

What strategies can be implemented by town officials in collaboration with citizens to maintain civility in local government?

Towns. There are 1,250 towns in the state of Wisconsin. Each is governed by a town board, usually consisting of three to five elected members. These officials work through the logistics of the day-to-day provisions of services provided within each town (“Town Government”). If one does the math, that means between 3,750 to 6,250 men and women are serving the constituents of Wisconsin (close to six million people) in town government roles. Does this task seem daunting? Considering that citizens are people with opinions, ideas, and goals, it is worth appreciating the work of our town government. The Wisconsin Towns Association reminds us that our town government “provides fundamental services to 95% of Wisconsin’s geography and about 30% of its population.” In addition to knowing, understanding, and working on the necessary responsibilities, town officials need to be able to work hand in hand with town members. It seems important to consider strategies town officials could implement that would facilitate civility as officials represent and work with Wisconsin citizens. In being relatable, effective communicators, and side by side leaders town officials work to promote civility in local government.

Because the roles of town government officials directly affect Wisconsinites, there are some ways officials can create avenues for civility. Although the definition of civility in Merriam-Webster's Dictionary involves the idea of politeness and courtesy, the Latin root reminds us that civility actually means relating to the citizen and being orderly in behavior. As our elected officials relate as citizens, they connect and see common concerns. They listen well. They go beyond simply being polite and courteous and find threads of commonality and indicate a willingness to listen well. A simple strategy for civility is our officials remembering they belong to and represent neighbors, friends, and other town members.

In addition, communication is key to promoting healthy relationships between town officials and community members. Indeed, an employment hub reminds readers that effective communication mitigates conflict, improves goal direction and productivity, and strengthens the team mentality (“10 Benefits of Effective Communication in the Workplace”). If town members see there is a priority of relaying information and they are well informed on current issues, there is a sense of connectedness, inclusion, and respect. A current website, optional emails, direct mailings, paper postings, and face-to-face conversations provide ample methods for effective communication. When it comes to voting on town concerns, the community can work together with board members because each party is aware and knowledgeable on the issues which need addressing.

Lastly, as invested community members, town officials lead well working side by side for the population they serve. Having town officials present and engaged, working next to the population they serve is the new leadership strategy that has been proven to work (“Leading Side by Side; A Modern Approach to Leadership in Changing Times.”) Despite society’s fascination with charismatic leaders, the reality is that no single leader can lead an organization or town alone. Collaboration, incorporating different points of view, and team problem-solving approaches are vital for civility and progress. Leaders who work side by side demonstrate they are not afraid to be challenged; they take on hard conversations. These leaders encourage a healthy debate while being present and available. Side by side leaders provide an opportunity to foster new ideas and outcomes as they work alongside other capable individuals within the community.

It would be easy to place the burden of civility on the shoulders of the elected. However, each town board official is just that: elected. Citizens of Wisconsin would be wise to thoroughly

educate themselves on the community members who are running to fill town government positions. Electing folks who show integrity, who listen well and are excellent communicators is critical; research tells us people with these qualities make ideal leaders (“The Top 10 Qualities of a Great Leader”). Additionally, leaders that look to work side by side in the community they serve are an asset. The communities that side by side leaders serve within will find civility as a byproduct. As wise citizens, we need to vote for men and women who strive to serve well because they care about their communities and the work which needs to be done in them.

Town government is very connected to its people where, “the people govern themselves and unleash the potential of democracy” through voting on specific issues right at town meetings (“Town Government”). This government, directed by the populous of Wisconsin, tends to roads, recycling, fire protection and ambulance service, and many other services. In an effort to provide excellent, pertinent services for our towns, it is critical that town officials and town dwellers understand one another, have clearly communicated goals and expectations, and purpose to appreciate each other as fellow citizens. Civility in local government is a team effort.

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