



50 Questions for #CAMA50

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Aside from your current position, can you think of a Mayor you have worked with that stood out from the rest? What did you learn from them and how did they help you in your approach with your Council?

I have had the privilege of working with many great municipal leaders in my career. One that stands out for me is a former Warden of a County in Ontario. I came to the County following the departure of the CAO, Treasurer, Director of Human Resources and Clerk. Council had commissioned a governance review from George Cuff and a series of recommendations for change were included in the report. It was a great opportunity to establish a new leadership team and implement meaningful change.

For me, this Warden was an ideal leadership partner. He provided me the space and autonomy I needed to implement substantial change and establish new policies and processes while at the same time asking the appropriate challenging questions to ensure I was meeting Council's expectations. I felt that I could trust his sincerity and his intentions. I was comfortable that if something needed to be said that he would say it to my face. We had an honest and candid rapport.

It is not easy to enter a new organization and make fundamental changes to critical functions. The trust I had in his up-front nature provided the security I needed to take risks and challenge the status quo. I have tremendous respect for his integrity.

Is there a particular occasion in your career where you recall having to display resilience?

Many years ago, I was obligated to advise Council of a particular course of action the Warden was taking on a sensitive issue. Even though I did so in the proper way, it put a strain on my working relationship with my Warden. I asked to meet with him to explain that my job as CAO is to report to Council as a whole (not to any individual Council member) and that my position of trust with Council can never be compromised. For the rest of the Warden's term of office the relationship was professional but strained. Conversations were short and utilitarian.

It was difficult at the time as I believe a CAO can accomplish much more when there is a good relationship with the Warden or Mayor. However, I reminded myself that it would have been catastrophic if I had lost the trust of my Council by failing to notify them. Council must have trust in staff. I knew I had done my job and I hung on to that to weather the storm. I was fortunate to have a good relationship with our municipal solicitor who would often remind me that the price for doing the right thing is worth cost.

What is one thing you wish more people knew about local government?

I wish people knew that the people working in local government care deeply about their community and take great pride in serving their neighbours. It is not just a paycheck. We are passionate about what we do. It can be a thankless job that is subjected to a lot of public scrutiny and "armchair coaching". Our level of caring overcomes those negative pressures, but it takes a toll on us as people.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way you lead your organization?

The COVID pandemic has caused us to focus even more on the mental health and stress levels of our staff. Prior to the pandemic we would have said that we were doing a lot to support the well-being of our staff...and that was true. However, due to the pandemic we have seen the need in a clearer and more urgent way. The impact of our new programs such as Peer Support "Its Ok to Not be OK" have proven to some, who might have previously been skeptical, that we need to bolster our staff.

I believe that staff also have developed an increased level of expectation of care from management. The bar has been raised on both sides. We have responded with new programs such as Peer Support and a Staff-to-Staff Recognition program and we modified our Flex Time policy to allow for continued work-from-home options for staff. The pandemic has brought people more into focus.

Many organizations have had to adapt their programs and services due to the COVID pandemic. Is there one change that you made that has created an improvement or efficiency that will remain post-pandemic?

Like every municipality, we have embraced ZOOM meetings and truly appreciate the efficiency and cost savings that technology provides. Our provincial legislation has been adapted to allow for virtual Council meetings and hybrid meetings. I am in a County that has a mix of urban and rural and it can take two hours to drive from end to end so the time and travel cost savings is substantial.

In Ontario we are responsible for administering provincial offenses court and had to quickly create a virtual court platform at the onset of Covid. With virtual court we can process more cases and respondents do not have to travel to our location to attend in person. As most of the cases are traffic ticket related and our County borders the 401 highway, many of our clients live outside our local area and sometimes in other provinces. We are hoping that virtual court remains an option after the pandemic ends as it is much more convenient for the public and for staff.