



Drawing the Line – When CAOs Must Act to Address Incivility and Protect the Organization

A Practical Guide for Chief Administrative Officers

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Why This Matters

Incivility at the Council table rarely begins as overt misconduct. It often emerges gradually, through boundary drift, heightened pressure, unresolved tension, or misunderstanding of roles. In many cases, context explains behaviour. **But context does not excuse harm.**

There comes a point where understanding must give way to action. Drawing the line is about recognizing when behaviour crosses from difficult into harmful—and responding decisively to protect people, process, and the organization.

This brochure is designed to support CAOs in exercising judgment with clarity, confidence, and professional integrity when that moment arrives.

From Context to Action: When Understanding is no Longer Enough



This guide focuses specifically on the point at which incivility or harmful conduct requires intervention by the Chief Administrative Officer.

It is not intended to replace the broader relationship-building, governance orientation, and communication strategies that CAOs use to build productive working relationships with Council.

In most cases, strong relationships, proactive governance education, and patient leadership will prevent situations from reaching this stage. This document addresses the moments when those efforts are no longer sufficient and a line must be drawn.

When Behaviour Crosses the Line

Behaviour crosses the line when it:

- targets individuals rather than issues;
- becomes personal, threatening, or intimidating;
- undermines staff safety, dignity, or well-being;
- disrupts Council's ability to conduct business; or
- persists despite reminders, redirection, or procedural rulings.

Intent matters far less than impact.

Behaviour that creates an unsafe or hostile environment must be addressed, regardless of motivation.

Governance Conflict vs. Workplace Harm

Not all conflict is misconduct.

Robust debate, strong disagreement, and challenging questions are part of democratic governance. Councils are expected to disagree, and to do so publicly.

However, behaviour moves from governance conflict into workplace harm when it:

- subjects staff to humiliation or repeated criticism;
- questions motives, integrity, or competence rather than substance;
- encourages pile-ons from other members or the public; or
- continues after boundaries have been clearly set.

At this point, CAOs have both a professional and legal obligation to intervene.

Governance Conflict	VS	Workplace Harm
 Strong disagreement		 Personal attacks
 Challenging questions		 Humiliation of staff
 Public debate on issues		 Questioning integrity or competence
 Procedural tension		 Behaviour continuing after boundaries set

When conduct shifts from issue-based debate to personal harm, CAO intervention is required.

Preventing Escalation: Early Leadership Strategies

Before behaviour escalates to the point where formal intervention is required, CAOs often rely on proactive leadership strategies such as:

- Building rapport and maintaining open communication with elected officials early in the Council term.
- Supporting strong Council orientation that reinforces roles, expectations, and standards of conduct.
- Investing in relationship capital through regular dialogue, informal conversations, and one-on-one discussions.
- Addressing concerns privately with members of Council when tensions first emerge.
- Providing governance refreshers or training where expectations may need to be reinforced for the whole Council.

In many cases, these approaches are effective in preventing conflict from escalating into behaviour that harms staff or undermines governance.

However, when behaviour persists or escalates despite these efforts, the CAO may need to move to more direct intervention.

When Judgment Becomes Obligation

There is a point where intervention is no longer a matter of style, tolerance, or relationship management.



A CAO must step in when:

- behaviour creates or risks creating an unsafe work environment;
- staff are targeted personally or placed in a position of fear, humiliation, or exposure;
- governance rules are ignored after being clearly stated; or
- inaction could reasonably be interpreted as permitting harm.

At this point, **neutrality does not mean silence.**

Failure to act can expose the organization (and the CAO) to legal, reputational, and ethical risk. In these moments, intervention is not discretionary; it is required.

Staff Protection is Non-negotiable

CAOs are responsible for providing a safe workplace.

This responsibility includes:

- stopping personal attacks on staff immediately;
- removing staff from unsafe situations when required;
- documenting incidents objectively;
- activating workplace harassment or occupational health and safety processes; and
- advising Council when behaviour creates organizational or legal risk.

Protecting staff is **not** taking sides.

It is fulfilling a duty of care owed to employees and to the organization.

Escalation is Leadership, Not Failure

Escalation is not a sign that governance has failed. It is a signal that earlier measures are no longer sufficient.

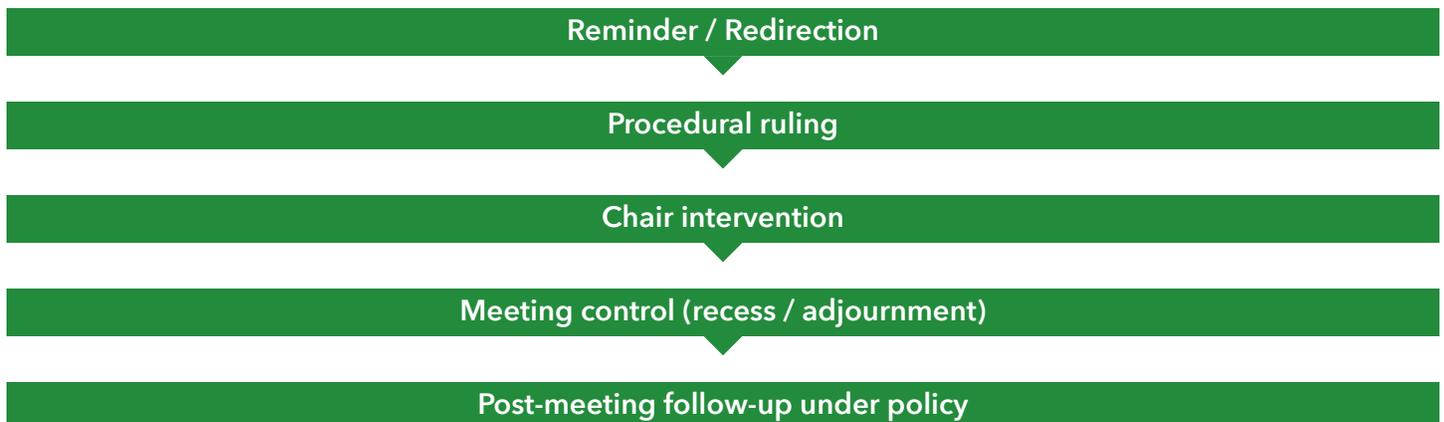
When behaviour persists, escalates, or shifts from procedural conflict into personal harm, the CAO must move deliberately to the next level of response.

Effective intervention relies on **clear thresholds**.

Typical escalation steps may include:

- informal reminders and redirection;
- formal cautions or procedural rulings from the Chair;
- removal of speaking privileges for the meeting;
- recess or adjournment; and
- post-meeting follow-up under applicable policies.

Predictable Escalation is Professional Leadership



Escalation should be predictable, proportionate, and policy based.

The Role of Policy and Legislation

When Codes of Conduct are insufficient or ineffective, CAOs may need to rely on other frameworks, including:

- workplace harassment and respectful workplace policies;
- occupational health and safety legislation;
- procedural bylaws; and
- communication and access protocols.

These tools exist to protect people and the organization when governance mechanisms fail. Using them is not an overreach, it is responsible leadership.

Supporting the Chair

While the Chair is typically the first authority responsible for maintaining order and addressing inappropriate conduct at the Council table, CAOs play a critical role in supporting the Chair and protecting staff when intervention becomes necessary.

Chairs may hesitate to intervene decisively due to fear of backlash, accusations of bias, or uncertainty about authority.

CAOs support Chairs by:

- preparing them in advance for contentious meetings;
- clarifying procedural options and escalation tools;
- reinforcing that intervention is expected and supported; and
- documenting incidents to reduce personal and organizational exposure.

Silence or delay increases risk for everyone involved.

After the Line is Drawn: Repairing Trust and Rebuilding Governance

Drawing the line is not the end of the work. Once boundaries have been enforced and harm addressed, leadership shifts toward restoring the conditions necessary for effective governance.

Repair is **not** about undoing intervention. It is about reinforcing that standards matter—and that the organization can move forward.

Acknowledging Impact

Repair begins with acknowledging impact. Even when issues have been addressed procedurally, unresolved tension may linger if individuals feel unheard, disrespected, or unsafe.

Acknowledgement does not require assigning blame or revisiting decisions. It requires recognizing that repair is needed.

Creating Space for Reset

Following a difficult period, Councils may benefit from a deliberate reset, which may include:

- facilitated governance workshops or retreats;
- reaffirmation of shared expectations and conduct standards; or
- private conversations between the CAO, Chair, and individual Councillors.

Resetting signals intentional leadership—not avoidance.

Reintroducing Staff and Rebuilding Confidence

Staff who have experienced incivility may feel exposed or hesitant to engage.

CAOs should:

- check in with affected staff;
- reaffirm expectations for respectful interaction;
- clarify processes for raising concerns; and
- ensure visible leadership support.

Trust is rebuilt through consistent actions, not statements alone.

Monitoring and Reinforcement

Repair is not a one-time event. CAOs and Chairs should:

- monitor behaviour and tone over time;
- intervene early if old patterns re-emerge; and
- normalize governance check-ins as part of professional practice.

Leadership Requires Courage

Drawing the line is uncomfortable. It may provoke criticism, resistance, or political pressure. However, failing to act allows harm to continue and signals tolerance of unacceptable behaviour.

Strong CAOs understand that protecting the organization sometimes requires standing firm – calmly, professionally, and decisively.

Leadership is measured not only by how conflict is managed in the moment, but by how governance is restored afterward.

Strong Leadership Restores Trust.

Additional Guidance

This brochure is designed to complement CAMA's broader work on governance, incivility, and Council-CAO relations. For deeper guidance, practical tools, and scenario-based support, CAOs are encouraged to consult CAMA's [Council Orientation Toolkit](#), [Standing Strong Toolkit: A CAO's Guide to Maintaining Professionalism Amidst Incivility Toolkit](#), and [Political Acumen Toolkit](#).

These resources provide broader guidance on governance dynamics, Council-CAO relationships, and strategies for maintaining professionalism in challenging environments.

Final Reflection

Leadership in local government requires judgment, patience, and professionalism. Most governance challenges can be managed through communication, trust, and relationship-building.

However, when behaviour crosses the line into harm, the responsibility of the Chief Administrative Officer is clear.

Drawing the line is not about winning a moment, it is about protecting the organization, the people who serve it, and the standards that allow democratic governance to function.