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## INGREDIENTS FOR EFFECTIVE COUNCIL MEETINGS

by Donald P. Lacy

The most important goal for each council member is to make "good decisions," that is to say, decisions that produce good results. Results-oriented decisions are best defined as those that meet the needs of the community represented. No absolute definition of "good" can be clearly established since "good" is determined by the individual decision-makers and community members. In one sense, good decisions are those that are accepted by the community and tend to reflect the values and interests of the community.

One essential ingredient for making "good decisions" is the council meeting. Effective council meetings will meet community needs and satisfy community residents. The effective council meeting has three basic dimensions that require attention: content, process and style.

### CONTENT

Content refers to making the right decision. The votes on major decisions are seldom unanimous. Thus, right is determined by a majority of those present and voting. It is not the outcome of the vote that makes the decision "right." Rather it is all that has gone into arriving at the individual vote that makes for good decisions.

Three essential elements play a significant role in making the right decisions. Time is required to collect, process and evaluate information relating to each decision. Thus, some council decisions may begin in a work session, appear for first reading at a subsequent council meeting and appear for a second reading at another time.

Allowing sufficient time to evaluate the potential outcomes and impacts of council decisions is important. Councils that appear to move in haste with little time devoted to discussion or evaluation may lose credibility with the community served.

Another essential element for making the right decisions is that each council member does the necessary homework. Council members must come to meetings prepared. They must read the staff reports and background material necessary to understand and

evaluate the decisions. There is no substitute for doing one's homework well in advance of a meeting.

Many managers encourage individual council members to ask questions for clarification or additional information prior to the council meeting. Local protocols and procedures will determine when and how such inquiries are to be made, but it is always better to seek information prior to the meetings than to use significant amounts of time during meetings to seek information that may not be readily available.

If council members sense a genuine and widespread problem with the information available, then a motion to table, return to staff or delay might be appropriate. Councils, however, should avoid the routine use of such delaying tactics. If too many issues are tabled or referred for future study, a lack of homework or dissatisfaction with staff reports is probably indicated.

Good council/staff relations are the third essential element for making the right decision. A manager and staff can and will provide the necessary information to help council members arrive at a decision.

The interaction between council and staff should be established and understood by all council members and staff. Maintaining a professional relationship between the council, the manager and other staff with protocols that are understood by all is important. Council members must seek the information necessary to make decisions, but each council member must remember that requests for information should be reasonable and within the range of capabilities of staff to collect and deliver. Above all, council members should remember that managers, not the councils, direct the day-to-day operations of the local government.

### PROCESS

Process is perhaps the most widely discussed dimension relating to council meetings. Process refers to making decisions the right way. A good process begins with a well prepared agenda that has an order

of business that suits the local community. Many versions of agenda structure can be found, each with its strong advocates.

Some agendas place public comments first; others place public comments last. Some councils make room for public hearings for each separate item that requires a council decision. Some hold public hearings as a separate meeting. No one structure for an agenda is ideal.

Process involves more than agendas, however. A meeting must be well managed, start on time, end at a reasonable hour and not be too short. Agendas and documents should be distributed well in advance of the meeting (five days). Some reasonable version of parliamentary procedure must be followed. Debate and dialogue should be permitted but should not get out of hand. In short, the meeting process must have some control and order so that time is managed effectively. Many guides to effective meeting processes are available for council members to study. Councils should regularly evaluate the procedures used to conduct meetings and make changes to the procedures and processes where necessary.

Effective meetings depend upon the development of processes which facilitate the efficient use of time but provide ample opportunity for dialogue and discussion. Meetings must have a structure that is understood and predictable but must provide sufficient flexibility to accommodate those unexpected needs that arise during the decision making process.

In short, the processes and procedures used for council meetings require regular evaluation. No single uniform procedure has been found to meet the needs of each council. Thus, the processes and procedures used by each council should be evaluated regularly and changed if necessary in order to make meetings function effectively and efficiently.

## **STYLE**

Style is a dimension of council meetings that receives very little attention from decision-makers. Style refers to the image, the atmosphere and the ambiance that surrounds council meetings. The way council tends to operate in time projects an image to the public, the press, the staff and to the audience.

The atmosphere surrounding meetings can be tense, hostile and combative, or it can be relaxed,

friendly and peaceful. The image projected may be one of not listening, aloofness or insensitivity, or council may be perceived as good listeners, open, sensitive and flexible. Some councils appear to be caught in constant tangles of parliamentary procedure, trivial pursuit, instant replay or insider jokes and comments. Other councils project a very smooth, positive and professional image.

A community develops its perception of its council and its government based on the image that is projected. Perception becomes the reality for that community. Often the council will develop its own self-image based upon community perception. Thus, it is important to evaluate and understand the collective image of the council over time.

"Good meetings" with appropriate attention to content and process will create a positive image that builds an effective local style. It may seem appropriate at the time or even humorous to create conflict, make clever remarks or play "gottcha" with the manager or other council members. The short-term impact of open conflict, too much informality or frequent games of one-upmanship may not be very harmful in isolation. However, a consistent style of conduct and behavior that produces a negative image can significantly diminish the effectiveness of the council to make widely respected decisions.

Even the physical environment plays an important role in the image and style projected by the council. Well-lighted, comfortable rooms with good seating and sound systems help create a positive atmosphere for council decisions. The atmosphere created by the physical surroundings can help project the positive images that councils need as they make important decisions.

Attention to the many details and guidelines for developing effective content, process and style for council meetings are beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, councils need to regularly evaluate their meetings. Changes in the approach to making decisions, alterations in the process, and the development of a style that produces a positive image can change the attitude of the community toward government, its policies and its decision-makers. The annual council retreat is a good time to begin the process of evaluating the operating protocols and procedures of the council.

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