

WORKING WELL TOGETHER: A TOOLKIT FOR COUNCIL-CAO -ADMINISTRATION RELATIONSHIPS

**A foundational onboarding resource
for elected municipal officials in Alberta**

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

When you are elected to municipal office, one of the most important parts of your success is your working relationship with the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and the rest of Administration. This relationship influences everything from how smoothly Council meetings run, to how effectively services are delivered in your community, to how your strategic priorities are implemented.

A positive and respectful relationship between Council and Administration is the foundation for a healthy municipal organization.

This toolkit is designed to help you understand what that relationship is, how to make it work, and what to avoid. It is a practical resource for every member of Council, no matter your background, previous experience, or the size of your municipality. Whether you are serving in your first term or returning with experience, this guide provides essential knowledge and tools to navigate your role with clarity and confidence.

The toolkit is not about creating formality or bureaucracy. Instead, it helps answer key questions that often arise during the early days on Council:

- **What is the CAO's role, and what is mine?**
- **What are the best ways to foster a productive team environment?**
- **Who do I talk to if I need information?**
- **How do I bring forward concerns or ideas without crossing the line into operations?**

Built around four key themes, this resource draws on the principles of good governance set out in Alberta's ***Municipal Government Act (MGA)***, and is informed by insights from interviews with current Mayors, CAOs, and Councillors. It includes both foundational concepts and practical advice, so you can build trust, communicate effectively, and stay focused on delivering value to your community.

Your council term is an opportunity to make a lasting difference. This toolkit is here to help you start strong and stay aligned with your colleagues, with Administration, and with the community you serve.

KNOW YOUR ROLE & RESPECT THEIRS

Understanding where your job ends and someone else's begins is one of the most effective ways to prevent confusion, conflict, and frustration. In municipal government, the separation between governance and administration is essential for maintaining clarity, accountability, and professionalism.

This division of responsibilities is not just about process. It is a foundational element of effective local leadership. When elected officials focus on setting direction and approving policies, and Administration is empowered to manage operations, the municipality runs more smoothly. This structure helps ensure that services are delivered consistently, decisions are made strategically, and the public can have confidence in their local government.

When roles are unclear, problems arise. Councillors may unintentionally interfere with day-to-day operations, staff may receive conflicting messages, and the organization may struggle to stay aligned with Council's priorities. These situations can erode trust, create inefficiencies, and even expose the municipality to legal or reputational risk. That is why understanding your role and working in partnership with the CAO and Administration is essential for a productive and respectful term in office.

What Council Does

- Sets long-term vision and priorities for the community
- Passes bylaws, adopts policies, and approves the municipal budget
- Represents residents and advocates on their behalf
- Oversees the performance of the CAO
- Focuses on strategy, not service delivery

What the CAO Does

- Implements Council's direction through programs and services
- Oversees municipal staff and manages day-to-day operations
- Advises Council on policy, legal, financial, and operational matters
- Ensures compliance with legislation and Administration's policy
- Leads the organization internally

Councillors Do Not Manage Staff

Individual Councillors have no authority to direct or evaluate municipal employees. Municipal staff report to the CAO, not to council, or council members individually. Respecting that reporting structure is not only good governance, it also protects staff from undue pressure and keeps you within your legal responsibilities.



"I always say, I sit on one side of the table and the administration sits on the other... I've definitely seen councillors who think they can just pick up the phone and tell the CAO what to do, and that's not a healthy relationship."

- Reeve, Rural Municipality

Council is a Team

Council is a governing body that makes decisions as a group and works best when it behaves like a team. Council makes decisions as a group. Once a decision is made by the majority, it becomes the decision of Council, even if you personally voted against it. Individual members cannot act on behalf of Council or issue directives to Administration on their own.



“We work very much as a team of councillors. That doesn’t mean we always agree — we have some very divergent viewpoints and debates can be quite active. But it’s really rewarding to see how those different perspectives tease out solutions.”

- Councillor, Small Municipality

Example

Imagine Council has just voted 4 to 3 to approve a new location for a dog park. You were one of the three who voted against it. You made your concerns clear, you asked thoughtful questions, and you expressed your opposition during the debate. Now that the vote is over, the direction is set. It is no longer your personal position that matters - it is Council’s collective decision that must be respected.

This is where things can become difficult.

You might personally disagree with the outcome. You might hear frustration from residents who also opposed the decision. You might even believe that the wrong choice was made. But your role as a member of Council is to uphold the decision of the group, not to continue campaigning against it once the vote has been taken.

Think Like a Board of Directors

You are part of a governing body - you do not manage the municipality. Your role is to:

- Set direction
- Monitor progress and risk
- Represent the public interest
- Hold the CAO accountable for results

Like a Chief Executive Office of a business, the municipality’s CAO leads the implementation and manages staff to achieve Council’s objectives.

Practical Tips

1. If a resident complains about a service (e.g., garbage pickup, snow removal), acknowledge their concern, then refer them to the CAO or municipal intake system. Do not investigate or intervene directly. It might be natural for you to want to help a resident with a problem, but you may not have all the information and it is important to trust the expertise of staff to either resolve the concern or raise it with council as a whole.
2. Avoid visiting municipal offices or job sites unannounced. Staff may feel pressured to treat your presence as direction.
3. Don't copy (CC) or blind copy (BCC) staff on emails to the CAO unless explicitly agreed upon. It creates confusion about who's in charge.
4. Use Council meetings, strategic planning sessions, or set up a meeting with the CAO to raise operational concerns — not private messages or side conversations with staff.

The key thing to remember is that you were elected to a governing body, not a management position. Think about it like being appointed to the board of directors. Focus on the bigger picture of how to move your community forward and trust and respect the expertise of your CAO and their staff to get the job done.

BUILD THE RELATIONSHIP EARLY AND THEN KEEP AT IT

Strong working relationships do not happen automatically. They are built through trust, consistency, and shared understanding over time. In municipal government, the connection between Council and the CAO is one of the most important working relationships you will have. Starting off on the right foot and continuing to invest in the relationship throughout your term is essential to good governance.

Every newly elected Council brings change, and with it, an opportunity to set a new tone. How you engage with the CAO in the first weeks and months can shape how the entire Council works with Administration for the rest of the term. Clear expectations, respectful communication, and time spent building rapport make it much easier to navigate difficult conversations when they arise.

It is also important to remember that relationships are not one-time efforts. They require ongoing attention. Just like any high-functioning leadership team, Council and the CAO need to check in regularly, revisit shared goals, and have space to talk openly about what is working and what is not.

Plan for Disagreement, Not Just Consensus

Disagreement is a natural and necessary part of governance. Different perspectives, values, and priorities lead to debate and discussion. That is not only expected, it is healthy when managed with respect. Councils that understand how to work through disagreement early in their term are better equipped to make good decisions under pressure later on.

Take time as a new Council to talk about how disagreement and potential conflict will be handled. Discuss your communication preferences, decision-making styles, and how you like to receive feedback. Encourage your CAO to share their approach as well. Having this conversation up front reduces the chance that difficult moments later on will escalate into personal or organizational breakdowns.

What Council Does

- Schedule an initial one-on-one meeting with the CAO after the election
- Ask about their leadership style, communication preferences, and current organizational priorities
- Share how you prefer to receive information and raise questions
- Discuss how concerns should be brought forward and followed up on

Use Structured Tools

- Request your CAO plan a Council orientation session that includes governance training and team-building
- Request your CAO to organize a strategic planning session to align expectations
- Establish an annual CAO performance review process that is collaborative and productive, not punitive
- Use retreats or quarterly check-ins to reflect on how Council and Administration are working together

Practice Humility

- Acknowledge what you do not know and be willing to learn
- Take advantage of formal training opportunities through Rural Municipalities of Alberta, Alberta Municipalities, the Elected Officials Education Program, or your own municipality
- Ask questions early rather than acting on assumptions
- Be open to coaching and advice from peers, your CAO, or experienced Councillors



“Our CAO is actually very good about this. If we’ve got a challenging debate coming up, she reaches out to us all on a group email and says, ‘Okay, this is coming, be prepared, come in with your material.’ And we do... we look into stuff.”

- Councillor, Small Municipality

Check In Regularly

- Schedule a recurring check-in between the Mayor and CAO and between the CAO and Council
- Use informal briefings or coffee chats to continue building relationships with one another
- Share updates and feedback in a consistent and respectful way

Practical Tips

1. Participate fully in all orientation sessions. Even experienced Councillors benefit from a shared onboarding experience, and this will be one of your first chances to start building a strong foundation as a team.
2. Set a reminder to revisit your working relationship with the CAO and your council colleagues after six months.
3. Respect your CAO’s time and capacity. Avoid overwhelming them with multiple individual requests.
4. Assume good intent. If something seems off, clarify it directly rather than letting tension build.
5. Keep personal conflict separate from professional decisions. Focus on solutions, not personalities.

COMMUNICATE CLEARLY, RESPECTFULLY AND COLLECTIVELY

How Council communicates with the CAO and Administration sets the tone for the entire municipality. Communication is not just about the words used, but also about timing, tone, consistency, and process. When communication is clear and respectful, it builds trust, increases efficiency, and reduces misunderstandings. When it is inconsistent, vague, or emotional, it can quickly lead to conflict or confusion.

Municipal staff take their cues from Council. If council is organized, professional, and aligned in its communication, staff are better able to respond confidently and deliver on expectations. It also helps bolster a positive work culture where staff will be efficient and motivated in their actions. But when individual members go directly to staff, share inconsistent messages, or criticize Administration publicly, it puts staff in an impossible position and damages the relationship.

Communication is a shared responsibility. It works best when both Council and the CAO understand the expectations and norms for how to interact. This means agreeing on who communicates what, how decisions are shared, and how questions and concerns are addressed.

Direction Comes from Council as a Whole

- Only Council as a governing body can give direction to the CAO
- Individual Councillors do not have authority to direct staff or make operational requests
- Avoid one-off conversations with staff that may be interpreted as instructions
- Respect the CAO's role in managing internal communication and follow-up

Set Clear Protocols

- Work with the CAO to define how Councillors should request information or raise concerns
- Use Council meetings and briefing memos for formal updates and direction
- Clarify whether informal check-ins or email summaries will be used for ongoing communication
- Identify how emerging issues will be escalated or responded to between meetings

Be Professional and Respectful

- Give constructive feedback to the CAO in private, not in public meetings or through social media
- Express appreciation publicly when staff go above and beyond
- Avoid using Administration's staff as sources for political messaging or internal strategy - their role is to provide unbiased subject matter expertise and implement Council's official decisions.
- Maintain confidentiality and avoid gossip or speculation

Focus on Patterns, Not Perfection

- Not every message will land perfectly- that is normal in any working relationship
- Look for overall patterns in tone, consistency, and responsiveness- if something feels off, raise it early and directly rather than letting frustration build
- Keep communication open even during disagreement or tension

Example

If you receive a resident concern about a sensitive issue, such as a bylaw enforcement complaint or a planning decision, avoid responding publicly or contacting staff for details. Instead, forward the concern to the CAO and ask that it be reviewed and responded to through the proper process. This protects both you and the staff involved. While your role is to represent the public interest, as an elected official you are responsible for learning and using the proper procedures to do so.

Practical Tips

1. Agree as a Council on a shared communication protocol with your CAO. Make sure everyone understands it.
2. Use the right channel for the right purpose. For emotionally charged or complex issues, start with a phone call or meeting to build understanding. Then, follow up with a short email to document agreements or next steps.
3. Keep your tone respectful, especially in writing. Assume staff and the public may see any message you send.
4. Do not speak on behalf of Council unless formally designated to do so. When in doubt, clarify your role.
5. If you have feedback for Administration, bring it to the CAO directly. Avoid discussing staff performance publicly or with residents.

STAY FOCUSED ON THE PUBLIC INTEREST

As a member of Council, your role is to represent the whole community, not just the people who voted for you, not just the loudest voices, and not your personal preferences. The most effective Councils are those that stay focused on the long-term public interest and make decisions based on what will serve the entire municipality over time.

Working in the public interest requires discipline, especially when issues are politically sensitive or emotionally charged. It means staying out of day-to-day decisions and trusting Administration to implement Council's direction. It means focusing on policy, strategy, and outcomes, not personalities, blame, or popularity.

Being elected gives you influence, but it also gives you responsibility. Residents expect you to rise above personal conflicts, make informed decisions, and model professionalism. This includes how you speak about and to the CAO and Administration, how you respond to criticism, and how you conduct yourself in meetings and in the community.



"We have some very divergent viewpoints on our council. Debates can be quite active, but we are very respectful... one councillor I often butt heads with has probably been the most influential in making me a better councillor, because she challenges me and makes me think."

- Councillor, Small Municipality

Put the Community First

- Ask yourself whether each decision serves the broader public, not just a specific group
- Let go of personal agendas from the campaign once Council direction has been set
- Recognize that not every issue will be popular, but good decisions are rooted in facts and values
- Lead with empathy, especially during periods of uncertainty or change

Avoid Micromanagement

- Stay focused on the "what" and the "why" - Administration handles the "how"
- Trust Administration to determine how best to implement Council's direction
- Refrain from following up on individual work assignments or requesting operational updates unless agreed upon with the CAO

Expect Disagreement and Handle It Constructively

- Disagreement is not dysfunction - it is part of democratic governance
- Focus on debating ideas, not individuals
- Once a decision is made by Council, support it publicly and support Administration's implementation efforts
- Avoid undermining decisions in the media or in your community. Try to find areas of commonality or alignment, even when you might disagree on the final decision or how you got there.



"I didn't feel like council was representing the community. There was a lot of fighting — people voting just based on who brought the motion, not on the merits. That's not in the best interest of the community."

- Mayor, Mid-size City

Celebrate Progress Together

- Acknowledge successful projects, strong performance, and positive outcomes
- Recognize the contributions of both Council and administration when milestones are reached
- Find time to reflect on what has gone well — not just what needs fixing

Example

Council approves a contentious rezoning application and residents are upset, your role is to listen and acknowledge their concerns. However, it is also your responsibility to explain the decision respectfully, help residents understand the rationale, and avoid blaming staff or other Council members. This helps preserve trust in the municipality, even when people disagree with the outcome.

Practical Tips

1. Resist the temptation to revisit a decision just because it becomes politically uncomfortable. Stay grounded in the facts.
2. Support staff in public, even if you have private concerns. Raise issues with the CAO or in closed session discussions, not in front of the media.
3. Take time to review your municipality's strategic plan, participate in future opportunities to set strategic direction, and use it as a guide for future decisions.
4. When you feel frustrated, ask whether the issue is about process or outcome. Not every disagreement needs to become a conflict.
5. Celebrate collective wins. Use your platform to lift up the good work happening in your community and within your organization.

RESOURCES

- [What every councillor needs to know: A council member's handbook](#)
- [CAO Handbook](#)
- [CAO Performance Evaluation Toolkit](#)
- [Political Acumen Toolkit](#)
- [Public Engagement Guide](#)
- [ABmunis: Advocacy Resources](#)
- [RMA: Advocacy Resources](#)

* This is not a comprehensive list, but a great place to start.