



# The municipal “good to great” journey



Steve Maloney is President of SP Maloney Corp, which specializes in providing tips and strategies to help individuals, teams, and entire organizations reach their full potential. Steve can be reached at [smaloney@spm-aloneycorp.com](mailto:smaloney@spm-aloneycorp.com).

Today we face a situation that our generation has never quite experienced before. The effect on our everyday lives of COVID-19 is starting to make SARS and even 9/11 seem quite minuscule by comparison. As many have observed, it is the municipal order of government that affects the day-to-day lives of the public much more than any other, so perhaps looking at the silver-linings of life, the timing of this article couldn't be better.

## Council-Staff Collaboration

A recent survey was sent to more than 400 Ontario municipalities. While a few themes emerged, one prominent one was the importance of the collaborations between council and staff. So with that in mind, and borrowing from the best-selling author Jim Collins, here are nine competencies/disciplines to will help your municipality to go from good to great.

### 1. Be interested

It might seem trite to state that you should be interested in your profession, but it might seem even more difficult now than ever before. There is nothing like the jolt of a frightening, invisible enemy like a world pandemic to make us all re-examine our values and priorities. Eventually this crisis will pass and we'll get back to the grind of making our municipality work to its potential. You cannot motivate your employees per se, but you can create the environment that they are motivated by. A little-known fact about employee engagement is that the number one factor is *organizational progress*. People want to work for an organization that has a vision for a future and cause that they believe in. *Canadian Business* magazine said it best a few years ago when

they stated, “82 percent of senior executives say there is a direct link between organizational performance and company culture.”

### 2. Employ stars

The recent survey mentioned previously revealed that the number one barrier to municipal success was the absence of an effective HR performance development plan. Common sense is most uncommon and your organization would do well to test for emotional intelligence. Two traits that you want to focus on are the skills of self-management and personal accountability, as these are the two most coveted by CEOs. The one troublesome theme that emerged was the amount of micromanaging that goes on in many municipalities. Micromanaging is the biggest insult you can foist on your coworkers and the presence of it only leads to an environment of mistrust and disillusionment. This issue was found to be most prevalent between council and management. The commitment to employing stars and “culture fits” will make life easier for the CAOs and mayors.

### 3. Strong values

A municipality will not be any stronger than the people that are recruited, hired, or elected to be part of it. All stakeholders – whether they are council, management, or employees – will either be motivated or driven by money, power, knowledge, helpfulness, harmony, or order. These six value clusters will be used by the municipality to make decisions; but, in many cases, they'll also cause much conflict. Once you know the individual stakeholder's primary motivators, you can then assign tasks, jobs, and committee involvement to the betterment of the whole organization based on individual strengths.

#### 4. Persevere

I can't remember a time when this concept was so hard to follow and seemed so unclear, but perhaps Bill Gates said it best to the world when he circulated this about COVID-19 in March 2020: "It is reminding us that after every difficulty, there is always ease. Life is cyclical, and this is just a phase in this great cycle. We do not need to panic; this too shall pass." I've always thought that good times and bad times have one striking similarity – when you're in them, you never think either cycle is ever going to end.

#### 5. Be disciplined

Whether it is businesses, community groups, sports teams, or a municipality, successful organizations make a habit of exercising discipline. One of the major municipal frustrations that came from the survey was that many of the individuals seem to feel the need to do others' jobs and play out of position. Council's role is one of governance, and management-staff is operational. What may seem like a simple concept is hard to put into practice on a daily basis. Understanding the roles of all stakeholders is paramount to greatness.

#### 6. Take/make think time

The timing might be perfect to employ this strategy as online meetings have never been more popular. Many of the municipalities are currently conducting the tasks of strategic planning, efficiency studies, and service delivery reviews. Municipalities can use this down time to explore critical opportunities like

identifying cost reductions, process efficiencies, distinguishing between core and non-core services, and opportunities for shared services with neighbouring municipalities.

#### 7. Always deliver

How do we really know when we deliver to our customers? The late U.S. President John F. Kennedy summed it up best when he said the biggest compliment you can give someone is when you ask them, "What do you think?" To best measure this there has to be a clear calculation between actual results versus customer expectations. When measuring this calculation, be sure to include both an historical perspective against futuristic expectations. When there's a 15 percent discrepancy below expectations, you have a challenge. This will reveal a prioritized action plan to move forward and you should be measuring this for all departments: corporate services, public works, fire department, parks & recreation, etc.

#### 8. Clear decisions

This was a good news area in the survey as it appears that the staffs of most municipalities are doing a good job providing research on policy and programs to council. It's always easiest to improve an area of strength, so it's best to find out as individuals whether we are intrinsic, extrinsic, or systemic decision makers. It is best if we have a mix on our municipal teams as to provide balance. What does all this mean to the betterment of your decision-making processes? Who on your team overvalues or undervalues others?

Who is most apt to ignore systems and rules in a heavily regulated industry? Who are your pothole councillors and too in love with tasks themselves? Embracing the concept of constant improvement is critical in the journey of good to great.

#### 9. Sell what your municipality does well

Many individuals and organizations strive to be the jack of all trades, but it is easier to be the master of one – and more profitable. Many municipalities take advantage of being the master of one and make that the event of the year. For example, the Fiddle Festival, the Butter-Tart Festival, and of course, one of my personal favourites, Ground Hog Day with Wiarthon Willie up in South Bruce Peninsula. Your strength could be an industry, a day, an event, a season, a climate, or a natural resource; know what it is, package it, promote it, and sell it.

#### Embrace Change

In the year 2000, after winning 10 golf tournaments, three of them major championships and over \$10 million, Tiger Woods decided to make a swing change. A golf reporter asked him, "Why are you changing? You've just had the best golf year of all time – haven't you reached perfection already?" The answer – "You never really reach perfection. It's an unattainable destination that one never reaches, but I'm going to keep trying."

Your municipality can go from good to great by embracing the concept of improving each day, month, quarter, and year. **MW**

*as published in*

# MUNICIPAL WORLD

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE | WE SHARE YOUR STORIES | MUNICIPALWORLD.COM