Quiet Leadership Tool for CAOs

Using Storytelling & Visuals to Support Good Governance and Reduce Tension

CAMA ✦ **ACAM**
Administrative Excellence

Quiet Leadership Tool for CAOs: Using Storytelling & Visuals to Support Good Governance and Reduce Tension

Why This Tool Matters

Incivility at the Council table is often driven by misunderstanding, overload, or lack of context, not bad intent.

Councils are required to make complex decisions in public, often under time pressure and political scrutiny. When information is presented in dense, technical, or fragmented ways, frustration can surface as reactivity, mistrust, or personal criticism.

Intentional storytelling, supported by clear data and visuals, helps Councils:

- understand why an issue matters;
- focus on outcomes rather than personalities;
- see progress over time; and
- engage more constructively with staff recommendations.

This is not about persuasion. **It is about clarity, credibility, and calm leadership.**

From Information to Governance Insight

Data	Context	Insight	Decision
Facts, figures, activity	Why it matters now	What Council needs to understand	What Council is being asked to do

What This Tool Does

This tool helps CAOs:

- reframe "dry" reports into clear governance narratives;

- use infographics or short visuals to support understanding;

- humanize municipal work without exposing staff to risk; and

- reinforce good governance behaviours quietly and consistently.

Used regularly, these practices reduce tension, support respectful dialogue, and help Councils stay focused on community outcomes.

How CAOs Can Use This Tool

CAOs may use this worksheet:

- before preparing a Council report or presentation;

- when introducing new or sensitive issues;

- following periods of tension or misunderstanding; or

- as a coaching aid for senior staff preparing reports.

It is intended for internal use and does not form part of Council policy or procedure.

Worksheet: CAO Storytelling & Council Framing Guide: Using Narrative and Evidence to Support Understanding, Reduce Reactivity, and Protect Staff

This guide is intended to help CAOs frame Council materials and discussions in a way that supports informed decision-making, reinforces good governance, and sets the tone at the Council table. It is not a form to be completed, but a thinking lens to apply before items reach Council.

Governance Framing	Clarity & Delivery
The Governance Issue	Before Council sees the item, be clear on: • What decision, update, or discussion Council is being asked to engage in • Whether the item is for information, direction, or decision • What level of debate or sensitivity is likely at the table
Community Context	Ground the item in the why: • Why this matters to the community now • What problem is being addressed or outcome being pursued • What has changed since Council last discussed this issue Context reduces reactivity and anchors discussion in community impact rather than personalities.
The Story (Plain Language First)	Before drafting a formal report or visual, clarify the story in plain language: • **The situation**: What is happening or prompting this item • **What staff did or considered**: Options explored, constraints, and professional judgment applied • **The recommended direction**: Where staff are proposing Council go and why • **The expected outcome**: What Council can reasonably expect if this direction is taken If the story cannot be explained clearly in plain language, the report is not ready.

Governance Framing	Clarity & Delivery
Evidence That Supports Understanding	Use data to support the story, not overwhelm it. Consider: • Trend data • Before / after comparisons • Key performance indicators • A high-level financial snapshot • Other targeted evidence that directly informs the decision Data should clarify choices, not distract from them.
Format & Presentation Choice	Select the format that best supports clarity and tone: • Infographic or visual summary • Dashboard, chart, or map • Summary slide • Short narrative report supported by visuals • Staff feature or short video (where appropriate) The format should match the complexity and sensitivity of the issue. **Format Follows Risk**
Staff Visibility & Protection Check	Before the item goes forward, confirm: • Staff contributions are acknowledged respectfully • No individual staff member is placed in a politically sensitive position • The CAO is prepared to respond on staff's behalf if discussion escalates Good storytelling includes protecting the organization, not just explaining the work.
Council Table Delivery	Prepare for how the item will land in the room: • Clear linkage to Council priorities, strategic plans, or previous decisions • Intentional tone: calm, neutral, outcome-focused • Planned redirection if discussion becomes personal, reactive, or misaligned with governance roles How an item is introduced often matters as much as what is written.

Within the Format & Presentation Choice section:

Low Sensitivity	High Risk Sensitivity
• Routine update	• Dashboard
• Emerging issues	• Summary slide
• High emotion scrutiny	• Visual narritive + CAO framing
• Staff-facing work	• CAO-delivered, staff shielded

Reflection (Optional)

After the meeting:
- Did this approach improve understanding or tone?
- Did it help Council focus on outcomes rather than process or personalities?
- What would you adjust next time?

Key Leadership Reminder

Clear storytelling, supported by data and visuals, reduces misunderstanding, and misunderstanding is one of the most common triggers of incivility in governance.

Why This Example Is Included

These two examples show how the same information can lead to very different conversations.

Storytelling and visuals:
- improve understanding;
- reduce frustration;
- protect staff from reactive criticism; and
- support respectful, outcome-focused governance.

> Toolkit Note: This example is illustrative only. CAOs may adapt storytelling and visual approaches to suit their Council, community, and organizational capacity.

Traditional Report

Subject:

2025 Road and Sidewalk Maintenance Program Update

Purpose:

To provide Council with an update on the status of the 2025 Road and Sidewalk Maintenance Program.

Background:

The municipality maintains approximately 320 km of roads and 210 km of sidewalks. The annual maintenance program is delivered in accordance with approved budgets and service standards. Activities include asphalt patching, crack sealing, sidewalk repairs, and line painting.

Current Status:

As of June 30, 2025:
- 42 km of roads have been patched
- 18 km of crack sealing completed
- 96 sidewalk repair requests addressed
- Line painting completed on 60% of priority routes

Weather delays in May impacted scheduling; however, crews are working extended hours to recover lost time.

Financial Implications:

Expenditures are tracking within the approved operating budget.

The Storytelling & Visual Governance Report

Subject:

Keeping Our Roads Safe and Serviceable: 2025 Maintenance Update

Community Context

Every year, residents expect safe, reliable roads and sidewalks – especially following winter damage. Council's approved maintenance program focuses on extending asset life, addressing safety concerns, and responding to the highest-risk areas first.

The challenge:

A harsh winter caused accelerated wear on priority roadways and sidewalks across the community.

What staff did:

Crews prioritized safety-related repairs, high-traffic routes, and known problem areas while managing weather delays early in the season.

What this achieved:

By mid-year, the majority of high-risk locations have been addressed, improving safety and reducing the likelihood of more costly repairs later.

Progress at a Glance (Infographic or Visual Summary)
- 42 km of roads repaired
- 96 sidewalk safety issues resolved
- 60% of priority line painting completed
- Weather delays recovered through schedule adjustments

(Simple progress bars or icons reinforce understanding.)

Why This Matters
- Fewer trip hazards and vehicle damage complaints
- Extended lifespan of existing infrastructure
- Responsible use of approved operating funds

Traditional Report

Conclusion:

The program is progressing as planned and will continue through the fall construction season.

Typical Council Response
- Requests for more detail
- Questions about specific streets
- Comparisons to last year
- Frustration from residents still waiting

Discussion often shifts to individual complaints rather than overall outcomes.

The Storytelling & Visual Governance Report

What's Next

Crews will complete remaining line painting and continue targeted repairs through the fall, focusing on neighbourhood streets and outstanding service requests.

Council Decision Context

This update demonstrates progress on Council's infrastructure and public safety priorities and confirms the program remains on track and within budget.
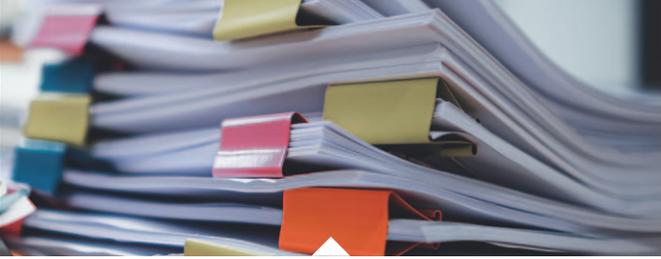
Typical Council Response
- Questions focused on priorities and outcomes
- Clear understanding of trade-offs
- Fewer reactive exchanges
- Improved tone and efficiency of discussion

The following example illustrates how the same information can be presented in two different ways – and how that choice shapes Council discussion.

Traditional vs. Storytelling Reports and What it Means for Council

A quick look at how two different reporting approaches can shape understanding, tone, and decision-making at the Council table.

Traditional Report

VS

The Storytelling & Visual Governance Report

2025 Road & Sidewalk Maintenance Program Update

- Dense text
- Technical terms
- Activity-focused
- Data without context

Keeping our Roads Safe & Serviceable

- Clear, plain language
- Outcome-focused
- Shows trends & impact
- Visuals that aid understanding

Common Council Dynamics

- Requests for more detail
- Focus on specific issues
- Confusion or frustration
- Reactive, drawn out discussion

Positive Council Dynamics

- Focus on priorities & solutions
- Questions shaped by outcomes
- Shared understanding & confidence
- Outcome focused, respectful discussion

Why This Matters for Good Governance

Reduces misunderstanding

Lower reactivity

Protects staff from undue criticism

Keeps Council focused on outcomes