



Promoting Civility in our Public Spaces: A primer for local officials

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What is Civility?

Although the topic of *civility* is frequently discussed today in our news outlets, social media channels and within our public spaces, the term “civility” is not new. The origin reaches back to the Romans, around 500 B.C. as a Latin derived term “*civis*” or citizen. The word later evolved to “*civitas*” meaning “*the rights and duties of citizenship*” (Schaefer, 2015 p. 104). The rights and duties of citizenship required citizens to assemble, vote on leaders, lead discussions, make decisions and act on issues of importance to those citizens.

Over the course of past centuries to present day, the term civility has continued to evolve and garner multiple definitions. George Washington, the first president of the United States, famously hand copied his *110 Rules of Civility in Company and Conversation*, as an assignment to work on his penmanship as a teenager. Today, Webster’s® Dictionary defines civility as “formal politeness and courtesy in behavior or speech.” However, we understand the concept of civility is far more than simply politeness and courtesy, although politeness is a necessary first step. Civility is rooted in the foundation of respect. The Institute for Civility defines civility as “claiming and caring for one’s identity, needs, and beliefs without degrading someone else’s in the process” (Institute for Civility, 2023. *What is Civility*, <https://www.instituteforcivility.org/who-we-are/what-is-civility/>).

For the purpose of this fact sheet, civility is defined as: demonstrating and maintaining, both in our words and actions, respective behavior toward one another when we disagree (NICD, 2022; ILG, 2003). Civility is not an issue when we agree with others; it only arises when we disagree. Civility is concerned with how to treat each other with respect when we do disagree. This fact sheet outlines effective strategies for local officials to apply in promoting civility and explains why the practice of civility and how modeling respectful processes and communication is critical for the overall health of our communities.

Why Promote Civility?

Civility is a cornerstone of democracy. When civility is practiced well, it becomes a learned process for how we treat each other in our public spaces. Public officials can

further the mindset for civility by modeling civil behavior. Civility and civil processes in our public spaces provides an opportunity for diverse groups of people to develop a deeper understanding of one another's values, opinions, perspectives and generate ideas for potential solutions. Communities cannot avoid tough issues because they are unpleasant or complicated (Burgess and Burgess, 1997). Conversely, when the public witnesses their own public officials engaging in personal attacks, rude behavior, or disrespectful treatment of each other or the public at large, it divides the community and often leads to distrust and disengagement among the public. Even when a community and its public officials try with their best efforts to be civil, it can still lead to ineffectiveness or alienate groups. But, practicing effective strategies for civility will help shape respectful communities over time. It is worth the investment.



While not easy, civility is important to model and put into practice. One of the most effective practices that public officials can enact is civil discourse among, and between public officials. Civil discourse, the thoughtful and respectful exchange of ideas through conversation, is critical to finding effective solutions for the issues facing our communities (NICD, 2022). Without civility and the practice of civil discourse, public officials fail in meeting their roles and responsibilities

of governance, and we fail in our role as responsible citizens. How local government runs its public meetings and engages with residents, is a direct reflection of the community and its values. Below are some steps toward enhancing the practice of civility and civil discourse in public spaces.

How to Promote Civility: Tips and Strategies

Steps for Improving Civility and Civil Discourse in Public Settings

1. **Distinguish Civility From Politeness**. The purpose of exercising civility is to demonstrate respect in the face of disagreements, or to show respect when expressing incompatible viewpoints. Don't focus on social politeness at the exclusion of others, or in an attempt to avoid important discussions. Throughout U.S. history, groups have been excluded or marginalized due to maintaining the status quo. Civil interactions can occur that bring in and engage people. Establish ground rules for civil discussions to help people understand and appreciate differences. These differences may help us better understand issues and how they impact others, and ultimately help us find workable solutions. For more information please visit, <https://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/setting-ground-rules-civil-discourse-and-difficult>.

2. **Embrace Diverse Points of View.** Local officials are confronted with difficult policy challenges, such as housing, climate change, homelessness, education, etc. Gathering as many perspectives as possible on what might be the best solution to a problem creates a co-production of knowledge. This increases the chances of finding a workable, equitable solution with the people most impacted, the residents of the community.
3. **Avoid Debates, Engage in Dialogue.** When one debates, their goal is to win an argument, not listen to the other side. Debating defends assumptions and original positions. The goal of dialogue and public discussion is to explore the various pieces of the issue “puzzle” to see the bigger picture. This may lead to finding the best possible decision with the least intended consequences to resolve the issue. For more information on dialogue, please visit Building Public Understanding, <https://buildingpublicunderstanding.org/distinguishing-between-debate-and-dialogue.html>.
4. **Listen, Listen, Listen.** Everyone attending a meeting should respect other attendees’ right to listen and the right to be heard. Give full attention, and put away or silence phones. Repeat back core points for the record if permissible. Practice active listening techniques if possible. Design a process to allow for people to share their views in an equitable format.
5. **Provide a Welcoming Environment.** Encourage participation, free from heckling, applause, or confrontation. Body language can also transmit messages such as receptiveness, confrontation, or intimidation. Communities that value mutual respect model civil behavior in verbal and non-verbal actions. For more tips on how to provide a welcoming environment for a public meeting, please visit, <https://mrsc.org/stay-informed/mrsc-insight/december-2020-1/strategies-for-managing-difficult-public-meetings>.
6. **Use Titles.** Refer to each other by title and last name (i.e., Commissioner Smith, Chairwoman Jones, etc.). Likewise, use titles for community members such as, Sir, Madam, etc. Using titles may seem formal, but it conveys respect for everyone in the room and reflects the role and responsibility people bring to the conversation.
7. **Use De-Escalation Strategies.** Follow the CLARA strategy (*Princeton University, Bridging Divides Initiative*, www.bridgingdivides.princeton.edu).



Center Yourself → **L**isten → **A**cknowledge/Affirm → **R**espond → **A**ssess

- a. **(C)** Calm and Center Yourself. You may not feel calm but appear calm. Avoid pointing, crossing arms or other aggressive postures.
 - b. **(L)** Listen. Let the person vent to express feelings, needs or values. Venting should not involve personal attacks.
 - c. **(A)** Acknowledge the feelings and values shared. Acknowledgement and understanding does not mean agreement, it reflects what you heard, For example, *“I sense your aggravation about this situation”*, or *“I hear your concern for jobs.”*
 - d. **(R)** Respond to the issue. Make a clear request or proposal, such as *“I understand you have every right to feel angry but it is not ok to threaten people here.”* Or *“Will you tell me more about your concerns?”*
 - e. **(A)** Assess the situation. Trust your instincts. If de-escalation is not working, then stop. Get help, remove the individual or close the meeting. Remember, the goal of de-escalation is to calm the situation or prevent physical or verbal attacks. De-escalation is not trying to win an argument. It is about calming a situation and regaining order.
8. **If Necessary...Break or Eject.** If conversations escalate and people are not following the accepted decorum, take a recess to allow things to calm down. If conversations escalate and a disruptor is provided warnings, yet order does not get restored, eject the person or group from the public meeting.
 9. **Separate People From the Problem.** Residents of a community will have different views and opinions on how best to address complex problems. Don't attack people or their ideas, but rather focus on the problem itself. Separate the person from the problem and don't blame the messenger. Avoid the “us-versus-them” language and reframe the discussion back on the problem, not attacking the person. As Fisher and Ury (1991) state, be “soft” on the people but “hard” on the problem. For more information please visit, <https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/negotiation-skills-daily/six-guidelines-for-getting-to-yes/#:~:text=Separate%20the%20people%20from%20the%20problem.&text=Strive%20to%20imagine%20the%20situation,blame%20are%20key%20negotiation%20skills.>
 10. **Advocate for Your Board or Council to adopt Rules of Civility.** Take a Pledge of Civility or adopt Rules of Decorum for your board or council (NACo, 2016). Remember to model the pledge or code the board adopts. Refer to the Pledge or Rules prior to each session. Civility can be a learned response, and over time will become part of the norm and culture of the board. While Rules of Civility can help create decorum for a board, be mindful that such rules can also be used to limit meaningful engagement or exclude fringe groups from participating in discussion, hence reinforcing the status quo of power relationships.

For more information on how to adopt Rules of Civility, or for examples, please visit,

https://www.naco.org/sites/default/files/documents/search%20of%20civility_09.20.2016v2.pdf

In addition to practicing the outlined steps to promote civility in public spaces, our community boards and governing bodies can also promote civil discourse by enacting and following ground rules as a public body. It is recommended the board review the following board rules prior to each meeting and have them posted or displayed for board members and the public, either on a screen or a poster. A Pledge of Civility can also be voted on by board member's and reviewed prior to each public meeting.

Most importantly, local officials need to model civility and civil behavior if they expect members of the public to be civil. As David Mathews (2014) aptly summarized, "*A community is the product of choices made overtime, even the choices made by not choosing*" (p.121). As a local official, it is in the best interest and health of our community to make a conscious choice to put into practice the strategies and model the behavior that promotes civility and civil discourse in our public spaces.

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