



50 Questions for #CAMA50

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What is your favourite quote?

Three of my favourite poems are ***The Road Not Taken*** by Robert Frost, ***The Man in The Glass*** by Peter Dale Wimbrow Sr and ***The Dash*** by Linda Ellis (I encourage you to read all these), of which I could draw excerpts, but that wouldn't give a true reflection of my favourite quote.

My parents have been my role models my entire life and I would not be where I am today, without their support and guidance. My Dad always imparts his words of wisdom on my siblings and I, and his words are not lost. If I had to pick one (and there are many), it would be "***You Are a Chaplin, Not A Melon***". This is an adaptation of the quote Rodney Dangerfield told his son in the movie – ***Back to School***.

You'll have to watch the movie to understand the context. My Dad adapted it and it serves us all well. In summary it means – *you can do anything you put your mind to, you will achieve greatness and never let the person beat you to be yourself*. The role of a CAO is demanding, a tight rope that you walk alone.

You are under scrutiny and pressure each day. Competing deadlines, demands of Council, keeping a team motivated, spreading those scarce resources to serve the residents daily, long hours and sometimes little thanks. It is lonely at the top. Decisions must be made in the best interests of the organization – at times, difficult ones.

You are responsible for implementing the directive of Council, even when your opinion differs. Sometimes you second guess yourself, you find yourself under intense pressure to change a decision you made. As tough as it is, I stay the course, stay true to myself, and realize the impact I can have working collectively with my staff team. Working together, we will achieve greatness.

Local government has evolved quite a bit over the last 50 years. What is one positive change you have experienced in your career?

I have worked in municipal government for over sixteen years. There have been a lot of changes during that time, some good, some bad. If I was to single out one improvement or positive change – it would be citizen communication and engagement. While communication and engagement mean very different things, they both involve a municipality’s key stakeholder and whom we serve daily – the resident.

Years ago, it meant writing a letter to Council. Today, residents are in tune and follow what is happening in their municipality. They want to be heard – and they connect - via phone, email, social media, and presentations to Council. If they are passionate, impacted – they will become engaged, and will communicate. There are times when Council needs to hear from residents – budget, land use planning, feedback on levels of service and when developing plans.

Over the years, I have seen residents take a greater interest in their community. It is important to take the time to listen to our residents. While the final decision may not align with their opinion or request, residents will feel valued, respected, and heard. We must also consider – that different generations, communicate differently. Citizen engagement must be part of the process, not an afterthought or reaction.

Political acumen is so important for local government administrators. In your opinion, what are the three most critical attributes of having good political acumen?

To be able to survive and thrive as a CAO, you must be politically astute. The three most critical attributes of having good political acumen are: (1) building and maintaining relationships; (2) self-awareness; and (3) knowledge.

Working in municipal government can be the most rewarding form of public service. It’s where the ***“rubber hits the road”*** and you can make the greatest impact. To achieve the strategic vision of your municipality, you must work with numerous stakeholders – Council, staff, residents, businesses, community groups, other levels of government.

At times, a lot of personalities and a lot of opinions – sometimes at different ends of the decision spectrum. Sometimes emotions and conflict can be at an all-time high. All opinions are to be respected, you must be willing to resolve conflict, have difficult conversations, admit when mistakes are made - keeping the end goal in mind – to offer programs and services to residents in an efficient and effective manner.

You must be self-aware 365 days a year. Always conduct yourself with integrity and sincerity. You must be able to read a room, anticipate where the conversation is going, know when to speak and when to listen. You need to be able to see where the “landmines” are, to navigate “the pitfalls” and think strategically. Be respectful of the decision-making process and implement the directive of Council – irrespective of opinion.

To support your Council and staff team – you must have knowledge. This links back to developing partnerships and being self-aware as well. Knowledge of legislation, funding programs, professional development opportunities, group dynamics, trends, and best practices within municipal government. You must support and enable your staff to thrive and prosper within the organization. You want to lead the way and offer programs and services in the most efficient and effective manner possible. In addition to knowing – you must also understand – when to act and when not to. We must strive to be proactive, not reactive. Always **“walk your talk”**.

Self-care and work-life balance is important for anyone in a leadership role. What do you do for your “me” time, to take care of your mental and physical health?

Working for a smaller municipality, the CAO wears many hats at times. I have a strong work ethic and high expectations of myself. I sometimes did double or triple duty, when vacancies existed within the organization – feeling as CAO I had to do that, never asking for help, otherwise I would let the organization down. There was an expectation as well, that I would carry the load.

I was always an individual who put others ahead of myself – that was until the Fall of 2019, when I officially burnt out and had to take some time away. That was hard for me to do – but I had no choice really, I had nowhere else to turn.

Upon reflection it should never have gotten to that point - I should have asked for help sooner. I am not a rear-view mirror type of person. I learn the lesson and move forward. So, what did I learn? I am not a super woman, I can say no, I can ask for help. The biggest learning for me was – if you don't have your health – you have nothing else. How can I be good to my family and to my employer and employees, if I don't look after me? And for the first time in my life, it is all about me.

Your life is divided into four quadrants - health, self, family, and work. Prior to my burnout, mine was in the reverse order. Not anymore. I still have a strong work ethic, but I have a different perspective now. I look after me first. Some days I must reset, and I can now recognize that. My body and my son remind me!

What do I do for me now to take care of my mental and physical health? The first thing I did was purchase a personal cell phone – keeping the line between life and work separate. I walk, I meditate, I read, I journal, I listen to music, I practice yoga, I watch sports – Go Habs! I spend time with those that mean the most to me. I speak my mind and sometimes say no. I have started to do things on my bucket list. I have created boundaries.

Being in nature does wonders for my mind, body and soul. When I started on my journey back, I couldn't walk for 15 minutes – now I can walk up to 10 kilometers a day. I dug out those snowshoes I purchased five years ago and now use them – when the elements permit during the winter. During the summer months – I garden.

Life really is about balance and having no regrets. As CAO's we walk a tight rope every day. Find your balance – or as close as you can get and stay there. You want to work to live, not live to work. I am still on my journey back and am confident I can get there – it just takes time.

Local government leaders come from a variety of different professional backgrounds. In your opinion, what is one skill set/speciality that is essential for every CAO to possess or acquire?

When I commenced my CAO journey some fifteen years ago, most of my counterparts had either engineering or accounting backgrounds. I have an economic development background, with an undergraduate degree in science. Different education backgrounds bring different skillsets and strengths to the CAO role. I am a strong believer in lifelong learning – that your educational journey is never complete. You want to serve, be innovative and lead. That will require ongoing professional development and networking.

If there is one specialty that all CAO's need - it is the ability to develop and deliver plans. Council sets the directive, staff implements. We need to formalize how the Council vision will be operationalized and achieved. This ranges from identifying the required resources – human, financial and time, developing partnerships – within and across Departments, with other organizations, community groups or levels of government, developing contingency plans, how and when to communicate project updates to Council and the public, monitoring and evaluation. This continues into perpetuity to ensure a sustainable organization and community.