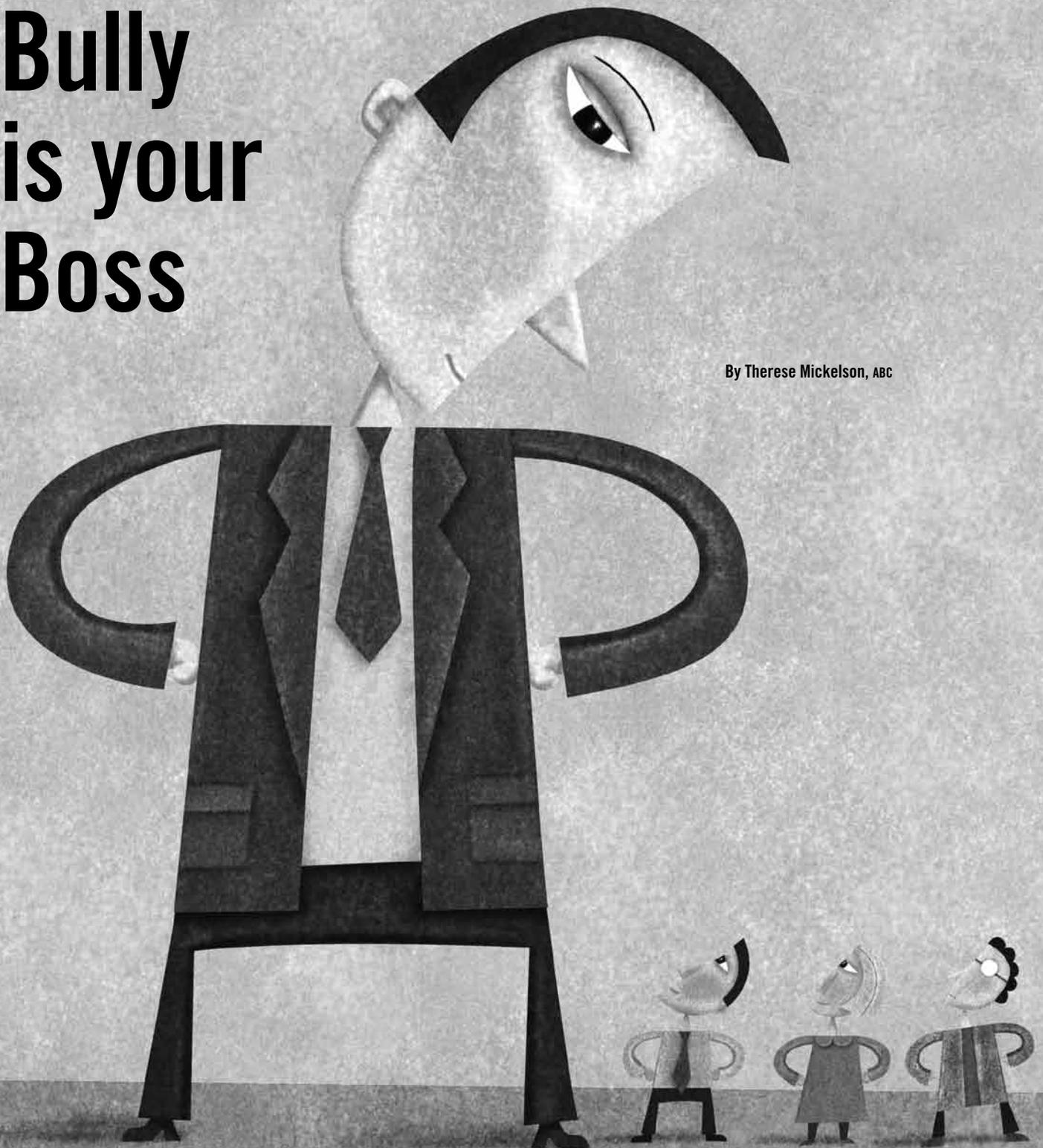


# When the Bully is your Boss

By Therese Mickelson, ABC



**W**hen John Doe, Chief Administrative Officer for the City of Happyville, woke up on Monday morning, the sun was shining, his children were singing and the dog had dropped his newspaper at his bedroom door. Despite his usual pattern of not sleeping well on Sunday nights, it was shaping up to be a beautiful day indeed. And then he remembered it was a Council Monday.

As he arrived at City Hall, he noticed his Planning Manager lurking by the back door.

“What’s up Jane?” he asked.

“I wanted to give you a heads up about the Open House we held yesterday afternoon, and to let you know that I may need to sue the City for defamation,” she replied. At his alarmed, yet not really surprised look, she added, “One of our Council members, and you know which one, spent the entire meeting telling people our estimates for the new development were wrong, saying that we’re either inept, or even worse, that I’m taking kick-backs to push certain projects ahead of others. This is the third time that he has suggested I’m either incompetent or a criminal, and it was in public, not just in the closed Council meeting. I’ve also heard he’s being saying the same thing to others during his regular visits to the senior’s centre. My personal and professional integrity is being called into question here, and I can’t sit back and let that happen.”

“I’m so sorry this happened again. I will talk to the Council member. Again. And I will emphasize that it could lead to legal action,” replied Doe. “I won’t tolerate this behaviour either.”

With that, they both proceeded to their offices. The CAO’s office was on the second floor, so John took the stairs to help relieve stress through exercise. He only received 15 emails from Council members on his way up, with 12 from the Mayor. That made a total of 184 emails from the Mayor since Friday. It seemed like a good idea to stop by the Mayor’s office for a moment.

.....  
*Note from the Editor: This is a composite story about a fictional city called Happyville, but the scenarios are based on actual experiences shared by local government managers across British Columbia. The scenarios have been tweaked to protect the innocent, but they are not exaggerated (other than everything happening on one day, in one organization). Thank goodness not all Councils are like this.*

“Good morning Mayor,” said John, with a hopeful smile. “Did you want to meet with me sometime today to run through a few items?” Hopeful smile still holding.

“I believe the proper way to address me is ‘Your Worship’ so please try to respect my Office,” said the Mayor. This was surprising to John, who had been asked by the Mayor to call him by his first name, saying he doesn’t like to stand on ceremony.

“I’m glad you stopped by,” continued the Mayor. “I have a number of things I want to address with you. One, I don’t want you speaking to other members of Council until you talk to me first. Two, I have some concerns about the way things are running here at the City. I want us to start using recycled toilet paper in the washrooms at City facilities to show we are environmentally friendly. I also met with the CUPE union representative, and I have assured her that we will start doing more to support our administrative staff. So I want you to organize a special day for them at City Hall. I noted that a few employees seem to spend a bit too much time chatting in the lunchroom, so I talked to the HR manager about putting up a few signs about no loitering. And I’ve had two phone calls from seniors complaining about the noise from the outdoor pool, so I think we may need to change the hours of operation or put up sound barriers in the area. I want reports on the status of these things by tomorrow or Wednesday at the latest.”

“Oh. Well. I will certainly look into these items. I’d also like to set up a time to meet with you to work out some of the details about the roles for Council and staff, and how we can work together to meet our responsibilities,” responded John, quite calmly.

After his brief meeting with the Mayor, John went to his office to start the day. He worked through his email, which had grown by another 25 emails from the Mayor, and continued with his preparation for the Council meeting that night. It was just before noon when his Fleet and Operations Manager called.

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## When the Bully is your Boss

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“Good morning. What can I do for you Fred?” he asked.

Fred’s response was not good. “I’ve had it John,” he replied. “I know you told me a certain Council member was having a tough time due to her divorce and the fact that her car was stolen last week, but I don’t appreciate being called an “f-ing idiot” and I won’t allow her to attack my staff with similar insults.”

Doe grimaced and then noticed his HR Director at his door. “I’m so sorry Fred. I agree that it doesn’t matter what is happening in her personal life, treating staff like that is unacceptable. I have Jill here at my door and will ask her for some direction on the best way to address this to support staff. Again, my apologies, and I’ll definitely address this with the Councillor.”

“Hi Jill. How’s your morning? Mine’s been a bit of a terror so far,” said John.

“Well John, I don’t think I’m going to make it any better, so I’m sorry about that,” replied Jill. “There’s a couple of things you need to know, and we may need to put some of it in writing. I’ve been told by a Council member that we have to hire his daughter again. If you remember, this is the daughter who basically parked the truck to sleep on the job every day, and was caught stealing from Stores. We’ve got it all documented, but the Council member told me this morning that I either hire her, or he’ll see me fired.”

“Oh. Gracious,” was the best John could get out. He also noticed that the Mayor had sent 20 more emails flagging things he wanted to see changed in the administration areas, including a different colour of carpet. John’s head was beginning to pound and it was only 11:50 a.m.

“You also need to know that another manager came to me for advice as she has been asked by the Mayor directly to do something that would contravene the Community Charter. She wanted to know if she could be fired for doing so, and I had to advise her that it could put her job at risk. But I also told her to talk to you so you were aware and could intervene before things go any further,” added Jill.

John shook his head, knowing without being told which Council member was involved, as he had already refused to take the action himself. He personally felt it was better to be fired for sticking to his integrity and being honest, than for comprising his standards by being dishonest and risking legal action.

After working through lunch and attending multiple meetings in the afternoon, John was ready for the start of the Council meeting. While walking downstairs, the Mayor stopped him to give him a handful of parking tickets.

“Get these taken care of will you?” said the Mayor. “My buddy Bill is a big contributor to this community and shouldn’t be paying parking tickets. Plus, he had a sore knee from our golf game, so he was entitled to park in the handicap spot.”

John stared at the tickets in shock and shook his head, telling himself it was something to deal with tomorrow. As he was about to enter the Council chambers, the Mayor stopped him again.

“By the way John, you’d better take care of those parking tickets tonight, because you’re fired as of tomorrow,” added the Mayor, before heading straight into Council chambers.

John finished the Council meeting and went home, relieved. Maybe now he’d start sleeping properly on Sunday nights.

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# Advice From The Experts: When the Bully is your Boss

**H**appyville thankfully doesn't represent the way the majority of elected officials behave; however, these situations do occur. As with any issue, there are a variety of underlying factors affecting behaviours, and there are steps that can be taken to improve the cultural environment and working relationships between Council and staff. Experts in the field of conflict resolution, team building, and Council-staff relations, Stacey Holloway and Tracey Lee Lorenson, share their insights on *Happyville* and how these scenarios could be addressed to improve relations in the workplace.

## **Happyville scenario – Council member criticizes staff in public, alluding to criminal behaviour.**

The Councillor in this scenario does not seem to understand the legal and regulatory obligations of public office. By openly criticizing staff, the Councillor is exposing the organization to damages, and he might also face personal liability. There are “procedural fairness” rights that officers have in relation to their employment, trade obligations that prevent elected officials from interfering in procurement, and collective agreements, human resource policies etc. that may also impact on the scenario above.

The comments by the Councillor are also a form of bullying. By definition, bullying is persistent unwelcome behaviour, mostly using unwarranted or invalid criticism, nitpicking, and fault-finding. It can also involve exclusion, isolation, being singled out and treated differently, being shouted at, humiliated, excessive monitoring, having verbal and written warnings imposed, and much more. In the workplace, bullying usually focuses on distorted or fabricated allegations of underperformance.

## **Happyville scenario – CAO's response to concerns raised by managers.**

To break this cycle of bullying, you have to take constructive action. Unless you act to break the pattern, it will continue. The managers involved in each scenario did the right thing in telling the CAO, John Doe, what had happened. An individual who perceives bullying or harassment should report the circumstances to the person identified in their workplace policy, their supervisor, or a delegated manager. If concerns are minimized, individuals should proceed to the next level of management. John Doe also did the right thing by supporting the managers, and noting that he would address the concerns.

Local governments, like all organizations, have an obligation to all employees to ensure a safe and productive work environment and a healthy workplace. Being clear on what is acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour in the workplace and taking action to confront unacceptable behaviour is critically important. This commitment must come from the top. The bully has to be reminded that bullying is a disciplinary offence and repeated incidents may render them liable to a formal procedure, which in this case could result in legal action.

When communicating concerns about unacceptable behaviour, do so in private and use “I” statements, not “you” statements. Here is an example of a conversation starter for a first attempt to have constructive dialogue and bring your concern to the attention of the bully. *“I'm disappointed in the working relationship between*

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## Advice From The Experts: When the Bully is your Boss

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*staff and Council and how we communicate. We come to work each day, enthusiastic, and with the goal to be highly productive and when we are belittled publicly and our competency and integrity is questioned it is de-motivating and negatively affects our performance. It's not a win-win situation for anyone. How can we improve the way we work together?"*

This direct confrontation can be startlingly effective. It's also a good idea to follow up on the conversation in an email with a summary of the situation that was offensive, and a focus on a commitment to support mutual respect. It should be factual and not emotional. This email should be blind copied to a personal email address for purposes of documentation retention to keep a record.

**Happyville Scenario: Mayor bullies and belittles CAO with "address me as Your Worship" comment, the demand that the CAO speak to him before talking to Councillors, the multitude of emails and administrative nitpicking, his direction to deal with parking tickets and firing the CAO without proper notice or procedures.**

While bullying is a form of aggression, the actions can be both obvious and subtle. A comment such as "address me as Your Worship" and "get my permission before you speak to individual Councillors" could be an intimidation and control tactic. John Doe at this point might respond with something along the lines of "*You sound annoyed—what's happened?*"

**Happyville Scenario: Mayor involving himself in detailed operational tasks and administrative areas of responsibility.**

As indicated in the exchanges between John Doe and the Mayor, there appears to be a lack of clarity as to the defined roles for both staff and Council members. Council members who are strong, influential and sometimes autocratic may try to circumvent the rest of Council and attempt to direct staff in fulfilling their own agendas. It's important to establish roles and responsibilities early—ideally shortly after the inaugural Council meeting. Council needs to understand its role as policy-makers rather than administrators, and that all members of Council are equal.

John Doe's response was excellent: "*... I will certainly look into these items. I'd also like to set up a time to meet with you to work out some of the details about the roles for Council and staff and how we can work together to meet our responsibilities,*" responded John, quite calmly.

**Happyville Scenario: Abusive language and attacks on staff.**

Employees have the right to expect to be treated with respect at work. The organization also has a legal obligation to protect its employees from harassment pursuant to grounds outlined in the Human Rights Code. In this scenario, Happyville would benefit from establishing a written Code of Conduct. This would help to

ensure that Council and staff share a common commitment to a respectful workplace. The Code of Conduct must also address how to respond to behaviour that contravenes the workplace standards, which could include legal action.

Another recommendation is to encourage Council and senior staff to meet at least annually to review their communication and working relationships. Some local governments are adding this to their strategic and business planning process as they recognize that leading as a team in the local government context (with the unique Council/staff relationships) is particularly challenging, and role clarity on an ongoing basis is critical. The goal in these sessions is to celebrate what's working, but also to readjust if necessary. It also provides guidelines for how situations will be addressed if needed. It's important to discuss the conflict resolution process *before* it is needed. This includes options to engage a third party to assist if the relationship has gone significantly off track.

**Happyville scenario: Councillor trying to force hiring daughter, including direct threats.**

Bullies use direct and indirect methods to coerce, intimidate and get their way. A direct threat is delivered personally, without apology or qualification, and with emotional force. An indirect threat is dressed up or disguised in some way in an attempt to insulate the person making the threat from any consequences. Direct threats expressly or implicitly suggest harm to the target. For instance, "*...you either hire her, or I'll see you fired.*"

As public servants, Council members must meet high ethical standards in the conduct of their official duties and faithfully fulfill the responsibilities of their offices, regardless of their personal or financial interests. The broad powers given to local government in the Community Charter are balanced, in part, by the enhanced ethical standards for elected officials. They were designed in consultation with the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) and are in keeping with the provisions of the provincial Members Conflict of Interest Act. These standards apply to all elected officials in local government. The legislation addresses conflict of interest, inside influence, outside influence, exceptions from conflict restrictions, gifts, contracts, and use of insider information.

This scenario includes an attempt to use nepotism, which is defined as using position to make recommendations regarding employment of family or friends. Section 102 (restrictions on inside influence) prohibits a member of Council from using his or her office to attempt to influence a decision of the municipality when he/she has a direct or indirect pecuniary interest in the matter. Because his daughter is the person involved, it would have a financial benefit to the Council member. A person who contravenes the ethical

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# tips & tactics

## Tips to Take Care of Yourself

If you are currently working in an environment where there is bullying and other unacceptable conduct, it is important to examine your options and consider the best way to protect yourself.

- > If you are a victim of a bully, it is your responsibility to take care of yourself by changing the dynamics of the relationship with your abuser.
- > Assess your situation. Make preparations to increase your options. There are really three choices when dealing with a bully.
  - You can take action to get the bully removed or sanctioned.
  - You can develop a plan to minimize the damage to yourself, including preparing to leave if necessary.
  - You can walk out of the door.
- > Check out the Code of Conduct for your organization and consider the culture to help determine your options and approach. E.g. if the bully is a member of Council, he/she is unlikely to be removed until a future election, if that. If this is the case, your leverage is limited.
- > Ask yourself the following:
  - Do others know about the bullying or is it done in public?
  - Is it tolerated as a part of the organization's normal working conditions?
- > If the organization sanctions it, explicitly or implicitly, you may need to make plans to leave. Things are unlikely to change for the better.
- > If the bullying is not an accepted part of the culture, if it is covert, or hidden from others, there may be a chance to get it to stop. In this case, report it through the process in place and take steps to document your experiences.

### Take Care of Yourself

- > Remind yourself this is not personal. You are just the latest target, and the abuse stems from the problems of the bully. It does not reflect upon you.
- > Talk to your friends and family about your situation at work. Seek their emotional support. Too often the victims of bullying isolate themselves out of shame or fear, and then they feel more trapped than ever.
- > Seek the advice of a trusted mentor who may have dealt with this situation before.
- > Talk to trusted coworkers or LGMA colleagues. You probably don't suffer alone, although a "serial" bully may prefer to pick off one subordinate at a time.

- > Seek out resources about bullying. There are books and websites about workplace bullying. These resources have a lot of detailed advice. Visit [www.bullyinginstitute.org](http://www.bullyinginstitute.org) or [www.bullybusters.org](http://www.bullybusters.org) for more tips on how to deal with a bullying situation.
- > Do your job and do it well. The workplace bully wants you to fail and when you don't, he or she will be defeated.
- > Make sure your superiors are aware of your work. Workplace bullies often try to spread the word that you are not doing your job well and will even go as far as to report the smallest infractions to your boss. Your actions will carry more weight than his or her words.
- > Consider taking time off to regroup. If you're having emotional or physical reactions, consult a mental health professional.
- > Consider your options and make a choice. If the culture supports or rewards bullying, seriously consider if this environment is right for you.
- > There is no guarantee that anyone will do the right thing. When you decide to take action, be prepared for conditions to worsen. In that case, your most effective course of action is to remove yourself from a hopeless situation.

### Be Proactive

- > Your greatest vulnerability comes from the fact that you feel that you have no options. Change the dynamics by creating options for yourself.
  - Line up references before you bring the issue to a head.
  - Create a financial cushion for yourself if possible.
  - Start your preliminary networking before you raise the issue publicly at work.
- > Even if the end result is a difficult transition, you will be serving your best interests in the long run by refusing to tolerate such abuse.
- > Determine your exit strategy—even if you don't need it in the end. Do you want to seek out a lawyer for a possible lawsuit or do you want to figure out a way to quit in a manner that does not call attention to the situation? There are advantages to getting out without burning any bridges when seeking future employment, although some people prefer to take the legal route. This is a big decision, so do your research. Having a reputation of suing an employer, no matter how legitimate, may hinder your future job search. A lawyer may help you determine how good of a case you have. Not all bullying is considered illegal, and making an exit scene can have negative long-term implications to future employment even if it makes you feel better in the short-term.

## Advice From The Experts: When the Bully is your Boss

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standards provisions in the Community Charter may be disqualified from holding public office unless the contravention was done inadvertently or because of an error in judgment made in good faith. Section 110 (circumstances in which a person is disqualified from office) sets out that a person who is disqualified cannot run until the next general local election if the Supreme Court finds that he or she is found to be in contravention of the rules. This behaviour would also be in violation of the oath taken by Council members which says, in part, "I will faithfully perform the duties of my office, and will not allow any private interest to influence my conduct in public matters."

### Happyville Scenario: Mayor directing staff to take action that contravenes the Community Charter.

Some workplaces that have dealt specifically with conduct issues (through training, policy etc.) are now starting to add specific policies that encourage staff to seek external legal opinions on specific decisions or directives by individual members of Council. All of Council is made aware of the policy that managers are expected to follow in these situations, and it allows Council as a whole to assess the risk. These legal opinions can assist staff in dealing with those issues where the decisions or actions of elected officials put the organization (and the elected official) at risk.

### At the end of the day...

Unfortunately, not everyone in a leadership role is a good leader. Some people abuse their power simply because they can, while others simply do not understand where they are going wrong. There are steps managers can take to address these behaviours in the workplace, even when the bullying comes from Council. There are also proactive measures like team-building and establishing clear policies that can help develop a respectful, supportive workplace. (For more information, see *Tips and Tactics for Organizations*, on page 13.)

There is also a growing trend in Councils investing in their leadership skills. One example is an upcoming leadership session at the LGLA Conference in February that is designed for Council members. The session focuses on the importance of being strong leaders individually, but also the challenge of collectively leading the organization in partnership with staff.

These are all positive steps to help prevent experiences like those in Happyville. For more information, see the *Tips and Tactics* for organizations, individuals and conflict resolution.

Many thanks to our experts for their input on *Happyville* and the *Tips and Tactics*.

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# tips & tactics

## Resolving Council-Staff Conflicts

### Agree There Is a Problem

- > Each side, Council and staff, needs to agree that there is a gap in their working relationship and that it affects how the local government is being managed. The subtle and draining effects of a trust and teamwork problem may need to be highlighted.

### See Both Sides

- > Consider using a third party to assist with this phase, as it provides an independent review, expert advice and assistance to safely explore issues and concerns.
- > Ideally, this process will involve confidential interviews, observing open and in-camera Council/staff meetings, surveys, and other approaches that can help to scope out the extent and shape of the issues. It provides a mechanism to highlight how the issues are affecting the local government's ability to deliver services. A summary of the issues and concerns on both sides can also provide a framework to determine what Council and staff should keep doing, stop doing, and start doing to improve working relationships.

### Agree on the Issues and Opportunities

- > Council and senior management need to work together, ideally at a weekend retreat, with the following objectives:
  - Strengthen trust and teamwork between Council and administration.

- Clarify roles and responsibilities of Council and administration.
- Establish a foundation/process for priority setting, planning, and budgeting.
- Openly discuss the perceptions and data gathered from both sides, brainstorm potential action plans, review model roles and responsibilities documents from other municipalities, agree on what the group wants to see, and establish priorities for the coming year.

### Get Management and Council to Strengthen Their Teams

- > Hold separate team-building sessions for senior management and Council. These build upon the joint session's goals and outcomes. Each group needs to address the issues that most people know have been blocking progress but haven't been addressed, as well as defining roles, responsibilities, and priorities.

### Bring it all Together

- > Now the top two layers of management can get together again to finalize their roles and responsibilities, address issues and set priorities.
- > Plan and schedule ongoing improvement programs (such as leadership training), to review/assess processes, core values, meeting and operational ground rules.
- > Establish action plans and follow-up dates.

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# tips & tactics

## Building a Respectful Workplace

### Establish Code of Conduct:

- > Establish a working committee to develop a proposed Code of Conduct that will help to ensure that members of Council, individuals appointed to committees and local government employees share a common basis of acceptable behaviour.
- > The Code of Conduct establishes standards that enhance public confidence that staff, elected officials and appointed representatives operate from a base of integrity and courtesy. This includes policies related to bullying, harassment and discrimination.
- > As part of this Code of Conduct, all members of Council and employees will be required to comply with the policies to ensure that all persons are treated fairly in the workplace, and are assured of an environment that is free of discrimination and of personal and sexual harassment.
- > The Code of Conduct should also address lack of compliance and provide the means to legally reprimand individuals, including options such as suspended remuneration.

### Clarify Lines of Responsibility and Governance:

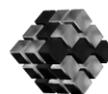
- > Provide incoming Council members with information on their roles and responsibilities as policy-makers as defined in the Community Charter, and the difference between this policy role and administration done by staff.
- > As the elected branch of municipal government, Council's role is to represent the community at large and ensure that the wishes of the constituents are considered when developing a vision for the future direction of the community.

- > The administration implements the resolutions and policies approved by Council and carries out the day-to-day business of the municipality. This separation of policy-making and administration is based on the tenet that the main mandate of Council is setting policy direction for the community.

### General Workplace Tips:

- > Encourage everyone in the workplace to act towards others in a respectful and professional manner.
- > Have a workplace policy in place that includes a reporting system.
- > Educate employees on what is considered bullying, why it is serious and where they can go for help.
- > Try to work out solutions before the situation gets serious or out of control.
- > Treat all complaints seriously, and deal with complaints promptly and confidentially.
- > Train supervisors and managers in how to deal with complaints and potential situations. Encourage them to address situations promptly whether or not a formal complaint has been filed.
- > Bring in an impartial third party help with the resolution, if necessary.
- > Do not ignore any potential problems.

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