



Massachusetts Municipal Association

MMA BEST PRACTICES SERIES

Recommendations for Effective Local Government Administration and Management from MMA Policy Committees

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MMA Policy Committee on Personnel and Labor Relations

Best Practice: Conduct and Civility of Public Officials

Local leaders remain at the forefront of democratic governance, addressing the public's concerns, developing and implementing policies, and setting the tone for civic engagement. Whereas the concerns of constituents are often diverse and divided, maintaining a public forum where people can disagree through civil debate remains at the core of a healthy democratic process. By listening, respecting people's opinions, remaining open to new ideas and points of view, and disagreeing constructively, local leaders can refine ideas and reach common ground to create meaningful policy. This means preserving civility in all discussions and debates, while protecting the rights to free speech. Poor behavior by local officials impedes the democratic process, encourages hard feelings and divisiveness, contributes to voter alienation and aversion to government, and creates a liability for cities and towns. Fostering a climate of respect among public officials and with residents is at the heart of work performed in the public interest.

Elected and appointed officials must understand that, regardless of their intentions and whether they are an appointing authority, their interactions with municipal staff can expose the city or town to liability and lead to serious legal consequences for the city or town. Even good-faith actions by elected or appointed officials could violate collective bargaining agreements or other policies or laws. Respect and professionalism in all public and private dealings with municipal staff and other elected and appointed officials is essential.

The following are recommended items to include in a code of conduct:

- Conduct at public meetings.
- Use of parliamentary procedure.
- Responsibility and behavior toward fellow members of a public body.
- Responsibility and behavior toward municipal administration.
- Responsibility and behavior toward employees and volunteers of the city or town.
- Responsibility and behavior toward members of the public and their rights, including public comment policies adhering with the recent [SJC Barron case](#).

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- Communication expectations.
- Conflict of interest and standard of ethics of members of a public body.
- Adherence to the city or town's social media policy.
- Statement of commitment to and understanding of the code of conduct and an acknowledgment of receipt.
- Reporting mechanism (e.g., report to chair of Select Board), including the procedure for filing a complaint, and a process for resolving conflicts, which could be a city or town's harassment policy.
- System of communication among members of the governing body regarding incidents of misbehavior and complaints, and communication to the chief executive officer.
- Enforcement of the code of conduct. This may include a decision by the governing body to publicly reprimand or not to indemnify an individual who acts inappropriately.

Municipal Examples:

- [Town of Carver Select Board](#)
- [Town of Harvard](#)
- [Town of Holden](#)
- [Town of Littleton](#)
- [Town of Wellesley](#)

Resources

- [MIIA Code of Conduct Guidelines](#)
- [Robert's Rules of Order](#)
- [Beyond Civility: From Public Engagement to Problem Solving](#), An Action Guide for City Leaders, National League of Cities Center for Research and Innovation, January 2011
- [The Institute for Civility in Government](#)
- [The Civility Center](#)

Note: This Best Practices recommendation builds on and updates a recommendation from 2020: [Conduct and Civility of Public Officials](#).