
BRIDGING CITIES

THROUGH INNOVATION & TRADITION

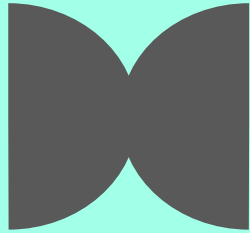


Managing Conflict

Becca Bixler,
City of Inwood

Handouts and presentations are available in the conference app.

Managing Conflict: Staying CALM Through Difficult Conversations



Turning Difficult Conversations Into
Opportunities for Stronger Communities

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Mayor, City of Inwood

Becca Bixler, Mayor

Becca is a healthcare social worker with 17 years of experience and is currently in her first term as mayor of Inwood, Iowa, after 8 years on the city council. With a Master's in Social Work and experience in both subacute rehabilitation and the VA healthcare system, she brings a strong commitment to advocacy, connection, and person-centered care. As mayor, she focuses on transparent leadership and strengthening civic engagement to better serve her community.

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Workshop Objectives

By the end of the hour, participants will:

- Recognize common sources of conflict in local government
- Learn practical de-escalation strategies
- Practice communication techniques that preserve relationships
- Gain tools to manage emotionally charged meetings
- Leave with a conflict management toolkit they can immediately implement



Let's Start Here...

Raise your hand if you've ever experienced:

- ☐ A resident yelling during public comment
- ☐ Social media misinformation
- ☐ A disagreement between council members
- ☐ A controversial ordinance
- ☐ Residents who say, "Nobody asked us"
- ☐ A meeting that went completely off the rails



Why This Matters

Conflict is not a sign of failure.

Conflict means:

- People care
- Decisions matter
- Perspectives differ
- Communities are engaged

The problem isn't conflict. It's how we manage it.



Why Conflict is Harder in Small Communities

We're not strangers.

We're:

- Neighbors
- Friends
- Former classmates
- Family members
- Business owners

People don't leave conflict at City Hall.



What's Really Happening

People often aren't angry about the issue itself.

They're feeling:

- Unheard
- Uninformed
- Excluded
- Disrespected
- Surprised

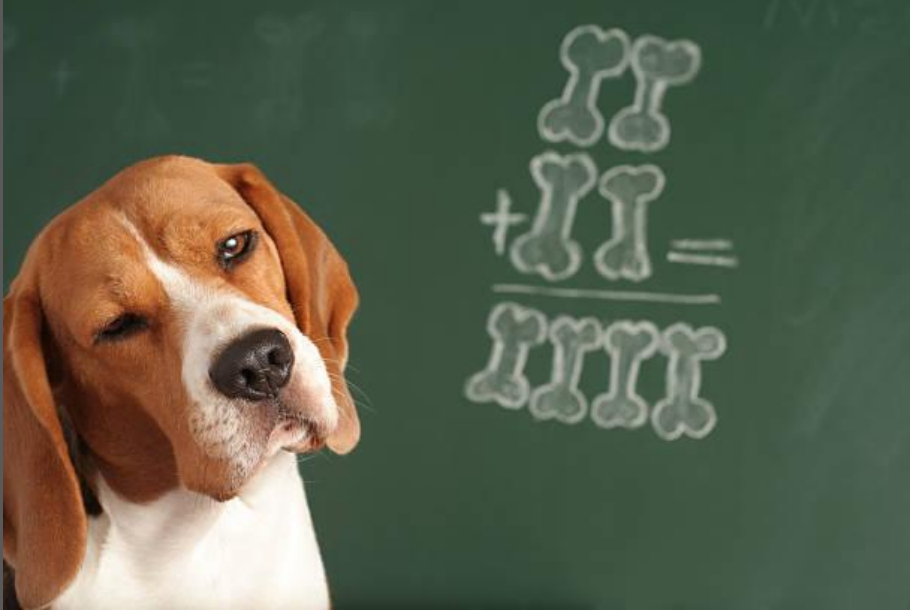
Underneath anger is:

- Fear
- Frustration
- Disappointment
- Uncertainty
- Loss

Anger is often a secondary emotion.

The Leadership Equation

Emotion + Uncertainty + Poor Communication = Escalation



Emotion + Information + Respect = Productive Dialogue

The CALM Framework

Curiosity over criticism

Active listening

Lead with transparency

Move toward shared goals

Our job isn't to eliminate conflict. It's to remain CALM in the middle of it.



C = Curiosity Over Criticism

Before responding, ask
yourself:

What facts do I know?

What assumptions am I making?

What outcome am I hoping to achieve?

Questions slow down
conflict.

C = Curiosity Over Criticism

Before responding, ask
others:

Help me understand.

Tell me more.

What concerns you most?

A five-second pause can
prevent a five-week conflict.

A = Active Listening

Listen for:

Facts.

Emotions.

Concerns.

Remember:

Listening ≠ Agreeing

Listening = Respect

L =
Lead with
Transparen
cy

Residents are asking:

Why?

Why now?

Who decided?

How was this determined?

Silence creates stories.

M =

Move Toward Shared Goals

Ask:

"What problem are we trying to solve together?"

"What outcome are we all hoping to achieve?"

You don't have to agree on
everything to work toward the
same future.

Don't focus on winning.

Focus on solving.

Practical Phrases to Use Tomorrow

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Instead of:

"That's not true."

Say:

"Let me clarify the information we have."

Instead of:

"You're wrong."

Say:

"Help me understand your perspective."

Instead of:

"Calm down."

Say:

"I can see this issue is important to you."

Instead of:

"This is already decided."

Say:

"Here's the process we followed."

Interactive Scenario #1

The Angry Resident

"This council doesn't listen to anybody. You've already made up your minds."

At your tables:

1. What's happening beneath the anger?
2. How would you respond?
3. Which CALM principle would you use?

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MINS

Interactive Scenario #2

The Social Media Rumor

A Facebook post says:

"The city is secretly spending taxpayer money on this project."

Discuss:

- Do you respond?
- How do you correct misinformation?
- How can transparency help?

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Interactive Scenario #3

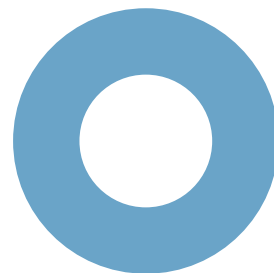
Council Conflict

Two council members begin arguing publicly.

How do you redirect the conversation?

Possible response:

"I appreciate that both of you care deeply about this issue. Let's refocus on the problem we're trying to solve and identify where we have common ground."



Your Conflict Toolkit

Before Meetings

- Anticipate concerns
- Share information early
- Explain the process
- Prepare difficult responses
- Focus on outcomes



Your Conflict Toolkit

During Conflict, PAUSE

- **P**ause - Respond, don't react.
- **A**cknowledge - Validate the person.
- **U**nderstand - Ask before assuming.
- **S**implify - Stick to the facts.
- **E**ngage - Focus on the next step.



The Leadership Opportunity

People may forget:

- Every vote
- Every ordinance
- Every agenda item

But they will remember:

- Whether they felt heard
- Whether they were treated with respect
- Whether they trusted the process

Final Thought

As both a social worker and a mayor, I've learned this:

**Communities don't struggle because they have conflict.
Communities struggle when they don't have the tools to navigate it.**

Conflict isn't something to fear.

It's an opportunity to build trust.

It's an opportunity to strengthen relationships.

It's an opportunity to build stronger communities.

Stay CALM and PAUSE.



Thank you!

