

CREATING A CIVIL



DIALOGUE:

WITH EMPLOYEES, DEPARTMENTS AND THE PUBLIC

BY JANE DE COLGYLL



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ou are a town manager, and over the last two years you have worked with your board of selectmen as well as town departments, committees and commissions to come up with recommendations to save money in the municipal budget. You used an exhaustive and fair process to decide where appropriate cuts should be made. As a result, your town's finance department has been scaled back from five employees to three.

While the affected employees were all part of the process, it comes as no surprise that the surviving employees are having some difficulty. Overwhelmed by the amount of work that now must be done by fewer people, the remaining employees are exhibiting symptoms of disengagement and anxiety. You find them complaining about how much work they have to do, gossiping, and comparing their situations with other departments that have remained fully staffed. You notice more absenteeism, abuse of sick leave, and low morale. Their negativity is spilling over to their interactions with other departments and the public, as evidenced by curt answers to questions posed by other staff and less-than-stellar customer service. More formal complaints are filed over issues that years ago would have been settled directly between the conflicted parties.

Other departments continue to make demands on the finance department, but the other employees feel unwelcome in the negative environment and seek answers to their questions through other means in order to avoid contact with the finance employees. There is a risk of all town departments developing a "silo" mentality, thereby weakening communication among departments. It has become hard for all teams to see and understand the bigger picture.

Residents, meanwhile, find that it takes longer for the finance department to do its job, and they have witnessed poor customer service or uncivil behavior. As we know, it only takes one bad experience in town hall for negative public opinion to be formed and generalized to all departments.

As a town leader, what can be done to turn this situation around? There is a tendency to want to throw up your hands, say, "It is what it is!" and go on with the important work of managing the budget process, putting aside the frustrating human drama around you. To do so, however, is to neglect an important leadership opportunity. You have the ability to set the tone of civility for your entire organizational structure. You can help employees move through their disengagement and anxiety to engagement and civility. You can encourage departments to create collaborative relationships with other departments, boards, committees and commissions, and help your residents appreciate the excellent work your town employees are doing for the community.

Local officials have the ability to set the tone for community discourse by effectively communicating up, down and across—up to residents, down to each employee, and across to departments, boards, committees and commissions.

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Communicating Down

Let's look at that theoretical finance department employee: disengaged, anxious, worried about losing his or her job, fretting about the amount of work he or she has to do, poorly motivated, and complaining about others. No community can afford to have unhappy, unproductive workers. So what can be done to turn this situation around? As a community leader, you have an opportunity, through communication, to create an atmosphere where employees feel important and motivated.

The following are some strategies you may use to keep employees engaged, reassured and productive:

- No matter what your position within the organization, get to know every employee by name and talents. They will feel valued and connected.
- Make sure you keep the “big picture” in view for all employees, establishing board, town hall, departmental and employee objectives that support the larger goals of the town.
- Honestly explain how the decisions in city or town hall affect every employee's work and life.
- Maintain regular all-staff meetings and departmental huddles.
- Share information, and repeat it when necessary. When they are feeling overwhelmed, it's hard for employees to take in information; repeating the message is vital for understanding.
- Be sure to clear up misinformation quickly.
- Invite a collaborative process with employees that values input from all.
- Promote an “open door” policy and be there to listen. Some town leaders have identified certain hours during which they will be fully available for one-on-one discussions.
- Publicly recognize individual employee contributions to the work of the city or town. This may be done in a public meeting, a news article in the local paper, or in your remarks on cable TV.
- Encourage a culture of creativity from bottom to top. Seek ideas from employees on projects you have in mind. Make sure all stakeholders have the opportunity to share their knowledge and expertise before final decisions are made.
- Build morale with employee-driven, low-cost or no-cost fun activities. While these creative opportunities for social interaction may appear to be time-consuming fluff, they can actually be productive in fostering a feeling of well-being and trust among employees that is hard to measure in dollars and cents.
- Promote employee career development by encouraging cross-training among under-resourced departments.
- Model fairness and equity in your words and deeds.



Communicating Across

Collectively, city and town departments need to know what is happening on all levels of local government. The open sharing of information helps to build a sense of connectedness throughout the organization, which promotes collaboration among departments and creative problem-solving.

The following are some ideas that may help to keep information moving across departments, boards, committees and commissions:

- Make it a priority to meet monthly with department heads, no matter how disparate their locations, in order to keep everyone “in the loop.” Hold these meetings in various department settings and provide food to encourage attendance.
- Offer a clear agenda, allowing time in each meeting for discussing the future.
- Share examples of challenges that departments have overcome.
- Applaud individual department and intradepartmental successes.
- Expect conflict, but move quickly to find common ground and resolution when conflict occurs.
- Demonstrate your willingness to be open to ideas from all department heads.
- Offer incentives to departments for finding creative, low-cost or no-cost ways to work together.
- Create intradepartmental electronic tools for clear communication on a weekly basis.
- Visit each department for a few hours at least twice per year, working side-by-side with employees to learn what they do.
- Plan an annual department-head retreat to focus on the best ways to build teamwork and collaborate effectively across departments.



Communicating Up

In his article “Community Building: How to Do It, Why It Matters,” published by ICMA Press, Ed Everett points out that people need to feel that they belong to something bigger than themselves. This is not a new concept, but Everett shines a spotlight on ideas that help to move us toward civility and the civilizing force of true community. He discusses the evolution of local government and public involvement, pointing out that town halls in early history were viewed as the center of the community. At that time, citizens were active in their own governance. Since about 1970, however, citizens have been more likely to treat town hall like a vending machine, Everett says, expecting services for their tax dollars just as we expect a product when we put money in a vending machine. What do we do when the vending machine is out of candy? We shake it, and maybe kick it! How can we change this view back to that of vitally interested citizenry engaged in the life of their community, proud of its city or town hall, invested in making their hometown a safe and fun place to live?

The following are a number of strategies for addressing this issue and improving the city or town’s image in the eyes of the public. (Many of these ideas were offered by local officials during the workshop “Best Practices for Top Recurring Municipal Problems,” which AllOne Health presented during the MMA’s Annual Meeting in January.)

- Make sure the public is not only informed about the positive contributions of municipal employees to the operations of the city or town, but also that their opinions are heard and respectfully considered.
- Make the city or town website accessible and interactive 24/7 for local residents to communicate with municipal offices, voice concerns, learn what each department is doing, find forms, etc.
- Collect email addresses of residents and use them periodically to send important news items touting municipal successes and challenges.
- Institute an “open door” policy for residents, with specific times that department heads will be available.
- Make sure every department responds directly and quickly to resident complaints.
- Conduct sit-down interviews highlighting a variety of municipal employees on a regular basis for viewing on cable and/or print follow-up articles in the local paper.
- Create and promote special events unique to your city or town (e.g., a farmers market or holiday parade).
- Erect a highly visible electronic community bulletin board, near the city or town entrance or on main intersections, reminding residents and the visiting public of important local events.
- Share some aspect of local history at key municipal meetings, publish historic notes in the local newspaper, or set aside a special section of the city or town website for historic notes.
- Include local history in the grade-school curriculum.
- Plan an open house where department heads describe what each department is doing.
- Promote good-natured competitive community involvement in a “cleanup day.”
- Confer annual volunteer awards for community service/civic involvement.
- Hold a student artwork contest on the theme “What I like best about my city or town,” and use the winning submissions to produce a city or town calendar.
- Plan a historic house and garden tour in your city or town.



Meeting Human Needs

In the last few years, AllOne Health has worked with municipal leaders on the human challenges they face as they trim local budgets and attempt to meet the growing expectations and challenges from residents, governing bodies and employees. The list of top recurring problems cited by municipal leaders is daunting, but on closer inspection, some human themes emerge.

Municipal officials can take the lead to model the voice of reason and civility at every level of human interaction—with employees, in departments and with the public—by effectively communicating up, down and across. Once the basic human need to feel valued has been met, employees, departments and the public can become increasingly civil and engaged in the work of the city or town. 🌟