

Tips for Promoting Civility in Public Meetings

What is Civility?

In the context of democratic debate, civility is about how people treat each other. Civility involves the display of respect for those who have positions with which one disagrees.

Even though disagreement and confrontation plays a necessary role in governance and politics, the issue is *how* one expresses that disagreement. The key is to focus on the strengths and weakness of proposed solutions to community problems—not to engage in personal attacks against those who favor different solutions.¹

Specific Strategies

- **Embrace Diverse Points of View.** Local officials are grappling with difficult policy challenges. Bringing as many perspectives on what might be the best solution to a given problem increases the likelihood that the solution will indeed be successful and enduring.
- **Everyone Gets a Chance to Share Their Views.** Voltaire said "I may not agree with what you say, but I will fight to the death for your right to say it." Everyone's right to have their view heard is a central democratic value. Conversely, a strategy that relies on drowning other perspectives out usually results in a turning up of the volume and corresponding decreases in civility in discussions.
- **With Rights Come Responsibilities.** For there to be time for everyone to weigh in on an issue, there may need to be reasonable time limits on how long individuals speak. The goal is to create a culture in which as many people as possible (including decision-makers) are respectful of other people's time in attending and participating in the meeting.

About This Tip Sheet

This tip sheet is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute's resources on Local Government 101, go to www.ca-ilg.org/localgovt101.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

- *Email:* info@ca-ilg.org Subject: *Tips for Promoting Civility in Public Meetings*
- *Fax:* 916.444.7535
- *Mail:* 1400 K Street, Suite 205 • Sacramento, CA • 95814

- **Avoid Debates and Interruptions.** Interruptions should be discouraged so that individuals have the opportunity to complete their thoughts. A good practice for everyone participating in the conversation is to make a note of a question or different point of view that occurs to you when someone is speaking and then address that issue when it is one's turn to speak. This is an especially important approach for decision-makers to model.
- **Reduce Uncertainty.** Assuring people they will be allowed to share their views and how can reduce concerns that they will not be allowed to be heard. Explaining what process will be used to allow all views to be heard at the outset of a meeting or discussion item can reduce tension levels.
- **The Importance of Listening.** Listening is an important sign of respect, as is giving others the opportunity to listen. Decision-makers' active interest in what people are saying is vital. Repeating back core points that a speaker makes reassures the speaker that their message has indeed been heard—even if one does not necessarily agree with it. The mood turns ugly if the public thinks the matter has already been decided, decision-makers don't care about public input, or decision-makers are being impolite or disrespectful of the public they serve. Everyone attending a meeting should respect other attendees' right to both listen and be heard. One person should talk at a time, any private conversations should be taken outside or deferred, and cell phones should be turned off.
- **Be Compassionate About the Fear Factor/ Heckling and Applause Not Allowed.** Polls suggest many people fear public speaking.² This fear can come from concerns about being judged negatively or having ideas that people will ridicule or reject. Allowing cheering and booing or other forms of heckling discourages people from sharing their views (even silence or no applause can be perceived as rejection). It also runs the risk that those that do speak will focus more on getting applause than moving the conversation towards addressing

Agenda Guidance

Some local agencies include language to the following effect on their agendas:

Free expression of all points of view is an important democratic value in this community.

To allow all persons to speak who may wish to do so, each speaker is allowed a maximum of __ minutes. An effective approach is to lead with your key point or concern and then explain the reasons underlying it.

If others have already expressed your views, you may simply indicate that you agree with the previous speaker. If appropriate, a spokesperson may present the views of a group.

To encourage and respect expression of all views, meeting rules prohibit clapping, booing or shouts of approval or disagreement from the audience.

difficult issues. (Eye-rolling and grimacing can be non-verbal forms of heckling and also have no place in communities that value mutual respect.)

- **Separate People from The Problem.** Personal attacks or questioning people's motives or character rarely moves the conversation forward to a solution of a problem. In the book about effective negotiating called *Getting to Yes*,³ the authors encourage negotiators to attack the problem, not the people involved in the problem. Anything that approaches name-calling should be off limits.
- **Use Titles.** In meetings, a number of local agency officials refer to each other by title and last name (Supervisor Hassan, Council Member Lee, Board Member Aviña) as a verbal sign of respect that an individual has been elected and is participating in the conversation in that capacity. Using similar forms of respect for members of the public (Mr., Ms, Sir, Madam) when speaking can also reinforce the notion that everyone is engaged in a special kind of discussion.
- **Take a Break.** If conversations get heated, consider taking a break. As one veteran observer of public meetings noted "time can be an anti-inflammatory agent" that can give people a chance to calm down and restore order.⁴
- **Ejection a Last Resort.** If a recess does not work to restore order and other techniques are not successful, calling in the sergeant of arms is a last resort. A good practice is to create a record that disruptor was given ample warnings and opportunity to leave or reform their behavior voluntarily. If selective removal of one or more disruptors does not restore order, state law does allow clearing the room with the media allowed to remain⁵ (as an even more last resort).

A Note on Civility and Staff

Staff plays a critical role in providing service to the agency and the public the agency serves. An agency's ability to attract and retain capable and motivated staff is an important determinant of how satisfied the public is likely to be with the agency's performance and that of its elected officials.

An old management saw counsels those with oversight responsibilities to praise in public and criticize in private. That advice is sound for those in public service.

If an elected official has concerns about a staff member's performance or actions, a good practice to make the top administrative official of the agency aware of those concerns.

Similarly, a member of the public raises concerns about the performance of a public agency employee; refer it to management with a request for follow up.

If the communication is more in the nature of a personal attack, try to identify the underlying concern and respond to that. Separating people from the problem can be just as valuable a strategy when it comes to staff.

Parliamentary Procedure and Civility

Rules of parliamentary procedure are another tool to encourage civility and decorum at meetings. The most famous source of parliamentary procedure is Robert's Rules of Order. A good starting point is www.robertsrules.com/ (the "survival tips" page is especially helpful).

A former mayor and county supervisor (and now judge) has created a simplified version for use at the local level. Called "Rosenberg's Rules," the text and an explanatory video are accessible from the Institute's website at www.ca-ilg.org/rosenbergrules.

The following is an excerpt from Rosenberg's Rules on about courtesy and decorum:

The rules of order are meant to create an atmosphere where the members of the body and the members of the public can attend to business efficiently, fairly and with full participation. At the same time, it is up to the Chair and the members of the body to maintain common courtesy and decorum. Unless the setting is very informal, it is always best for only one person at a time to have the floor, and it is always best for every speaker to be first recognized by the Chair before proceeding to speak.

The Chair should always ensure that debate and discussion of an agenda item focuses on the item and the policy in question, not the personalities of the members of the body. Debate on policy is healthy, debate on personalities is not. The Chair has the right to cut off discussion that is too personal, is too loud, or is too crude.

Debate and discussion should be focused, but free and open. In the interest of time, the Chair may, however, limit the time allotted to speakers, including members of the body.

Can a member of the body interrupt the speaker? The general rule is "no." There are, however, exceptions. . . .

Note that the chair may have greater latitude in enforcing decorum among decision-makers than between the public and decision-makers.

- **Walk the Talk.** For civility to be a regular part of community discourse, community leaders must set the standard. Scholars are concerned—and the data seems to demonstrate—that public officials’ incivility to one another contributes to voter alienation and antipathy toward public officials and public agencies.⁶

A good approach is to treat people how you would like to be treated. This includes a) limiting one’s statements in discussions to those that move the conversation forward, b) keeping one’s remarks brief, to the point and non-repetitive of comments others have made (other than to note one’s agreement), c) avoiding personal attacks (in public and private) and d) otherwise adhering to the strategies described above.

Resource for Further Reading

This tip sheet is a distillation and update of the Institute for Local Government’s 2003 whitepaper called *Promoting Civility at Public Meetings: Concepts and Practice*, available at www.ca-ilg.org/civility.

Additional resources from the Institute include *Dealing with Emotions at Public Hearings*, available at [http://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/ilgbackup.org/files/resources/Emotions and Conflicts in Public Hearings 2.pdf](http://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/ilgbackup.org/files/resources/Emotions_and_Conflicts_in_Public_Hearings_2.pdf) and *A Leader’s Role When Tragedy Strikes*, available at [http://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/ilgbackup.org/files/resources/Everyday Ethics April10.pdf](http://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/ilgbackup.org/files/resources/Everyday_Ethics_April10.pdf)

Conclusion

How a community conducts its public meetings is a reflection of the community and its values. As Dr. Martin Luther King’s observed:

In a neighborhood dispute there may be stunts, rough words, and even hot insults; but when a whole people speaks to its government, the dialogue and the action must be on a level reflecting the worth of that people and the responsibility of that government.⁷

Dr. King’s admonition to his listeners to set their standards of discourse high--irrespective of how others behave--is consistent with the quote from Gandhi to his followers that “you must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Sample Codes of Civility

***Drafting Note:** A threshold issue is whether an agency's code will be positive or negative. In other words, will the code describe conduct that is prohibited or describe the kind of conduct it desires to be the norm. Describing the kind of conduct that is preferred has the advantage of being more instructive in setting the goal and encouraging people to meet that goal.*

Commitment to Civil Behavior

To maintain a cohesive, productive working environment, the members of the San Diego County Water Authority Board of Directors commit to:

1. Support the Authority's mission.
2. Bring Authority related concerns, issues, and conflicts to the Authority Board for discussion.
3. Offer alternative solution(s) when addressing a problem or issue.
4. Show respect to each other as appointed representatives of their member agencies.
5. Promote civility during Board meetings and tolerate nothing less.
6. Maintain the confidentiality of material discussed during closed Board meeting sessions. Similarly, not to disclose the content or substance of confidential or privileged communications relating to Authority business.
7. Limit the length of comments during Board meetings to three minutes per Director per item and not repeat points that already have been stated by other Directors.

Pledge of Civility

1. The manner in which we govern ourselves is often as important as the positions we take.
2. The organization's collective decisions will be better—and truer to our mission—when differing views have had the opportunity to be fully vetted and considered.
3. All those who appear before the organization's board and committees have the right to be treated with respect, courtesy, and openness. We value all input.

Accordingly, we commit to conduct ourselves at all times with civility and courtesy, to both those with whom the Board interacts and to each other. We also pledge to endeavor to correct ourselves, should our conduct fall below this standard.⁸

Resources and References

¹ Burgess, Guy and Heidi, *The Meaning of Civility*, Conflict Research Consortium at www.colorado.edu/conflict/civility.htm.

² <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1891/Snakes-Top-List-Americans-Fears.aspx> (fear of public speaking ranks second to fear of snakes).

³ Fisher, Roger and Ury, William L., *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (1991).

⁴ See Vermont Institute for Government, *Born to Chair: An Introduction to the Science and Art of Chairing a Board Meeting* (1998), available at <http://www.sec.state.vt.us/municipal/pubs/chair.pdf> and <http://crs.uvm.edu/citizens/chair.pdf>, page 3.

⁵ See Cal. Gov't Code § 54957.9, which provides:

In the event that any meeting is willfully interrupted by a group or groups of persons so as to render the orderly conduct of such meeting unfeasible and order cannot be restored by the removal of individuals who are willfully interrupting the meeting, the members of the legislative body conducting the meeting may order the meeting room cleared and continue in session. Only matters appearing on the agenda may be considered in such a session. Representatives of the press or other news media, except those participating in the disturbance, shall be allowed to attend any session held pursuant to this section. Nothing in this section shall prohibit the legislative body from establishing a procedure for readmitting an individual or individuals not responsible for willfully disturbing the orderly conduct of the meeting.

⁶ Carter, Stephen L., *Civility: Manners, Morals and the Etiquette of Democracy* (1998) at 9.

⁷ *From the March on Washington for Jobs, Peace and Freedom*, 1963.

⁸ Adapted from the Pledge of Civility adopted by the California Public Employee Retirement System Board.