips are meant to help staff engage on municipally managed channels, not community-led groups or pages.

### When to respond

- Engage when a short, kind reply can clear confusion, prevent the spread of misinformation, or help many people at once.
- Ask yourself if responding will improve the situation. Will it: help people understand, strengthen a relationship, build trust, reduce tension, or prevent confusion? Is the matter central or important for a department or the organization?
- If you choose to respond, speak or write as though you are communicating to a crowded room – because your words could be shared or posted.

### When not to respond

- Pick this path when more replies will not add value or may raise risk, fuel conflict or debate, waste time or compromise privacy.
- You cannot regulate or restrict people into being civil. Before removing or hiding a post, use positive, plain language that inspires and demonstrates the tone you expect from others.
  - » Instead of: “We have a strict policy against swearing and we will delete inappropriate comments,” try: “We welcome constructive input, respectful discussion and different opinions. We don’t host personal attacks or swearing.”

### Sample closing phrases

“We have a diverse community, and decisions need to balance opinions. We hear your view. Thanks for sharing it with us.”

“We need to communicate in a way that protects your privacy. Please send me a direct message or contact me by [Phone / Email]. I’ll follow up.”

“We welcome different views. The best way for Council or staff to see them is by sharing feedback at [link] by [date].”

“We welcome constructive feedback and suggestions that we can consider and use.”

### External community social media

Many people get municipal information from community social media channels managed by others. These may not be appropriate spaces for municipal staff to engage there. Respond by:

- Ensuring factual information is available on municipal digital channels and that it is easy to find.
- Providing Council members, key community opinion leaders / partners, and social media moderators with clear factual information so they can inform and moderate discussions well. It is often worth the effort to get to know social media moderators.
- Seeking legal advice for content that constitutes abuse or slander. In Canada, people can be sued for defamation or serious harassment on social media.

This guide supports respectful public dialogue and smart use of staff time. Every municipality and situation is different. Follow your organizational policies, procedures, and escalation protocols. This guide is not legal advice. Redbrick offers training for elected officials, leaders, and staff to help strengthen skillsets and provide more strategies to manage issues and public response.

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