

Council-Staff Relations

Location: Nova Scotia

Topic(s): Council Ethics, Council & Staff Relationships

Please describe the situation.

The Mayor was receiving information from somebody about a certain staff member that was very uncomplimentary. The Mayor walked into my office and demanded that I address the issue that was purported to be true. When I asked the Mayor what evidence there was for this and who she received her information from, the Mayor's response was she was told the matter "in confidence". I argued that I was not prepared to talk to the "offending" employee without properly validating the complaint with the person who made the allegation. She insisted that I should act on it on the basis of her word, I refused.

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

The Mayor knows a lot of people in the small town and personal agendas, rumours and innuendo fly around with people believing anything they hear. The particular staff person was only doing his job but people did not like the fact that he took a position contrary to theirs. The accusations they made were his attitude is poor, he has major morale issues in his department, his staff all complain about him, and he should be fired. There was no evidence of any of this from my close observations of his department or his staff in the past or present. But yes, I was aware of a couple of disgruntled employees who were recently disciplined.

How did you respond to or address the situation?

The Mayor asked me what she is supposed to do when people tell her things in confidence. My response was if she was told it in confidence she should keep it to herself, or if she wants me to act on it she should tell the person that the CAO would be advised about it and would contact him/her for details, or better still, the aggrieved person could come to me directly so I could ascertain the facts, properly document the issue and have it looked into. Key to that would be a follow up that we have taken corrective action to prevent a future occurrence or alternatively, that we looked into it and the evidence did not bear out the complaint.

What lessons did you learn from this scenario?

I could have been a tad more diplomatic with the Mayor in how I conveyed my message, however, she has gotten to trust me because I have been consistently honest and truthful about my advice. More importantly, I should have shared with her that I am in her confidence circle and we have an equal role in addressing organizational or political issues and when people tell her things "in confidence" we are part of that confidence circle.

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

Have a conversation with elected officials on how we can take a lot of pressure off them by giving us the "bad cop" role. That is, they receive a complaint "in confidence" and they let the complainant know that the CAO is in the confidence circle. We call the person and assess the situation. We can then follow up after the review on what our findings were. This is about finding a political win for the elected officials by taking their complaint seriously but also by the complainant hearing that their elected official also wanted results. Whatever the outcome, whether in favour of or against the allegations made, all parties look good when a complaint is looked into.