

Building Rapport with a New Council

Location: Nova Scotia

Topic(s): Council & CAO Relationship, Council Changeover

Please describe the situation.

We have all experienced the ups and downs of the Council/CAO relationship. Following an election which saw significant change to the occupants of the Council table, it quickly became obvious that change was in the air. We had left behind, mainly due to retirements, a well-functioning Council that understood and appreciated our respective roles and the positive results that can occur when it works.

What was the current political environment? What factors led to the situation? What were the events that unfolded in this particular scenario?

Our new councillors, who now formed the majority of Council, were ready to sweep Town Hall clean. They came with the preconceived ideas that all the things we did were done wrong and believed we did very few things right.

They did not understand or appreciate the role of councillors or Council, and didn't much care. They simply wanted to change things immediately without process or discussion and hoped to do this by micro-managing all aspects of municipal operations. The final straw for me was when Councillors openly criticized staff in Council meetings and whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Council attended the Councillor training as provided by their provincial association and other training opportunities that the Province made available. None of this resonated with them. They knew better but were not prepared to settle for their role. They wanted to manage and change everything.

How did you respond to or address the situation?

My initial reaction to this change was to close shop and attempt to control and limit Council communication with all staff members. I viewed this new Council's approach as an attack on our organization and decided that a strategy would be to bring this deteriorating relationship to the edge of the cliff. Maybe this wasn't a wise career move. This did, however, force us to the next step which turned out to be very beneficial. I recommended that we needed help and suggested the formation of a committee to review our current operations and develop a go-forward plan. The committee would be made up of supportive and non-supportive members of Council and myself as CAO. I further suggested that we required some outside professional help. Council agreed that we work at finding a solution and supported both requests. We hired a local government consultant, interviewed Council, staff and members of the public and provided a go-forward plan that everyone could support.

What lessons did you learn from this scenario?

This was an “ah ha” moment for all of us. Following what can best be called a necessary intervention, we went from having the worst Council/CAO relationship to one of my best. A meeting of the minds and an appreciation for each other’s roles and responsibilities developed. I learned that although we both have our distinctive roles and responsibilities, there is grey area in the middle that we both periodically visit. And that’s ok, if its properly managed.

What advice would you give to someone going through a similar situation?

For us to move forward we needed help. Be strategic, get in front of it and lead the process. Sometimes we need to put our careers on the line. For me this was a win /win option. If this worked out, great, I enjoyed the Town and the great people who work there. If it didn’t, and my leaving was the result of this process, that was ok as well. Sometimes we just can’t make it work and personalities can complicate the situation. Sometimes the fit between CAO and Council determines how successful a relationship and the future of an organization can be.

There is no hard-fast rule in dealing with such situations. As a CAO you should be prepared to find common ground and build on early successes. Know when you require outside help. Having outside professional help, chosen by the committee turned out to be what we required to move forward.