

# WHAT DOES GOOD GOVERNANCE MEAN FOR COUNCILS

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Good governance ultimately defines the inherent conflict between control and risk, as was elegantly defined by John Uhrig in his Review of Corporate Governance of Statutory Authorities and Office Holders in June 2003.

The current economic crisis has spawned much introspection about its causes and many of the reviews have focused on the principles of good governance.

The OECD states that there are eight main characteristics of good governance. It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. It assures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. (OECD, 2001).

Clearly such divergent characteristics will lead to stresses, and in certain cases conflicts, which will require some fine tuning. This article will discuss certain characteristics of Local Government which are peculiar to effective councillor decision making, and which include:

- Councillors as representatives and team players
- The council meeting as the forum for decision making
- Leadership
- Councillor access to information.

## COUNCILLORS AS REPRESENTATIVES

### AND TEAM PLAYERS

Decision making for councillors is made significantly more difficult by the need for them to represent both their constituents, who elected them, as well as the welfare of the community as a whole.

Nevertheless, once elected, councillors need to understand that their pre-election agendas and allegiances are superseded by the expectation of the local community for effective governance.

And the democratic nature of Local Government, with its emphasis on transparency to the community of the decision processes, demands that the electorate can follow the decision processes in some detail. It is not enough for councillors to go through a perfunctory endorsement of issues at the meeting of council.

### THE COUNCIL MEETING AS THE FORUM FOR DECISION MAKING

Councillors are able to exercise their authority after they have been formally sworn in and when they meet formally as council. Neither the mayor nor councillors have executive authority as individuals.

However, for councils, like all effective teams, it is the quality and skill of the participants' interactions and their ability to function and perform as a unit, that determines the outcome – success, failure or somewhere in between.

And even with the best will in the world, behavioural psychologists have shown that effective team behaviour can be impacted by inbuilt forces that oppose productive dialogue amongst team members, such as the need to protect themselves from seeming to be incompetent.

In the end, good governance requires councillors to be part of a process that asks the hard questions, validates the information, debates the issues, seeks understanding of the issues before them and to then, and only then, make a decision.

## LEADERSHIP

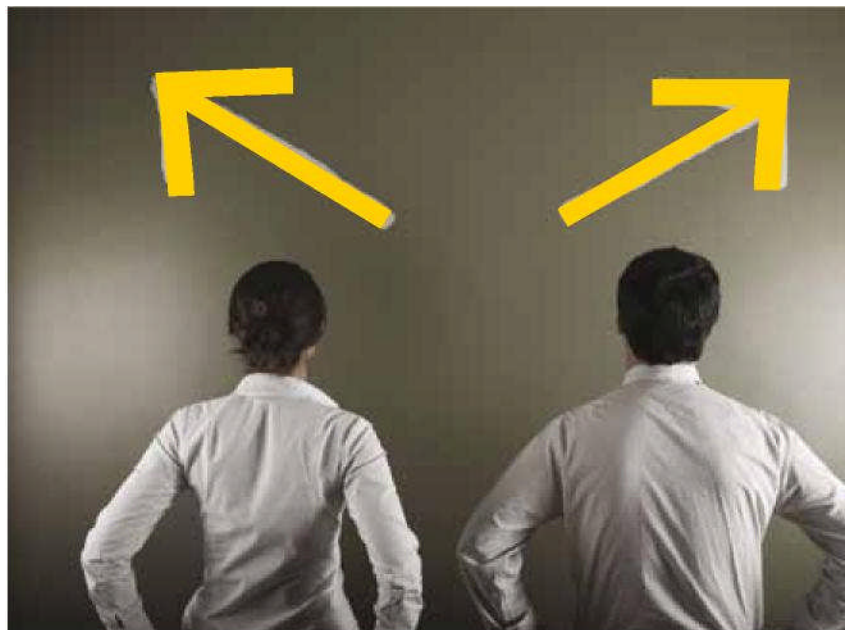
Great teams require the political acumen of effective leadership - being able to align agendas, create coalitions, smooth ruffled feathers, etc. But perhaps most importantly, is the capability to effect changes in the attitudes of colleagues and their behaviour so that they are less defensive, more prepared to listen to other points of view and to face the brutal facts of current circumstance.

The mayor, as the chair of the council, has the unenviable task of moulding and cajoling his or her councillors into a team capable of effective governance – what they are elected to do. With their many agendas and allegiances, inside and outside of chambers, mayors often feel that it would be easier to herd cats than the bunch of councillors the community has given them. It is no less of a problem for the Chief Executive and his or her management team, they too have to manage this herd of cats, a herd that changes every time there is an election.

## INFORMATION ACCESS AND DECISION PROCESSES

Local Government decision-making is based on a wide range of issues on behalf of the community. This is no simple task for councillors. Indeed, if you think about the vast volume of complex and sometimes contradictory information councillors are expected to read and understand, and the challenges that this can represent, perfunctory endorsement of report recommendations is not surprising.

And this problem of information overload is compounded by the limited access by councillors to administrative support, so that they need to individually satisfy themselves about the validity of the information they receive.



## THE WAY FORWARD

The first step on the way to achieving good governance through great teamwork is to find out what the team thinks of its own performance. It does not matter what others think. What does matter is what the team thinks of itself, what skills and competencies it thinks it has, how effective are the decision processes and what the individuals that comprise the team think of each other? This is about unearthing from the tacit consciousness of team members what they really think and feel, through reviews such as:

- *Assessments about the information and decision making processes that underpin the effectiveness or otherwise of council meetings*
- *Councillor opinions of mayoral leadership both within the council meeting and externally*
- *Peer reviews by the councillors of each other's behaviour within and outside the council meeting.*

In the final analysis, rarely is Local Government performance accidental. Rather, it is the alchemy of good strategy, strong teams and discipline based upon a virtuous cycle of facing the brutal facts through regular review (assessments), learning from the findings and implementing remedial and proactive actions as appropriate. ■