



Massachusetts Municipal Association

MMA BEST PRACTICES SERIES

Recommendations for Effective Local Government Administration and Management from MMA Policy Committees

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MMA Policy Committee on Personnel and Labor Relations Best Practice Recommendation: Conduct and Civility of Public Officials

BEST PRACTICE: Adopt a code of conduct for appointed and elected officials serving on boards, commissions, committees and councils in order to maintain civility, decorum and professionalism in public positions at all times.

Local leaders remain at the forefront of democratic governance, addressing the public's concerns, developing and implementing policies, and setting the tone for civic engagement. Whereas the concerns of constituents are often diverse and divided, maintaining a public forum where people can disagree through civil debate remains at the core of a healthy democratic process. By listening, respecting people's opinions, remaining open to new ideas and points of view, and disagreeing constructively, local leaders can refine ideas and reach common ground to create meaningful policy. This means preserving civility in all discussions and debates, and not tolerating speech or behavior that is belligerent, disrespectful, threatening, abusive or disparaging. Poor behavior impedes the democratic process, encourages hard feelings and divisiveness, contributes to voter alienation and aversion to government, and creates a liability for cities and towns. Fostering a climate of respect among public officials is at the heart of work performed in the public interest.

Elected and appointed officials must understand that, regardless of their intentions and whether they are an appointing authority, their interactions with municipal staff can expose the city or town to liability and lead to serious legal consequences for the city or town. Even good-faith actions by elected or appointed officials could violate collective bargaining agreements or other policies or laws. Respect and professionalism in all public and private dealings with municipal staff and other elected and appointed officials is essential.

The following are recommended items to include in a code of conduct:

- Conduct at public meetings
- Use of parliamentary procedure
- Responsibility and behavior toward fellow members of a public body
- Responsibility and behavior toward town or city administration

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- Responsibility and behavior toward employees and volunteers of the city or town
- Responsibility and behavior toward members of the public
- Communication expectations
- Conflict of interest of members of a public body
- Adherence to the city or town's social media policy
- Statement of commitment to and understanding of the code of conduct and an acknowledgment of receipt
- Reporting mechanism (e.g., report to chair of selectboard), including the procedure for filing a complaint, and a process for resolving conflicts, which could be a city or town's harassment policy
- System of communication among members of governing body regarding incidents of misbehavior and complaints, and communication to chief executive officer
- Enforcement of the code of conduct (which could include a decision by the governing body to publicly reprimand or not to indemnify an individual who acts inappropriately)

A code of conduct should remain easily accessible to everyone, including municipal officials, employees and the public. Following every election, or at least once a year for appointed positions, municipal officials should review the code of conduct and sign an acknowledgement of review, which should be kept on file.

The following are examples of codes of conduct:

Town of Littleton Board of Selectmen: tinyurl.com/LittletonConduct

Town of Carver Select Board: tinyurl.com/CarverConduct

Town of Holden Selectboard: tinyurl.com/HoldenConduct

Resources:

- Robert's Rules of Order: www.robertsrules.com
- "Beyond Civility: From Public Engagement to Problem Solving, An Action Guide for City Leaders," National League of Cities, 2011: tinyurl.com/NLCBeyondCivility
- The Institute for Civility in Government: www.instituteforcivility.org
- The Civility Center: civilitycenter.org