

Building Civility and Trust in Local Government

A NATIONAL INITIATIVE OF THE CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATORS



Administrative Excellence

Overview

Across Canada, municipal leaders are confronting rising incivility, strained Council-CAO relations and growing polarization in public life.

These challenges affect every order of government and threaten the foundation of respectful, effective local democracy.

In response, the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA) launched a **national engagement initiative** in 2025 to better understand these dynamics and identify constructive, educational solutions. The initiative was not about advocacy or assigning blame—it was about learning, sharing, and supporting both CAOs and elected officials in rebuilding civility and trust in local government.

About the Initiative

Following strong member feedback at the 2025 CAMA National Conference, the CAMA Board approved a national research effort focused on practical ways to strengthen governance culture across municipalities.

The work included:



Three national Think Tanks involving over 50 Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs) from across the country.



Confidential interviews with current and former elected officials.



Consultations with key partners such as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), the Canadian Urban Institute, Juice Inc., and other experts.

Together, these activities provided a cross-country snapshot of the realities faced by municipal administrators and elected officials – and revealed several consistent themes about the state of local governance in Canada.

Key Findings

Incivility Is an Emerging Systemic Concern

Participants noted that while experiences vary widely across municipalities, many are observing similar patterns that suggest a growing systemic concern within parts of Canada's governance culture. The decline of respectful debate, increased social media hostility, and blurred roles between Council and administration are affecting trust and effectiveness in some communities.

Governance Gaps and Role Confusion

Both CAOs and elected officials cited unclear boundaries between governance and administration as a leading cause of tension. Weak or inconsistent provincial oversight, the absence of mandatory governance training, and limited enforcement of Codes of Conduct leave municipalities vulnerable to dysfunction.

Human and Organizational Impacts

The personal and organizational toll is significant. Emotional exhaustion, reputational damage, staff turnover, and recruitment challenges are widespread. Many CAOs and elected officials described the strain on morale and wellbeing caused by ongoing conflict, misinformation, and lack of accountability.

Shared Desire for Solutions

Encouragingly, both administrators and elected officials expressed a genuine commitment to improving the tone and culture of local governance. They want practical tools, consistent training, and safe spaces for dialogue to rebuild respectful, functional relationships.



POLICIES

What Works: Promising Practices

Despite the challenges, CAOs across the country are implementing innovative strategies that show promise in strengthening civility and improving governance culture:

Visible Council Support	Public resolutions or statements backing staff can reset culture and demonstrate that harassment will not be tolerated.
Right-to-Disconnect and Communication Protocols	Setting boundaries on communication helps model respect and prevent burnout.
Use of Harassment and Occupational Health & Safety Law	Where Codes of Conduct are weak, statutory frameworks provide protection for staff and administrators.
Chair Training and Meeting Management	Strong, confident Chairs who enforce decorum set the tone for constructive debate and safe Council Chambers.
Peer and Resilience Supports	CAOs benefit from confidential peer networks, coaching, and access to mental-health resources that help sustain leadership under pressure.

CAMA'S Next Steps

Based on these findings, the CAMA Board is advancing a **phased implementation plan** built on five key pillars:



① Systemic and Structural Collaboration

CAMA will engage Provincial and Territorial Associations for both administrators and elected officials to:

- Promote mandatory governance and chair training that equips leaders to manage conflict and maintain decorum.
- Encourage enforceable Codes of Conduct with fair and consistent application.
- Support workplace-safety protections that include CAOs and staff.

This work will remain educational and collaborative, ensuring that the lived realities of members inform broader systemic reform.

② Practical Tools and Resources

CAMA will provide members with practical, ready-to-use tools, including:

- **Policy templates and checklists** for communications, right-to-disconnect, and trespass policies.
- **Model contract clauses** that strengthen protections against harassment and ensure fairness in employment terms.
- **Governance quick references** such as *Where to Draw the Line* and public-facing infographics explaining what good governance looks like.

③ Peer and Resilience Supports

- A new **CAMA Peer Support Network** will be launched—CAOs trained to offer confidential, non-judgmental support to peers based on their “lived experience” in the profession.
- CAMA will also expand its **Safe Space Forums and Think Tanks** to promote shared learning and reduce professional isolation.

④ Professional Development and Education

- The 2026 CAMA National Conference will include sessions focused on managing incivility and strengthening Council-CAO relations.
- CAMA has initiated conversations about a potential collaboration with FCM to deliver a session at the 2026 FCM Conference on chairing with confidence, restoring decorum, and fostering resilient leadership.
- Looking ahead, CAMA plans to engage elected official associations to encourage exploration of **Mayor Masterminds Forums** - safe, confidential spaces for peer learning and support.

⑤ Expansion of the Council Orientation Toolkit

CAMA will enhance its existing **Council Orientation Toolkit** with a new *Guide for Mayors and Chairs*, featuring:

- Practical one-pagers on rules of order and meeting decorum;
- Role-playing exercises and case studies;
- Guidance on working effectively with CAOs; and
- Best practices for transparency and managing conflict.

Conclusion

Incivility and governance breakdowns are not merely interpersonal conflicts—they strike at the heart of effective leadership and public trust in local government.

Through this national initiative, CAMA is charting a path forward grounded in education, collaboration, and shared responsibility. By equipping CAOs and Councils with the tools, frameworks, and supports they need, we can restore the respect and professionalism that sustain healthy local democracy.

Civility is not a soft skill - it is the foundation of effective governance and the key to building stronger Councils, stronger organizations, and stronger communities across Canada.

Halifax, Nova Scotia

