



RESPECTFUL PUBLIC SERVICE

Handbook

Prepared as part of **FLC**
President Greg Ross' platform,
which centers around three
pillars: Intentional Collaboration,
Expanded Education and
Respectful Public Service.



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Introduction

Introduction

Public service can be many things: an honor, a duty, a privilege, a chance to give back, a way to leave a legacy, and even an opportunity to develop new and lasting friendships. It also can be a trial, a burden, an overwhelming challenge, or even a nightmare.

In each moment of public service, you can imagine that whether the experience is generally positive or negative depends mostly on conditions. Natural disasters, human tragedies, economic decline ... dealing with these unquestionably adds to the sense of burden and challenge for public servants. But even a crisis can provide opportunities to live out the best of public service.

It isn't the conditions so much as the people one serves and serves with, their attitudes and behaviors, that determines whether serving in public office is rewarding or frustrating. **And the decisive trait, the one that drives the dynamic of public service, is respect.**

What does respect accomplish?

- ▶ Respect allows people to hear each other.
- ▶ It motivates us to understand each other.
- ▶ It makes it possible for our knowledge to grow.
- ▶ It enriches our perspective.

What happens when respect is absent?

- ▶ We don't bother to listen.
- ▶ We see no point in trying to understand.
- ▶ We lock down our opinions and perspectives as firmly as we shutter windows at the approach of a hurricane.

In our present political culture, respect is largely absent. People of different political stripes, various communities of interest and opinion, seem much more comfortable making sweeping accusations and coarse condemnations of those they disagree with than was true even just a few years ago. And there is evidence to support this perception.

There's a clear result of this decline in respect: a decline in the satisfaction of public service. Worse, the increased antagonism and conflict undermine the quality of the policymaking process. They turn policy debates into a contest of wills rather than ideas. Scoring "points" against one's adversaries, not improving the lives of residents, becomes how success is measured.

We may not be able to shift the national political culture in a more respectful, and consequently more constructive, direction, but we can help to improve our local culture or help preserve the respect our community still shows. This handbook can help.





It Starts with Leadership

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The better we understand our municipality's processes and procedures, the more knowledgeable we become about our policies. However, sometimes our residents aren't as familiar. It's not always common knowledge that we don't control the schools or hire and fire teachers – or that the municipal property tax is only a small fraction of a total ad valorem tax bill. As municipal leaders, we may often find ourselves frustrated because of this lack of understanding.

But if our eye is on fostering respect, we must be careful. No matter how often and how carefully we have provided information, many will have missed it, others will have barely seen it, and still others will not have understood it. Meanwhile, a host of channels of communication outside our municipal control are pumping out streams of content, often primarily with the sole purpose of attracting a larger audience. Outrage and the whiff of scandal are much more effective for this purpose than careful, thoughtful analysis. Even events in communities on the other side of the state, or in another state, can trigger local public reactions.

If we would seek to create a deeper culture of mutual respect in our municipality, it must begin with us. Leaders set the tone by what we say and what we do. Here are some keys to fostering respect by example:

- ▶ **Don't just tell them; show them.** Reciting the rules of conduct at the beginning of a formal meeting is an important tool for fostering respect. Equally important is the behavior of the leaders. Model the conduct we seek in others.
- ▶ **Assume the best (even if one must prepare for the worst).** Even a notorious provocateur will, at times, simply have an innocent question or an honest opinion to share. Assume this is one of those times.
- ▶ **Be one's best (even when others are not).** Leaders are, of course, human. But those we would lead expect more than *mere* human behavior from their leaders. That more is especially important when others are behaving at their worst. It's an extraordinary gesture to remain respectful when others are not, a gesture that will, in turn, foster respect in others.
- ▶ **Remember all of the audiences.** In the heat of a difficult interaction with a colleague, staff member or resident, one's focus can become too narrow. We can think only about how we want to deal with this one individual. But public leaders never do anything (even if the meeting is a private one) that is not likely to have a larger public audience in some way. Deliberately maintaining respect in dealing with those who show no respect can have a powerful positive effect on the larger audience's attitudes and behaviors.





Institutional Character

Institutional Character

All of us probably have had experience with institutions that fall into one of two categories. There are those that feel like fortresses or labyrinths. This may be evident in the architecture or floor plan, but it also can be evident in the various points of contact between those outside and those within the institution.

- ▶ One feels like one needs a guide, or an advocate, to get even basic information, let alone service.
- ▶ Other institutions feel open and inviting. Entering into the institution's portals, whether physical or virtual, doesn't feel like entering an alien (and hostile) world. Instead, the institution feels made for us. It is open and welcoming, easy to navigate and helpful when we are lost.

The fundamental difference between these two types of institutions is the level of respect they give those they serve. Dealing with a fortress institution, one must fight for every bit of respect one secures. In inviting institutions, respect (and the care that follows upon it) is the driving force of how the institution engages the world.

There isn't a simple checklist of things open institutions must do. Rather, open institutions offer respect for their clients in every decision that affects them. For municipalities, that means giving priority to the residents: the ways they think, the needs they have and the outcomes they seek.

- ▶ **Points of contact reflect the needs of residents.** A municipality's organizational chart typically is designed to serve the needs of those who work in the municipality. But the website or phone tree doesn't have to follow that same structure. The design that shows who residents should contact can reflect the questions residents ask, the level of knowledge they have and the services they require. Perhaps it's not the list of departments but the list of questions or services they navigate to find the help they need.
- ▶ **Communications speak the language of the intended audience.** No one likes the experience of not understanding or misunderstanding a message. But that frequently can be the result when our communications begin from our municipal perspective, from what we want to tell residents, our way of speaking about it. Respect for those we serve means asking ourselves what residents *need to know* and whether they will understand the message the way we are communicating it.
- ▶ **Communications find the intended audience, not the other way around.** It is easy for those in municipal government to experience frustration with the public's lack of awareness. We put notices on portable signs, on our website, in our social media posts, and still, the people we are trying to reach sometimes will say, "Why didn't you tell us about this?" Respect drives us to keep seeking the audience rather than expecting them to find us.





Building Public Trust

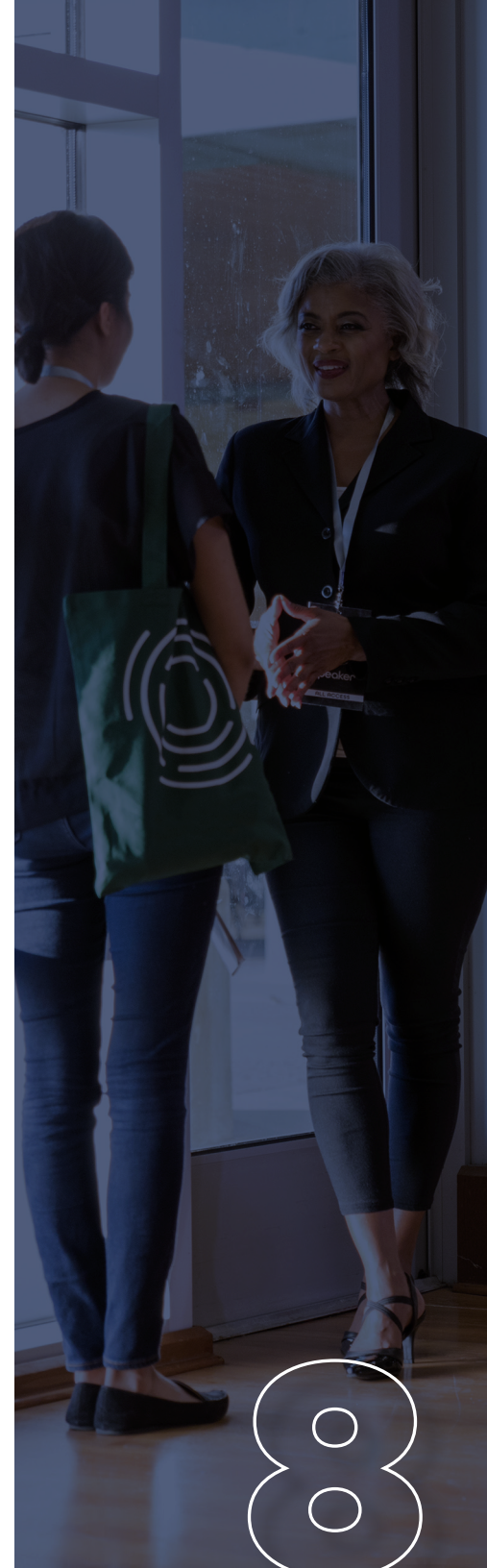
Building Public Trust

Trust and respect are intimately connected. Those we trust, we tend to respect; those we respect, we tend to trust.

When it comes to fostering *public* trust, it's not just the respect we show an individual resident that influences their level of trust in the government; it's also the respect we show others. Many of our residents have very limited direct contact with municipal employees and leaders. They have little personal experience to draw upon. **How residents see others treated often drives the level of trust they have in the municipal government. And that level of trust, whether high or low, impacts the respect they're inclined to show.**

There are always others watching, directly or indirectly, whenever our residents interact with the city and its staff. Recognizing this can guide us to use approaches that strengthen trust when we engage the public.

- ▶ **Set appropriate expectations.** Whether it's a regular meeting of the governing body, a workshop, a town hall or an individual appointment, being clear about what attendees should expect shows respect. If this meeting isn't what they thought it was going to be, they can leave; we won't waste their time. If they stay, they know what will be covered and what will be the likely result. And they know when and how they'll be able to participate in the discussion, if they want to.
- ▶ **Meet the expectations set.** Once we've set appropriate expectations, we should make certain they are met. The agenda shouldn't change unless the reasons are clear and the change respects the concerns of those in attendance. Rules for participation should be applied consistently; no one should be treated better or worse than others.
- ▶ **Be patient and understanding.** Even when municipal leaders and staff are striving to be open and respectful at all times, residents sometimes won't see it that way. Not infrequently, this has more to do with misunderstandings about the process or policy than it does with the conduct of individuals, though the resident's comments may be very personal in tone. The larger public will respect the official who doesn't retaliate and shows patience and understanding about the complexities and the importance of the situation to the resident who has spoken.





Respect: A Way of Being

Respect: A Way of Being

Showing respect for colleagues, staff and constituents can lead to a range of positive results: better decisions, more pleasant meetings, greater productivity, even future electoral success. Since we know the value of fostering respect, it makes sense to show and nurture it.

"Respect isn't a strategy; it's a way of being," says FLC University Professor Emeritus Scott Paine. "It is in us, a part of how we show up in the world because it is part of who we are. We show respect because we believe others should be treated with respect. Choosing to act on what we believe, we are respectful. We don't pretend."

As municipal officials, we can influence the expectations and the conduct of others by the example we set. If there ever was a time we needed respectful public servants, this is that time. And we, all of us, are the servants our communities need.





Resources

Resources

PUBLIC MEETINGS AND PUBLIC DECORUM CITY EXAMPLES

- ▶ [City of Cooper City Decorum](#)
- ▶ [City of St. Augustine Rules of Decorum](#)
- ▶ [City of Flagler Beach Civility Resolution Decorum](#)
- ▶ [City of West Melbourne Meeting Rules and Order](#)

RESPECTFUL PUBLIC SERVICE PLEDGE CITY EXAMPLES

- ▶ [City of Dunedin Civility Code](#)
- ▶ [City of Orlando Civility Resolution](#)

SAMPLES

- ▶ [Civility Pledge and Responsible Public Meetings Info](#)
- ▶ [Respectful Public Meetings Memorandum](#)

TIPS FOR REASONED AND RESPECTFUL DECISION-MAKING

Use Reflective Reasoning:

- ▶ Have ample time to reflect on ideas before making your decision.
- ▶ Use a more systematic process for arriving at judgments.
- ▶ Reflect on your personal responsibility for making sound judgments.

- ▶ Always be collaborative. Include diverse ideas and divergent perspectives from others and from your own imagination.
- ▶ Balance your own emotions with your reasoned judgment.
- ▶ Listen well to the views of others. Suspend personal judgment.
- ▶ Ask critical questions to clarify the issues.
- ▶ Avoid quick "either/or" thinking – the "black or white fallacy" – and avoid criticisms of opposing viewpoints that look as if they're directed against a person rather than their position.
- ▶ Always seek alternative possibilities as you reflect on your own views.
- ▶ Consider the consequences and implications of various viewpoints, including your own.
- ▶ Justify your position with clear principles of ethics, civility and logic.

Beware of "Blind Rule" Obedience:

- ▶ Avoid the tendency to cease or abruptly cut off discussion.
- ▶ Evaluate critically a claim that "this is the way we have done this in the past."
- ▶ Do not blindly rely on the chair to say, "Do it this way because ..."
- ▶ Never underestimate or neglect personal moral responsibility, in spite of what others say or imply.

- ▶ Challenge rules, thoughtfully, if you think that they compete with ethical principles or aren't logical. This makes for convincing, reflective dialogue, in light of changing times. But always be prepared to alter your views in light of what you hear. Evaluate rationally.
- ▶ Realize that past practices are subject to current realities.

Avoid Visceral Reactions:

- ▶ Bite your tongue. Steer clear of strong responses that are based on feelings.
- ▶ Don't let emotions rule your reflective judgments. Endeavor to separate issues from personalities.
- ▶ Avoid staking out positions and locking on to them blindly. Don't talk when it impairs your listening ability.
- ▶ Don't see others as "for me or against me."
- ▶ Don't allow a personal feeling to prevent thoughtful collaboration and potential agreement ... a "win-win" is always worth striving for.

Source: QC magazine, March/April 2011, "Some Helpful Suggestions for Reasoned Ethical and Civil Decision-Making"



301 S. Bronough St. Suite 300
Tallahassee, FL 32301