The Pendulum: tools for successful dialogue in local government

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Disclaimer:

This presentation only covers the very tip of the iceberg.
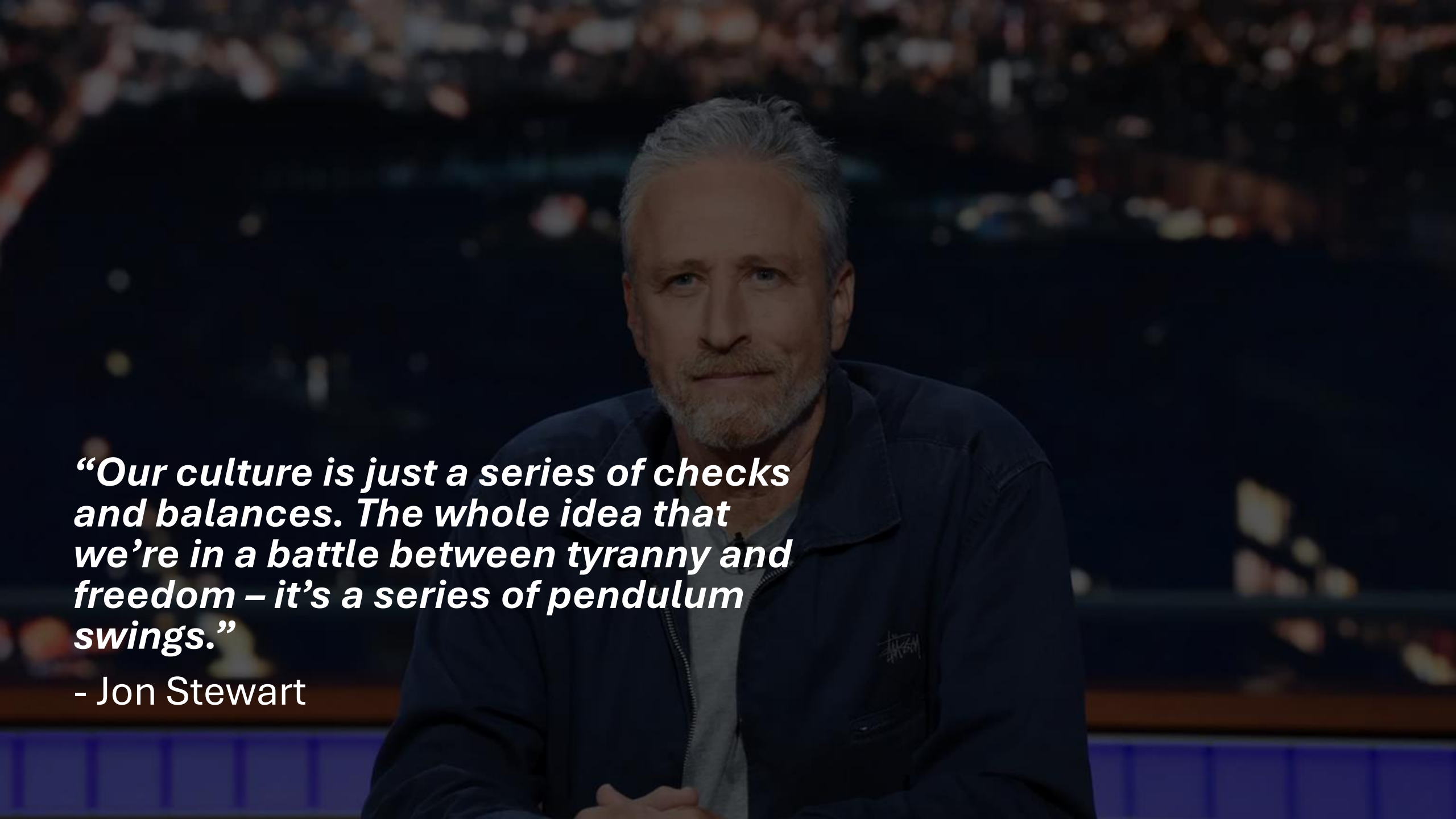
This is not legal advice!

Much of its content comes from a belief that we can and must keep improving how we work for our communities, in order to build and retain public trust.

Treat it as a starting point.

Any similarity in scenarios to real people and real events is coincidental and only based on local government sector hypothetical situations.

You should be commended for stepping up in your roles, and for being here today.

I wish we had another 3-5 days to cover this topic together! - jamie

"Our culture is just a series of checks and balances. The whole idea that we're in a battle between tyranny and freedom – it's a series of pendulum swings."

- Jon Stewart

Directions You Could Take This Topic

The Single Greatest Issue in Local Government Today?

Trust:
making the pendulum swing.

How do we know trust is an issue?

- Stats Can (2021) – *half of people are satisfied with life, and less than half feel a sense of trust in institutions and media (the younger, the less trust in institutions)*

- OECD Finding (2021) – *public involvement ≠ results*

- Pew Research Center (2023) – *since 2007, trust in gov't less than 30% (down from ~75% in the 1950's)*

- Gallup (2023) – 2/3 trust local government to deal with local issues!

- FCM (2019) – trust in local government higher than other orders (61%)

- Our own voter turnout (2022)

- Our experiences at public hearings

- The classroom (2019-2024 snapshot)

How can we (re)build trust?

- Awareness of the issue

- Desire to make change

- <u>Knowledge of how to address the issue</u>*

- Ability to make the change

- Reinforcement of actions and positives
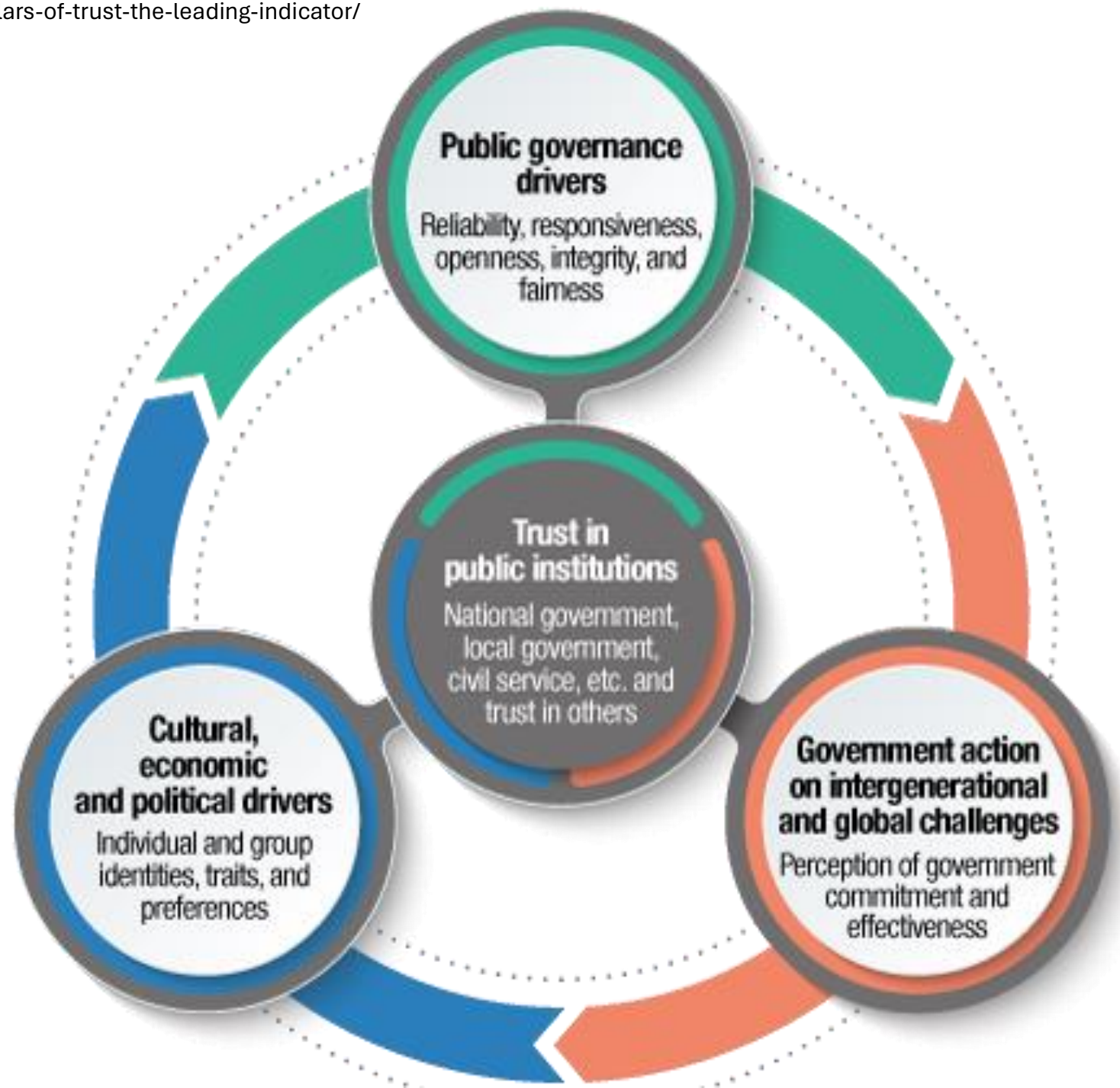
Factors of Trust

COMMUNICATION {

1. Transparency.
2. Demonstrating competency.
3. Engagement.
4. Discussion.
5. Time together.
6. Timeliness.
7. Demonstrating compassion.
8. Empathy & Kindness.
9. Accessibility.
10. Follow through.

Public governance drivers
Reliability, responsiveness, openness, integrity, and fairness

Trust in public institutions
National government, local government, civil service, etc. and trust in others

Cultural, economic and political drivers
Individual and group identities, traits, and preferences

Government action on intergenerational and global challenges
Perception of government commitment and effectiveness

COMMUNICATION AND TRUST

Communication with whom?

External (Public)

YOU

Internal (Your Organization)

Special Interests
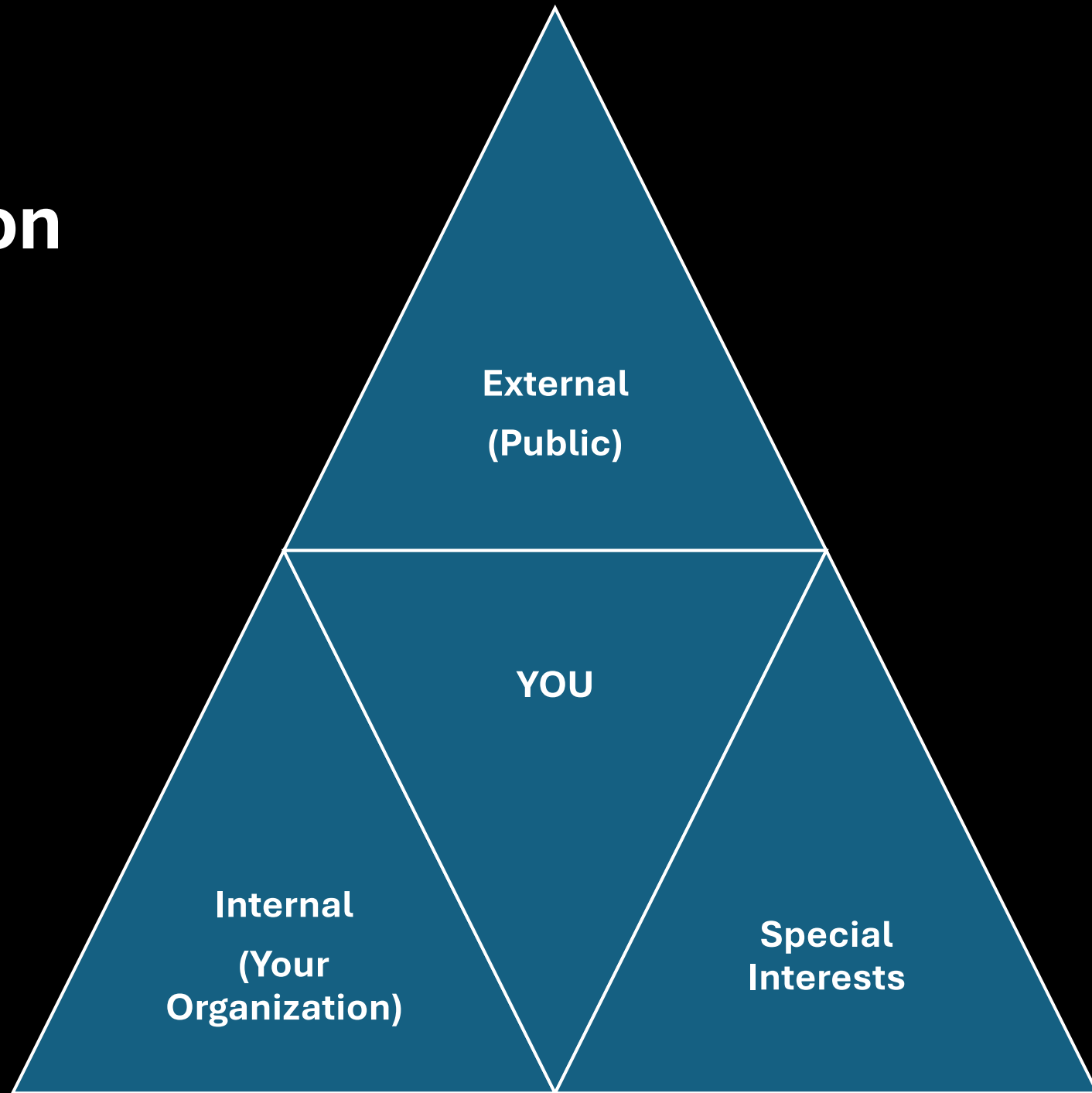
Avoid over-simplification

- Jumping to conclusions
- Telling ourselves stories
- Stereotypes
- Biases and Fear
- "They're just…"

Avoid over-simplification

- *"For every complex problem there is an answer that is simple, neat, and wrong."* – H.L. Mencken

Avoid over-complicating

"Perfectionism is procrastination masquerading as quality control." – Steven Barnes

Avoid over-complicating

- Avoid jargon
- Don't play the expert (even if you are)
- Demonstrate knowledge through the ability to simplify for a broad audience
  - More than ever, people are cautious of those who claim authority and expertise

Communication can swing the pendulum, or stabilize.

Through communication, how can you build trust?

There is good work going on already!

- Open Government
- "On the Record"
- Personal, clear, and timely Communications
- Economic Development Officers
- Communications Plans and Strategies (issue specific)
- Budget Engagement
- "Town Halls"
- Engaging High Schools in Design
- Council/Board Orientations (joinly, even!)
- Ongoing elected official training
- Strategic Planning – and linkages to the Financial Plan!

Don't get complacent.

- You don't know what you've got … until it's gone.
  - Make time for casual chats with each other
  - Meals and coffee – get to know each other personally
  - Not all meetings need to be "formal" – but all must be legal
  - Ask questions that you don't have a desired answer for (leading questions don't have to be a part of leadership)
  - Your regular meetings don't always have to be in Council Chambers
  - Uphold the value of your team. Praise publicly. Punish Privately.
  - Seek new ways to engage outside of public hearings.

Scenario #1: Partner Organization

- You are in a multi-jurisdictional negotiation with surrounding local governments, most of which is in camera due to land matters.

- Your mayor is approached by the media to comment on the item, which appears generally in the Strategic Plan of Council.

- The mayor responds quickly, personally, and over the weekend for the reporter, who has expressed that "there's a tight deadline" to publish that they're hoping to meet. The interview is completed, and the mayor even meets the reporter to get a photo on the property subject to negotiations.

- The mayor gets back to a busy weekend of public events and preparation for this week's council meetings.

- The article is published 4 days later, to the surprise of council, staff, and surrounding jurisdictions. Coincidentally, this is also the day of a inter-jurisdictional meeting on the topic.

- What went wrong? What went right?

- What do you think the outcome could be?

Scenario #2: External

- Following a contentious council meeting where a development permit for rental housing was debated, a member of council left City Hall and was greeted by a news correspondent with a camera.

- The councillor, upset with the decision made by the council, stated to the news that not only was the decision made "in haste and without due process," but "they shouldn't even be building that in that neighbourhood because there's a school nearby. But I guess they'll approve anything that this applicant brings forward because they are best buds from school."

- The councillor then storms off. The news airs later that evening to the surprise of council, and to the communications team, which recently ran a council training session on "de-stigmatizing language for elected officials" (the councillor in question did not attend).

- The next day, the council, the CAO, and the Planning team is bombarded by the local newspaper for comments not only on the decision, but on the comments of the councillor who appeared on the news.

- The mayor spoke with the CAO, Planning Director, and Communications Director to get key messaging before responding on behalf of council, attempting to demonstrate that the legal decision-making process was followed, and that the decision was appropriate given the process leading up to the vote of council.

- What went wrong? What went right? What could be the outcome?

Scenario #3: Internal

- The relationship at the elected Regional Board has deteriorated. In fact, it wasn't great from day one. Platforms conflicted from the outset. Because of a perceived disconnect between parties, in addition to budget constraints, orientations were not held before, during, or after the election.

- Some Electoral Area Directors feel disenfranchised by the municipal votes at the table, and the municipal representatives feel that the "Rural Mayors" are treating staff and particularly the CAO poorly (i.e. ignoring the One-Employee Policy; refusing the sign the Code of Conduct; and, walking into operational EOC's demanding updates). One municipal representative is frequently undercutting the work of the Board in public, and has leaked personnel information to the news following in camera discussions (previously, they have berated staff in public meetings). The Board Chair wishes to "keep everyone happy" by avoiding discussing the items with individual Directors; and further, they refuse to bring in external advisors to assist in team-mending – they feel it's too late.

- Staff are leaving en masse, and there are few applicants for open positions. Staff who have felt diminished by elected officials have gone on leave. Some staff, in their discontent, have sent "parting messages" to the Board, which has resulted in the Board arguing via email.

- The Board has asked the CAO to "fix the relationship."

Parting, Rapid-Fire Takeaways

- We can and should integrate communications planning and implementation throughout all local government practices – from the outset!

- We all play a role in local government communications; but elected officials set the tone down, up, across, and through communities.

- Collegial, collaborative, communication is essential in building trust and then acting on the crises of our time.

- The best discussions happen face-to-face.

- We don't have too much conflict, but too much discomfort in dealing with it (and too few tools to do so successfully).

- It is the responsibility of the elected officials to not just hold each other accountable, but to also work to foster strong, positive working relationships, even in the face of disagreement (especially!). There are ways, outside of Code of Conduct complaints, to hold each other to account; but they take time, patience, and discomfort. Once you have chosen the "nuclear option" it is nearly impossible to recover.

THE PATH AHEAD IS NOT BLACK AND WHITE

The poly-and-perma-crisis we find ourselves in, and our communities, deserve functional, thoughtful, kind, and action-oriented leadership.

In the absence of this leadership, the pendulum will continue to swing between each election, with very little being accomplished.

Thank you!
Q+A

To be continued tomorrow...

Ethical Role Clarity for Elected Officials

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Some key takeaways from what we couldn't cover prior...

1. Involve your technical experts and communications team early in all strategic projects

2. Involve the same folks as above when you're approached by the media

3. To build trust, you need timely, responsive, and collegial relationships internally, with partner organizations, and the media – this can facilitate stronger relationships in your community.

4. If your elected group relationship has deteriorated, don't lose hope. Ask for help. This is a sign of leadership. You aren't alone, and there are people who can help with conflict resolution, team-building, communication, or mediation.

RUSHING TO
FILL A VOID

The Role of Administration

- Staff are the operational body of the local government, charged with the day-to-day administration and "running of" the municipality.

- There are numerous methods of running a local government, but the "one-employee model" is currently viewed as the best practice. You may also see this called the Council-Manager System.

- Staff are to adhere to legislation, as well as bylaws/policies of Council.

- Staff are also to operate under job descriptions, collective agreements (or employment agreements/contracts), and work plans, often set by the CAO or management.

The Role of Administration

- Staff are not usually charged with setting vision and goals (although they may advise on them!)

- Staff, under leadership of the CAO, are to determine the appropriate tactics to accomplish the board/council vision and goals.

- A strategy can take many forms

The One-Employee Model: generalized

The Successful CAO?

- https://munigovt.org/2019/07/15/the-successful-cao-2019-07-14/
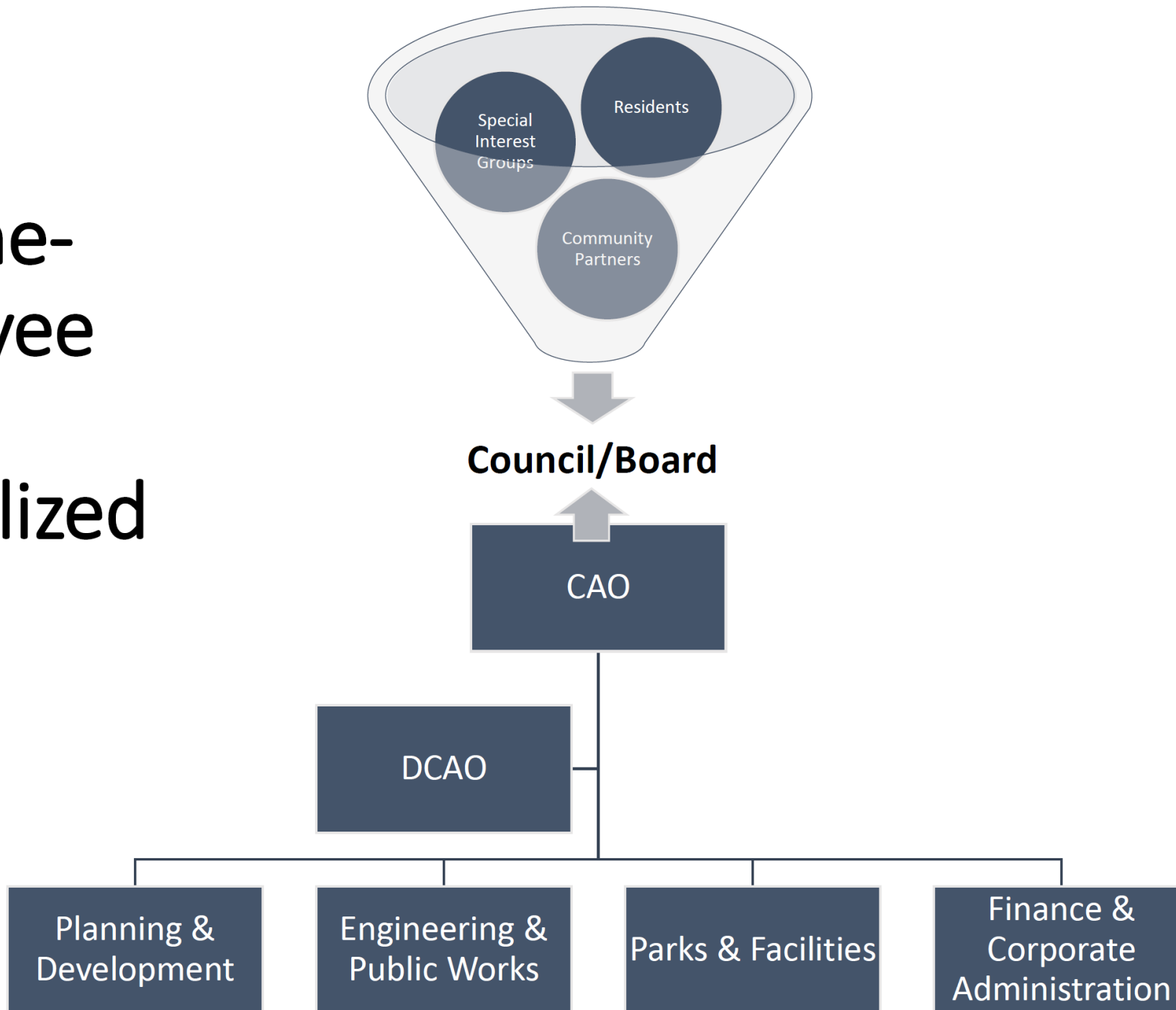
But even better...

- Leaders in the Shadows

- The Role of Canadian City Managers

- Welcome to the Hall

- Death of the Public Servant

- Guide to Good Municipal Governance

So, what makes a successful elected official?

The Role of Elected Officials
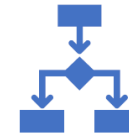
Governance

Service delivery policy choices

Establishment of officers

Finances

Decision-making processes

Meetings

How can elected officials best serve?

- Single issue vs. community-wide
- Prior preparation
- Care and due diligence
- Avoid decisions on the fly
- See the lands!
- Speak with people 20% (+ 80% *listening*)
- Show up, ask questions
- "Sharpen the saw"
- Recognize that you own the bylaws and policies
- Act like a steward of the public trust and interest
- Multi-generational thinking

The Role of Elected Officials (continued...)

Vision & Objectives

- Setting vision in a continuous body
- Establishing Objectives: why and when
- The difference between Objectives and Tactics
  - Community safety vs lighting installation
  - Safe mobility vs. street width
  - Smart Growth vs. processing of subdivisions
  - Responsible asset management vs. installation of XY-brand water meters
  - Truth & Reconciliation vs. date, time, and lunch order for the C2C Meeting
  - Good governance vs. the software used to publish the agenda

So where do you focus?

Where do you focus your strategies and plans given limited time and capacity?

Influence

Neither
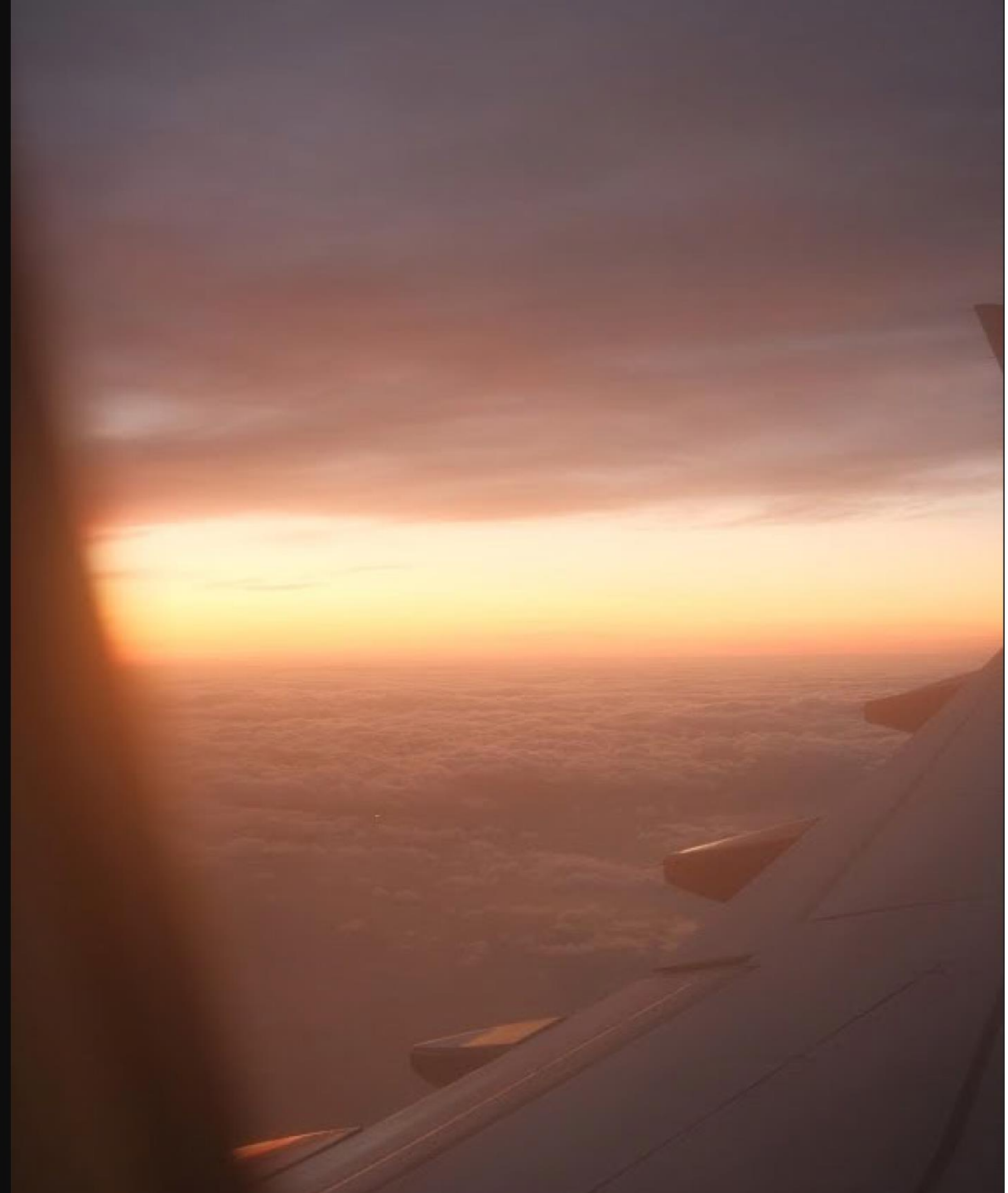
TIME

Control
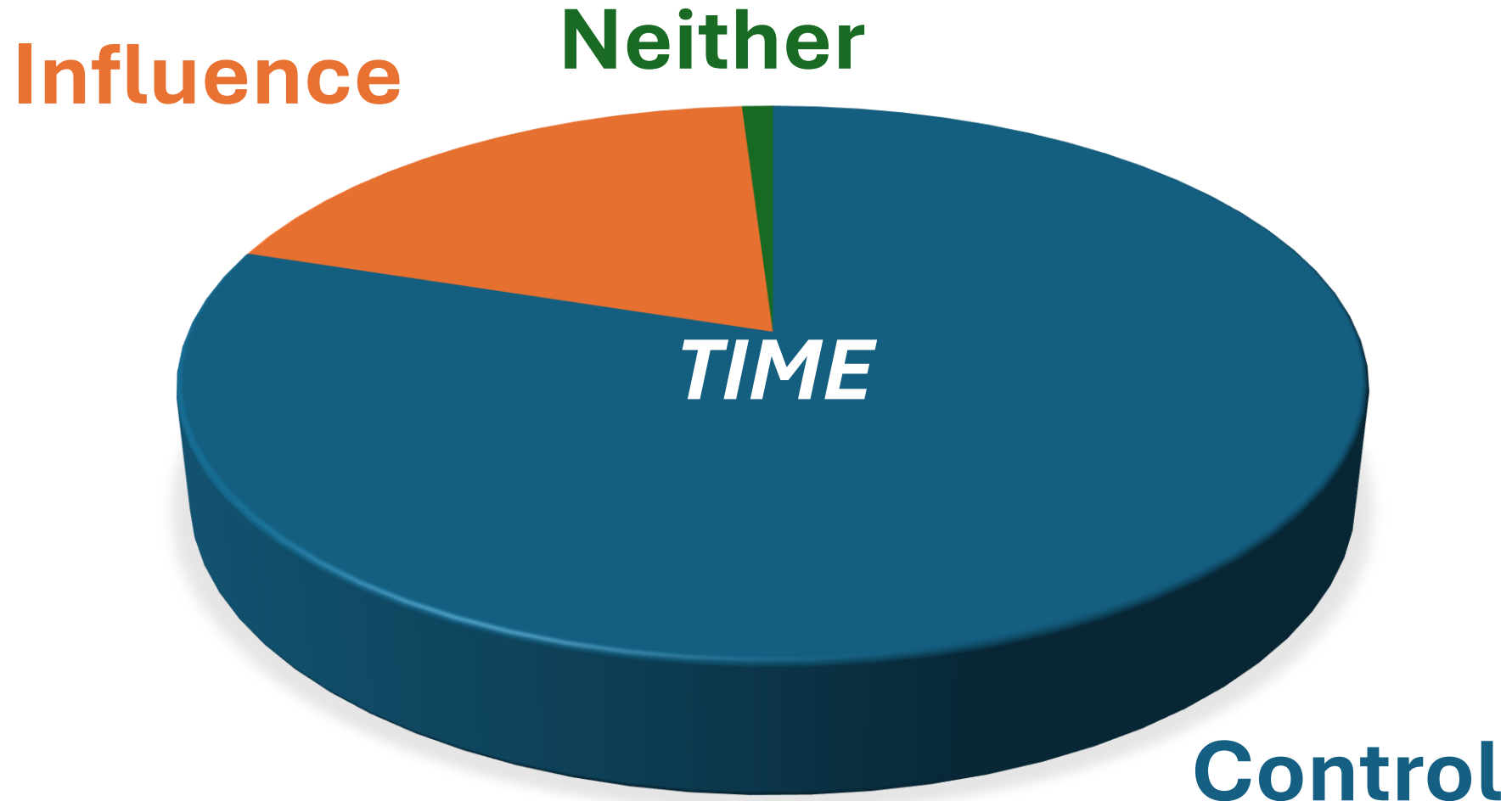
"A goal without a plan is just a wish."

Boards and councils establish vision and goals.

The historic tendency has been to put these "on the shelf" and move onto the next attractive project without consideration for how things will be implemented.

We will discuss linking decisions to implementation later in the session.

Ethical Conduct: a way of being

- Focus more on the process than the tangible policy, bylaw, or wording

- Have a code, then treat it like an asset!
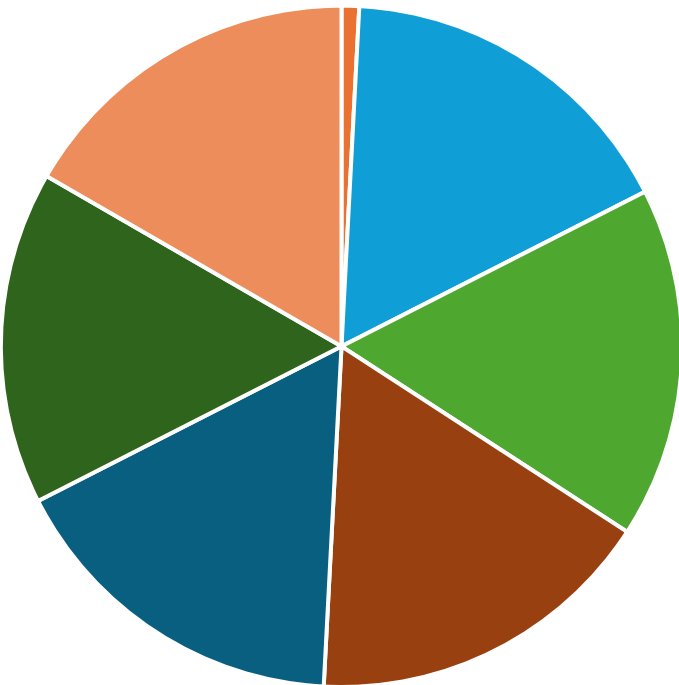
Fast, Good, or Cheap

....

The Iron Triangle

Weighing the opposing forces of quality, speed and cost against each other.

Traits of a Successful Member of Council

Traits

- ■ Knowledge
- ■ Curiosity
- ■ Humility
- ■ Empathy
- ■ Courage
- ■ Collaborative
- ■ Compassion

The Successful Mayor/Chairperson

- Is self-aware
- Brings people together, building a sense of team (up, down, across, in and out)
- Upholds the integrity of the local government
- Facilitates good governance and positive dialogue
- Represents the voice of "the whole" of Council internally, externally, and with partners of the community
- Chairs meetings
- Leads and helps keep the group on track towards its vision

Team Leadership: Levels

"People follow you because...

5:

Pinnacle

(...of who you are and the quality you exhibit)

4:

People Development

(...of what you have done for them)

3:

Production

(...of what you have done for the organization)

2:

Permission

(...they want to)

1:

Position

(...they have to)

Level 5 Leadership

- Typically, this is used to describe individual leaders in their journeys to lead others.

- This is also closely tied to "Servant Leadership" – or *service-oriented leadership*

- We can apply this to teams!

Jim Collins: The levels of contribution that people make including Level 5 Leaders who combine Personal Humility and Professional Will

Level 5 Executive — **They build enduring greatness through a paradoxical combination of personal humility and professional will**

Level 4 Effective Leader — **They catalyse commitment to pursuing a compelling vision and stimulate people to achieve high performance**

Level 3 Competent Manager — **They organise people and performance to the effective and efficient pursuit of predetermined objectives**

Level 2 Contributing Team Member — **They contribute to the achievement of group objectives and work effectively with others in a group setting**

Level 1 Highly Capable Individual — **They make productive contributions through talent, knowledge, skills and good work habits**

A proposal...

Level 5 Teams

1: Team of Capable Individuals

2: Unified Team of Leaders

3: Unified Team of Self-Aware Leaders

4: Unified Team-Aware Leaders

5: Caring, Unified, Team-Aware Leaders
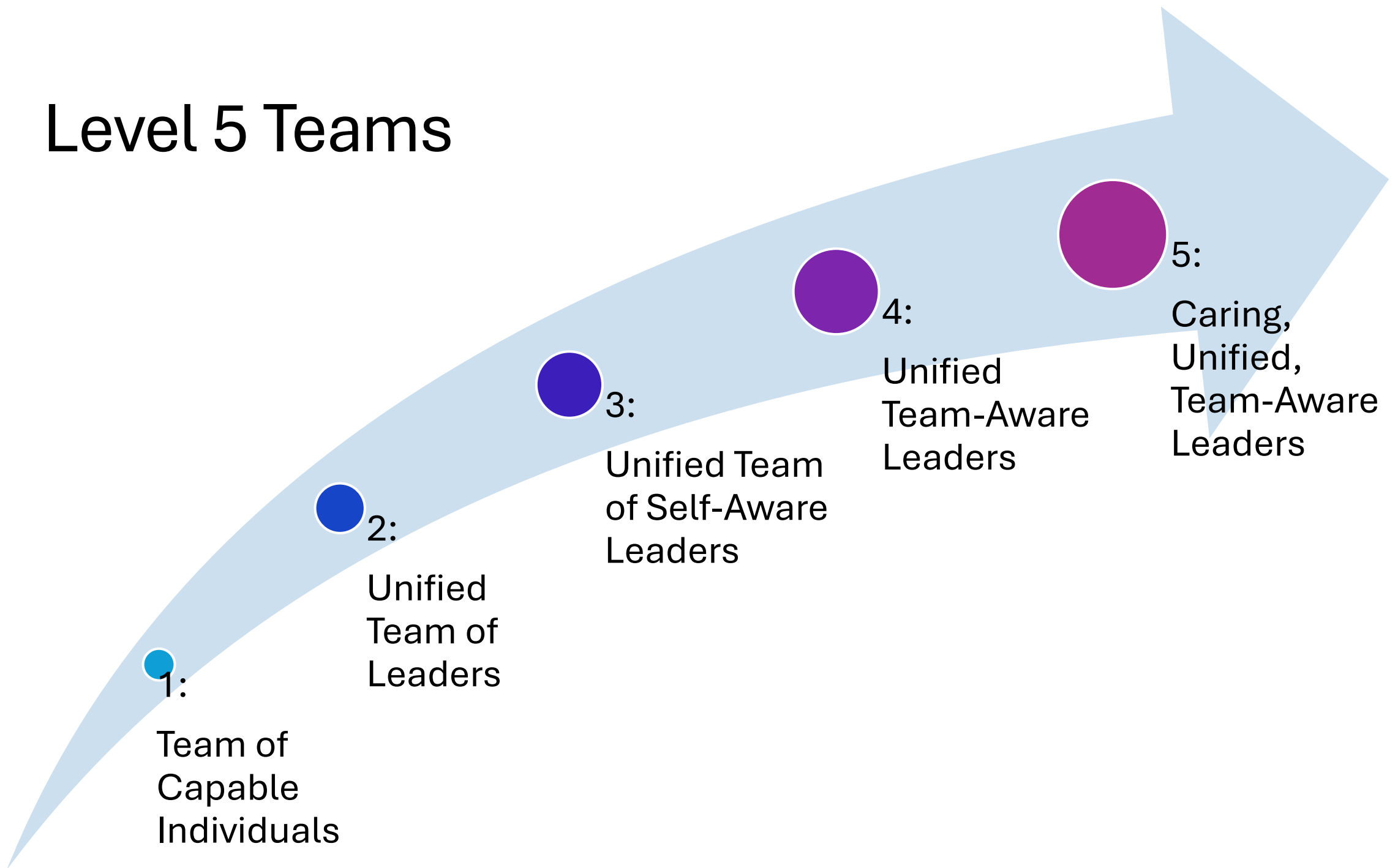
A Snapshot Assessment For Elected Groups
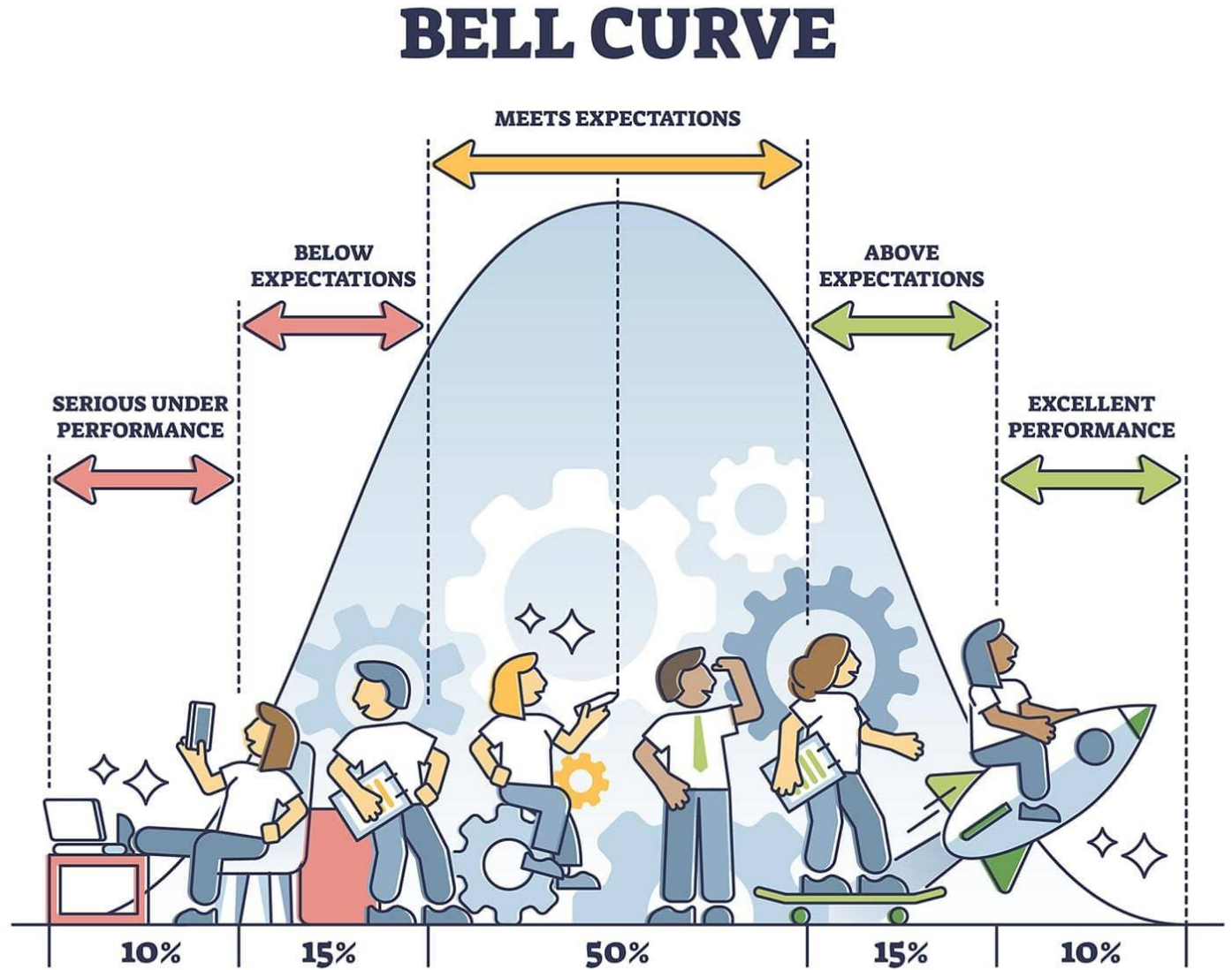
BELL CURVE

MEETS EXPECTATIONS

BELOW EXPECTATIONS

ABOVE EXPECTATIONS

SERIOUS UNDER PERFORMANCE

EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE

10%   15%   50%   15%   10%

Your performance review doesn't just have to be at the time of election...

CHARACTERISTICS OF BEST (AND WORST) PRACTICES

High Functioning Council	Muddling Through Council	Dysfunctional Council
Sets a clear direction and priorities for the corporation.	Sets priorities but then forgets about them.	Avoids setting direction or priorities or feels this is unnecessary.
Is focussed on its priorities and challenges, and what is in its control.	Is intermittently focussed – often council direction is driven by a minority or council members.	Easily distracted – lacks focus – 'squeaky wheel' leadership is the norm – 'crisis' of the moment.

Note: green = good

Does not reconsider decisions unnecessarily.	Frequently does not know how to deal with contentious decisions.	Frequently reconsiders decisions.
Listens more than talks.	Appears to listen but doesn't really hear key messages.	Talks more than listens.
Is accountable and takes responsibility for its decisions.	Personal – not collective accountability.	Blames others – often staff – for decisions/outcomes. Diffused accountability. Councillor members (or staff)"throw others under the bus".
Has a professional relationship with its City Manager and staff.	Doesn't see staff/council relationship conflicts.	Dysfunctional/unprofessional relationship with staff.

Is one where all council members are treated with respect.	Some council members marginalized.	Sees winners and losers around the council table. Marginalizes some members.
Welcomes differences of opinion.	Barely tolerates different views at the council table.	Intolerant of different perspectives and views different opinions as wrong.
Council meetings are well run, time is managed, and the important decisions get the attention they need and deserve.	Council manages to get through meeting agendas but just.	Council meetings are chaotic, easily distracted and important issues do not get the attention and time they should.

Council members retain strategic leadership role. Do not micromanage staff.	Different perspectives on Council regarding role separation and responsibilities.	Individual Council members micromanage operations and staff.
Council works as a collective decision - making body.	Some Council members work to undermine Mayor and Council.	Council has members who define themselves as "opposition" members.
Council recognises it can't please everyone. Adopts "statesman" role.	Council responds inconsistently to loudest community voices and special interests.	Council tries to please everyone, or Council members only represent their own constituency.

Here's the whole assessment/checklist, produced by Jerry Berry and Allison Habkirk, for your reference:
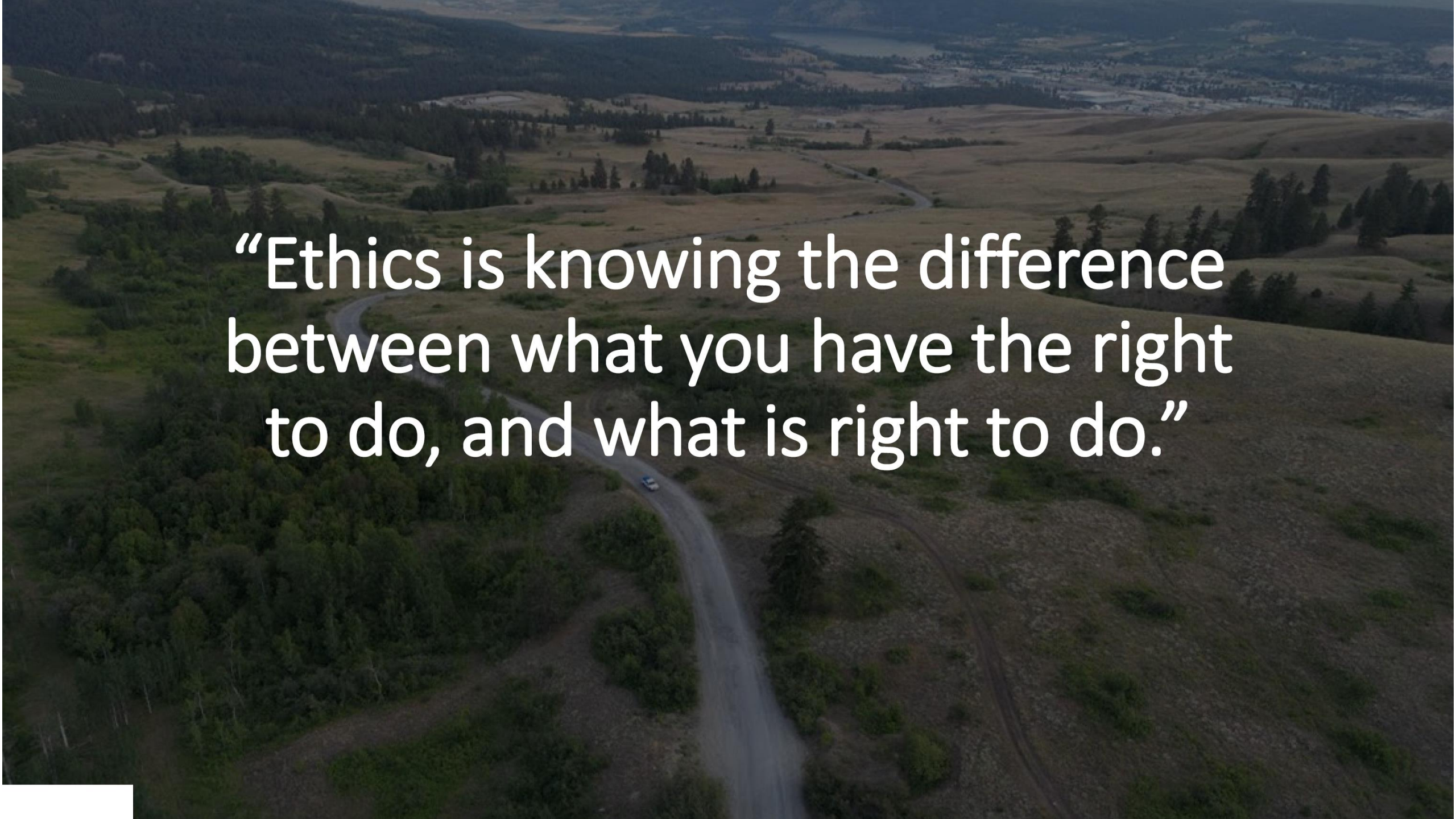
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Is focussed on its priorities and challenges, and what is in its control.	Is intermittently focussed – often council direction is driven by a minority or council members.	Easily distracted – lacks focus – 'squeaky wheel' leadership is the norm – 'crisis' of the moment.
Wants to get things done. Effective.	Doesn't know if it wants to get things done. Says it wants to be effective.	Doesn't know if it wants to get things done, or actively promotes chaos. Ineffective.
Board of Governors. Council and Staff Partnership exists.	Board of Directors, Activists, Delegates.	Board of Populists or Trustees.
Makes decisions and moves forward (respects the democratic principle of majority prevails) – after due process.	Makes some decisions – defers others and frequently gets stuck in circular referrals.	Avoids making decisions – particularly the tough ones.
Does not reconsider decisions unnecessarily.	Frequently does not know how to deal with contentious decisions.	Frequently reconsiders decisions.
Listens more than talks.	Appears to listen but doesn't really hear key messages.	Talks more than listens.
Is accountable and takes responsibility for its decisions.	Personal – not collective accountability.	Blames others – often staff – for decisions/outcomes. Diffused accountability. Councillor members (or staff)"throw others under the bus".
Has a professional relationship with its City Manager and staff.	Doesn't see staff/council relationship conflicts.	Dysfunctional/unprofessional relationship with staff.
Council, as a whole, shares responsibility for management of meetings.	Ineffective use of council procedures and protocols for meeting management.	Responsibility for meeting management falls solely on the mayor/chairperson.
Understands its role.	Suffers from role confusion.	Doesn't understand or accept its role.
Respects the boundaries between the role of council as policy makers and the role of staff to oversee operations and implementation of council decisions.	Intrusion by some members of council into the operations area.	Thinks its role is to oversee and 'manage' operational areas – doesn't recognize or respect boundaries or lines of communication.
Demonstrates respectful behaviour to council members and staff.	Behind the scenes attacks on council members and staff.	Openly criticizes council members and staff in public.

Is one where egos of the members are in check.	Individual egos asserted but managed by the majority of council.	Individual council members put individual needs and wants before those shared wants and needs of the council and the community.
Does not tolerate bullying of council members or staff.	Indifferent or does not recognize bullying behaviour.	Stands on the sidelines to witness bully behaviour.
Is one where all council members are treated with respect.	Some council members marginalized.	Sees winners and losers around the council table. Marginalizes some members.
Welcomes differences of opinion.	Barely tolerates different views at the council table.	Intolerant of different perspectives and views different opinions as wrong.
Council meetings are well run, time is managed, and the important decisions get the attention they need and deserve.	Council manages to get through meeting agendas but just.	Council meetings are chaotic, easily distracted and important issues do not get the attention and time they should.
'Office' of mayor respected. Mayor respects the will of council.	Mayor and council members' relationships disrespectful, guarded, untrusting.	Mayor sees his/her role as CEO over council / or council sees mayor as irrelevant.
Council takes responsibility for its own inter-relationships.	Council only selectively and intermittently manages its own inter-relationships between members.	Council expects CAO to act as 'referee' and manage and control the mayor or individual councillors.

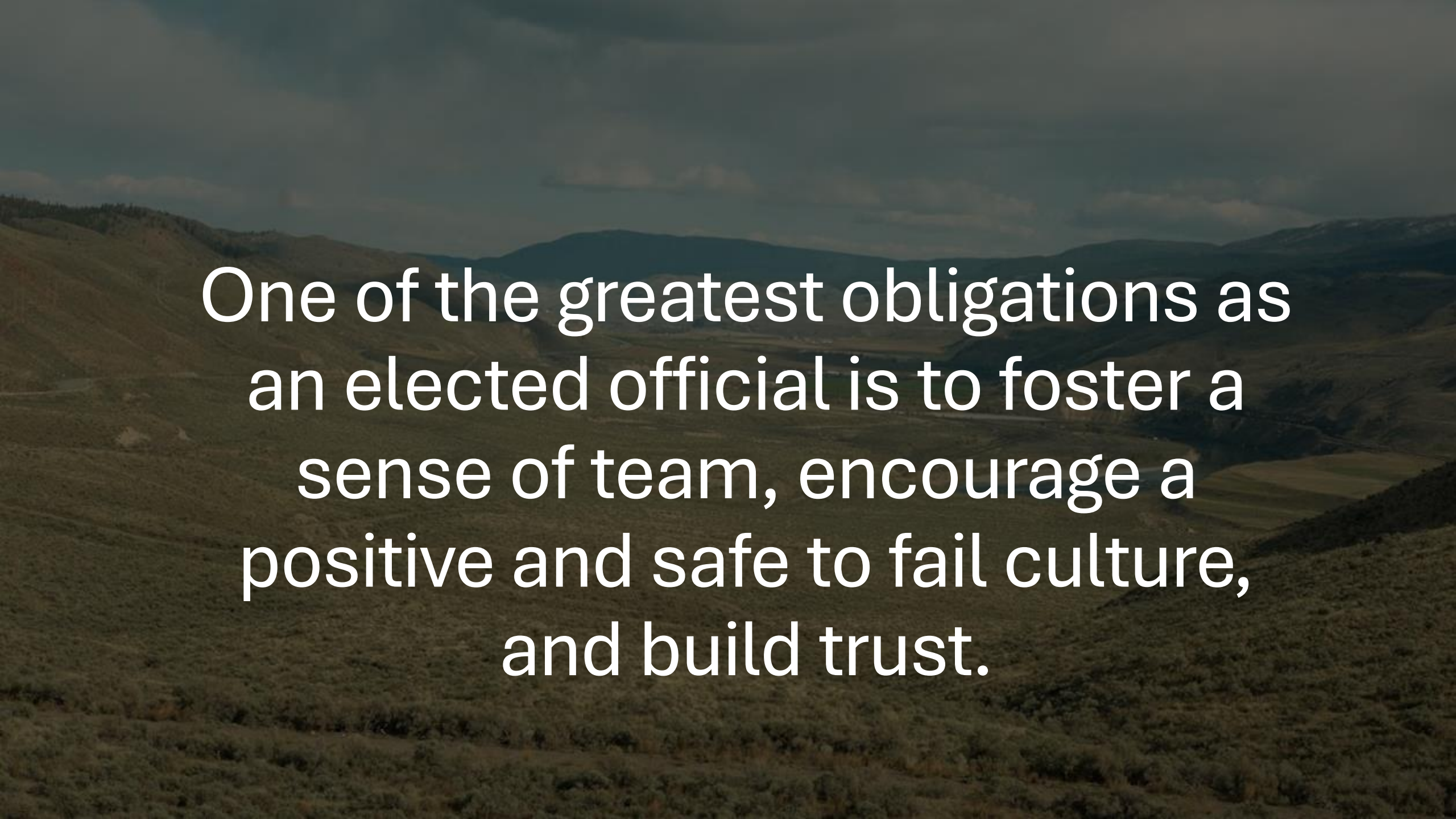|		
'Walks the Talk' – leads by example – respects the rule of law.	Inconsistent/unreliable.	Openly and demonstrably hypocritical.
Collectively sets decisions on confidentiality and respects confidentiality.	Confidentiality selectively broken.	Confidentiality decisions not respected. Individuals consider they are above democratic decisions of majority.
Council members retain strategic leadership role. Do not micromanage staff.	Different perspectives on Council regarding role separation and responsibilities.	Individual Council members micromanage operations and staff.
Council works as a collective decision - making body.	Some Council members work to undermine Mayor and Council.	Council has members who define themselves as "opposition" members.
Council recognises it can't please everyone. Adopts "statesman" role.	Council responds inconsistently to loudest community voices and special interests.	Council trys to please everyone, or Council members only represent their own constituency.
Council meetings / processes efficient as members come prepared. Research done in advance.	Some Council members come prepared.	Council members fail to prepare for meetings or to "get their ducks in line" before making motions.
Council works under the "orchestral" or "team" model.	Council has identifiable "cliques"	Council split on party, slate or allegiance lines. Block voting. Staff in the middle.
Communications respectful, direct and face to face.	Communications approaches "varied".	Communications "digital", miscommunication, misinterpretation and transmission / distribution errors.
Election is history. Council forward looking.	Some Council members see role as purely representing their "support" group. "Campaigning" ongoing.	Council members still fighting the past election; or are motivated primarily by addressing past perceived slights. (vengeance)

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"Ethics is knowing the difference between what you have the right to do, and what is right to do."

If your communication with each other does not demonstrate trust, you cannot expect your community to trust you.

One of the greatest obligations as an elected official is to foster a sense of team, encourage a positive and safe to fail culture, and build trust.

Wrapping Up…