

A large, stylized graphic of two hands, one on the left and one on the right, cupping the text. The hands are rendered in a dark blue color with a lighter blue outline, set against a light blue background. The word "civility." is written in a white, serif font, centered between the hands.

civility.

Nurturing It If You Have It, and
Resurrecting It Where
It Has Died

By Julia Novak, ICMA-CM



In 2010, I had the opportunity to be part of an ICMA International project in Baghdad, Iraq, that focused on an initiative of the U.S. Agency for International Development, Creating Civil Society. We can easily imagine why this war-torn country in one of the most divided regions of the world would need to focus on creating a civil society.

My experience in Baghdad made me realize how at risk we are right here in the United States—at risk of losing something we promote internationally as being a foundation of democratic society: civility.

Baghdad: Learning Democracy

Our job in Baghdad was to teach the community of Iraqi trainers the concepts of engagement, strategic planning, project management, and policy advocacy. Participation by residents does not exist outside of democracy, and we were to teach tools and techniques that could be applied to people who were,

TAKEAWAYS

- › The risk of incivility exists for communities and for our society if we don't do something to handle it.
- › Unfortunately, incivility can be found in good, great, and horrific governance.

for the first time, taking advantage of the opportunity to speak about what was in their hearts and to advocate their desires for their community. The people we interacted with realized they had been given a gift—democracy—and they wanted to learn how to be effective in its implementation.

I kept a journal of my time in Baghdad and recall commenting on the dedication of the people who were

coming to our sessions. We were working in a secure compound in the red zone of Baghdad and were unable to leave this secure area. The people we were training lived throughout the city, and they came to work each day at great personal risk and sacrifice.

On any given day, people might be late or could not make it at all, but their excuses were like none I had heard before: “An IED went off and most of the streets in the neighborhood were closed” or “No one could leave their house because there was a sweep going on searching for al Qaeda operatives.” Comments like these provide perspective on traffic jams and neighborhood disturbances.

The working conditions at the compound were not what you would call optimal. Our training facility was a former private residence. The room was cramped, the acoustics were bad, the screen was small, the chairs were uncomfortable, and the electricity in Baghdad is (still) not reliable, so power would cut on and off every few hours. Then we would go from the grid to backup generators.

When conducting training sessions in the United States, I often get feedback on the creature comforts—room too cold, chairs too hard, or food is bad. Iraqi folks never complained about the environment. They were eager to learn how to create a civil society.

Harrisburg: A City at War with Itself

In 2011, Pennsylvania's capital city was trying to find a pathway for dealing with a crushing debt that was the result of a failed incinerator. In October, Reuters did an extensive article about the situation, and the headline said, "Harrisburg: A City at War with Itself." A crushing debt is a significant issue for the city, but it should not be insurmountable.

The article referenced the state takeover, which was in progress when the article was written, and said, "A last-ditch attempt at a compromise between the mayor and councilmembers days before the bankruptcy filing ended in a shouting match 10 minutes in. The paralysis isn't rooted in partisan politics, either: All of the city's top officials are Democrats. Welcome to Harrisburg, a city at war with itself."

And the entire world was watching. Civility in Harrisburg is disappearing. The city faces a severe financial crisis, and political gridlock prevents the elected officials from coming together to work on solving the problems. Has governance been replaced by politics?

So What?

Harrisburg may be an extreme example, but other communities all across the country have already lost, are losing, or are at risk of losing their way. It can begin with such a polarizing issue as controversial zoning decisions or neighborhood traffic patterns. People find their voices by taking positions on issues, and they learn how to use their influence to stop controversial initiatives.

Is that the risk? I've concluded otherwise. I believe that apathy is the risk. Disgust is the risk. Detachment from community is the risk. The world watches, and when civility vanishes and paralysis sets in, no one will locate a business in the community and no one will buy property. The future is held hostage by dysfunction. No one wants to invest in a place that cannot come together to solve its own problems.

Clearly, in democratic society we do not expect people to agree on



SAMPLE GOVERNING BODY NORMS

1. Place cooperation, trust, and respect at the heart of all we do.
2. Work for win-win situations instead of win-lose.
3. Honor discussion before decisions.
4. Focus policy making on important ends for our owners and customers.
5. Be honest and candid with each other.
6. Share information and avoid surprises.
7. Maintain a sense of humor.

everything. Unanimity is not what we are seeking, but we must find a way to disagree agreeably on policy issues so local governments can move forward. If all we discuss is what we oppose and if we use our power to block things rather than to find new pathways for progress, growth is stifled, economic development is hurt, and the fire of cynicism about government is fueled. Cynicism already permeates national politics.

Although trust-in-government surveys suggest that Americans are more inclined to trust local government—consider the rampant mistrust of the federal government—I'm not sure that's such a compliment! In 2011, KRC Research's nationwide study, *Civility in America*, indicated that 65 percent of Americans see civility as a major problem and 55 percent expect it to get worse in the coming years!

The Lucky Ones

Fortunately, not all local governments in the United States are falling into the

trap of incivility. I can think of dozens of examples where civility is a norm; it's how these places do business; and it gives them a competitive advantage.

In the area of Salt Lake City, Utah, there are numerous communities with various forms of government and different personalities. Murray City is a suburb of Salt Lake that operates under the mayor-council form of government, with professional management provided by its chief of staff. Murray City is successful, and, after watching it in action, I would say the most important value we see is the mayor and administration collaborating with the city council to navigate community issues. In other communities like Lenexa, Kansas, and Clayton, Missouri, civility is an expectation and a tightly held community value.

Any official can point to charters, local ordinances, and job descriptions and claim authority and legitimacy. A successful community learns to work in the gray areas of the policy-administration dichotomy that Professor James Svara, professor and director, Center for Urban Innovation, Arizona State University, Phoenix, Arizona, has written on so extensively over the past 25 years.

Policy and administration overlap rather than collide, and because there is a basic platform of trust, there is space to work out differences because of the belief that each side has the community's interest at heart.

What Can Be Done?

Here are tools that managers can employ in communities in order to begin reclaiming civility where it has been lost or nurturing it where it exists.

Believing. In 1951, Edward R. Murrow began hosting *This I Believe*, a public radio series that was five years in the making. The challenge for listeners was to write an essay that used only a few hundred words to describe a core belief—something that person stood for.

NPR resurrected the concept in recent years with the stated goal of facilitating a higher standard of active

public discourse, inspiring people to reflect, encouraging them to share, and engaging them in a conversation about personal values and beliefs that can shape life, community, and society.

Essays from the 1950s are timeless, and in 2006 they were reproduced, along with a new series of essays, in the book, *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*. The book's format lends itself well to community engagement.

When a conversation, a retreat, or a meeting is started by talking about what people believe in versus what they don't like, there is a distinctly different tone. Individuals begin to see common

mean to govern?

- Issues the governing body must decide on are value laden: Representation.
- Efficiency.
- Individual rights.
- Social equity.
- And sometimes the values conflict.

And, of course, all their work is done in public. This is a blessing in a democracy, but sometimes it makes it challenging to have meaningful discussions on value-laden controversial issues.

Just as communities self-govern by electing local officials, those elected officials must self-govern how they govern! They can choose to allow negative,

- What do I expect from you?
- What am I willing to give you?

These basic questions can be modified to address any number of relationships between and among elected and appointed officials:

- What does the mayor expect from the council?
- What is the mayor willing to give the council?
- What does the council expect from the mayor?
- What is the council willing to give the mayor?

Or these:

- What do I expect from my colleagues on the governing body?
- What am I willing to give my colleagues on the governing body?

Or these:

- What does the governing body expect from the staff?
- What is the governing body willing to give the staff?
- What does the staff expect from the governing body?
- What is the staff willing to give the governing body?

The conversations that result from brainstorming responses to these questions and exploring the answers—whether there is alignment or not—are incredibly powerful.

Good habits. Communities that nurture civility do so intentionally by dedicating time to it. As is the case in any relationship, there is no replacement for quality community. Study sessions, retreats, and goal-setting sessions, for example, create opportunities for dedicated dialogue.

Author Brian Tracy said, "Successful people are simply those with successful habits." I believe the same is true of organizations and of governing bodies. **PM**



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ground, even with people they previously identified as the enemy. Ask yourself this question: What do you believe to be true about the future of your community?

Ground rules. Groups of people need ground rules that they can willingly commit to in order to govern their behaviors. It is easy to get frustrated when the political discourse turns nasty. Local government professionals can be extremely helpful in running a community, but their skill is no substitute for governance, and a manager cannot "manage" the council.

John Nalbandian, professor of public administration at the University of Kansas and former city commissioner and mayor of Lawrence, Kansas, offers these observations on the work environment in which elected officials are forced to govern:

- There is no hierarchy. Not even a mayor or council president is the boss of the governing body. Members come to the governing body as equals.
- Task definition is vague. What does it

disruptive behaviors to create the best reality TV show during prime time.

Or they can choose to commit to a set of rules and agree to be held accountable by each other. The true leading practice is for members of the governing body to agree that it is in the best interests of all to commit to norms and then routinely evaluate themselves on how they are doing.

Articulating expectations. One of the realities of group dynamics is that when we relate with people we have expectations—expectations about how the other person will behave and treat us. The irony is that we rarely share this basic information with the other person, opting instead for a game of relationship "Go Fish," where we reward or punish behavior that meets or doesn't meet our expectations.

Creating time for discussing some rather simple but profound questions can do wonders for relationships. Essentially, the questions are:



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