

Beyond the Spreadsheet: **The Human Side of Data in** **Collective Bargaining**

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Patrick Glynn is the founder and principal consultant of BoldPath Consulting. He brings nearly 30 years of experience working with and advising Wisconsin local governments, including service as a county human resources director and more than a decade as a public-sector HR and management consultant. His work spans labor relations, compensation and classification, workforce planning, management and leadership training, and organizational assessment, with a consistent focus on solutions that are fair, defensible, and workable in real public-sector environments.

Patrick's approach is grounded in an understanding of how local governments actually operate: political scrutiny, limited resources, union dynamics, public accountability, and the need for decisions that can be explained and sustained over time. He is known for a collaborative, candid style that emphasizes clarity over spectacle and long-term institutional health over short-term wins. In recent years, he has also helped public organizations carefully consider the role of generative AI in government work, treating it as a governance and management issue rather than a technology trend, and integrating it into existing professional, ethical, and organizational frameworks.



Act I

Stakes, Scrutiny, and Orientation

What This Session Is (and Is Not)

IN SCOPE

This Session Is About

- Making defensible decisions under scrutiny
- Using data in contested environments
- Professional judgment in public-sector bargaining

OUT OF SCOPE

This Session Is Not About

- Learning new formulas
- Building better spreadsheets
- Finding a single 'right' number

This session focuses on how data holds up when challenged.

Why Smart People Still Use Data Clumsily

Common Pressures

Time constraints

Political and
bargaining dynamics

Multiple audiences,
different standards

Inherited practices
and assumptions

Result

**Good math,
weak
argument.**

This is a systems problem,
not an intelligence problem.

Who Evaluates Your Numbers, and When



In the room

In public meetings

After the fact

**Scrutiny is
multi-stage.
Different
audiences.
Different
incentives.**

The Same Data Can Support Different Stories

Same underlying facts
(CPI, budgets, staffing, wages)

Story A

Affordability and sustainability

Story B

Purchasing power and competitiveness

Different stories do not automatically mean bad faith.

What Happens After One Weak or Misstated Data Point

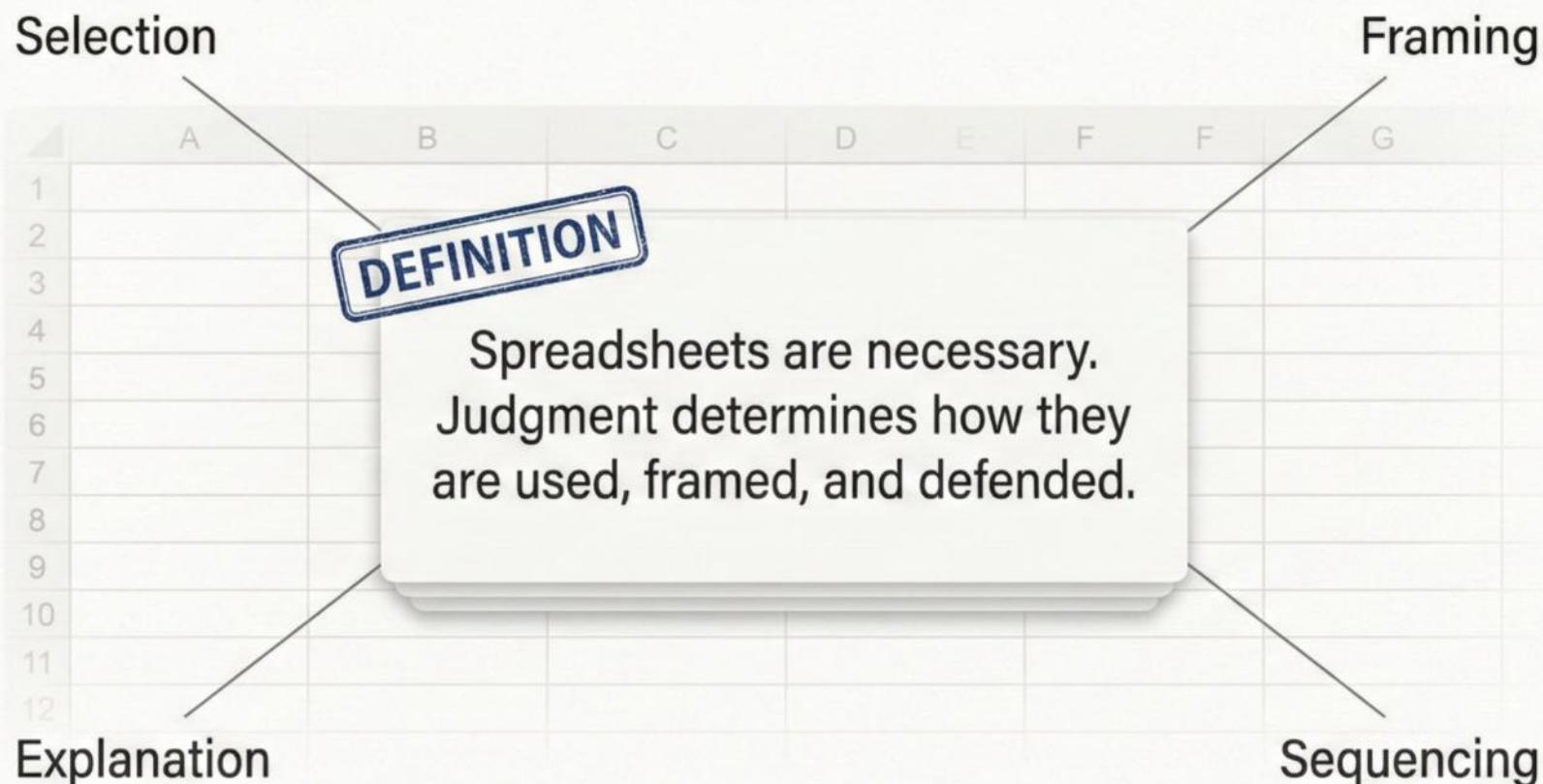
- 1 They challenge that number
- 2 They question your assumptions
- 3 They doubt your later claims
- 4 They discount your credibility

Credibility



Credibility is cumulative.

What 'Beyond the Spreadsheet' Actually Means



The point is
defensibility,
not decoration.

Act II

Credibility, Claims, and Evidence Discipline

Being a Trusted Advocate

Advocacy Done Well

- Uses the same standard for both sides.
- Acknowledges limits and uncertainty.
- Shows work and sources.
- Invites the next question.

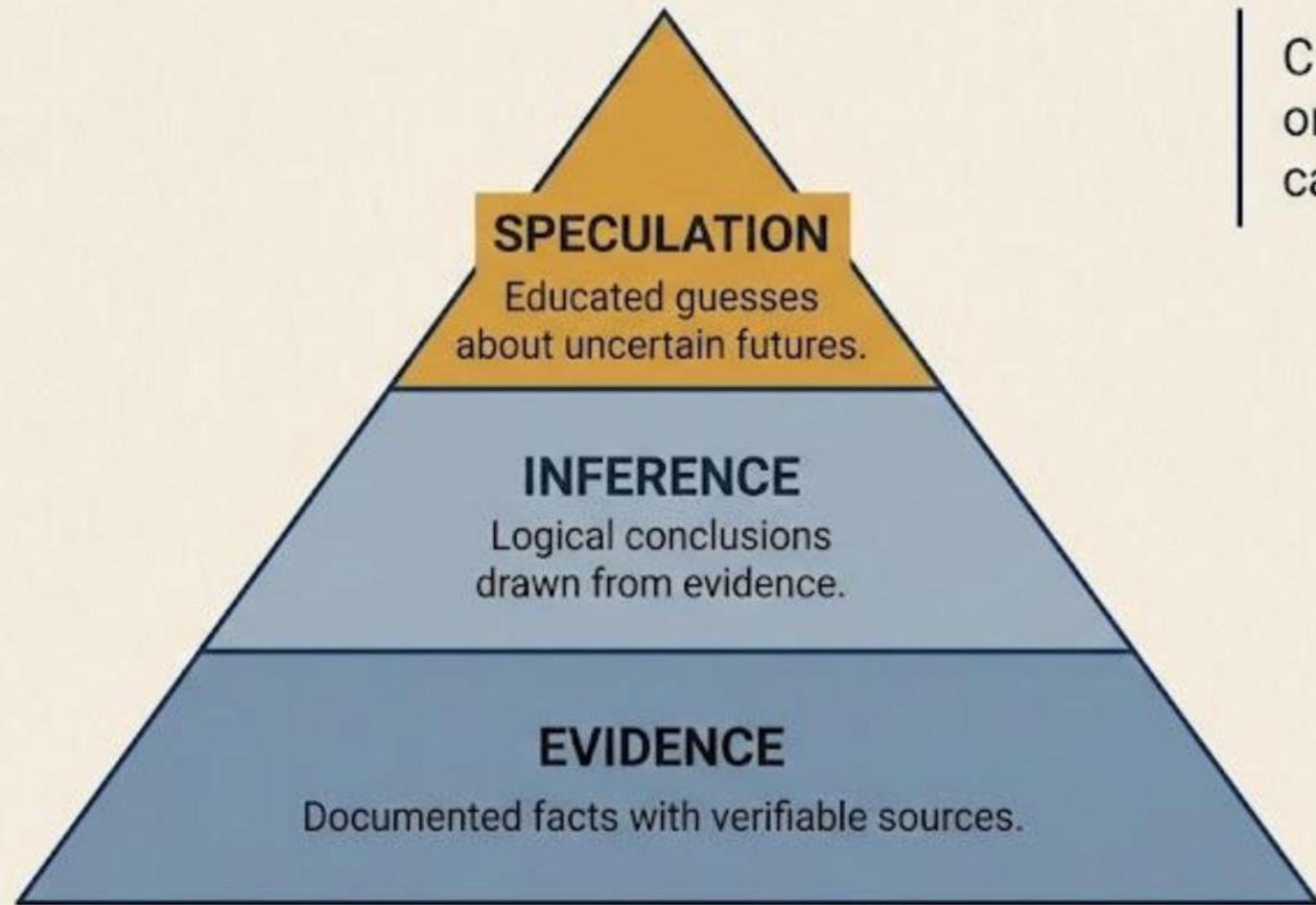
CREDIBILITY

Advocacy That Backfires

- Cherry-picks without disclosure.
- Overstates certainty.
- Changes definitions midstream.
- Relies on one number.

Trust is earned before the headline.

Evidence, Inference, and Speculation



Credibility depends on keeping analytical categories distinct.

What Makes a Data Exhibit Feel Trustworthy

Visible Discipline

- Definitions up front.
- Units, time period, and scope labeled.
- Sources cited and retraceable.
- Assumptions named.
- Totals reconcile.

Common Tells

- Unlabeled units or missing scope.
- Mixed time periods.
- Percent vs percentage points confusion.
- One-off outliers treated as trend.
- No source trail.

Rigor is a visual signal before it is an argument.

The Minimum Viable Data Exhibit

EXHIBIT A

1. Claim (one sentence) _____
2. Scope (what this includes and excludes) _____
3. Source(s) _____
4. Time Period _____
5. Method (plain language) _____
6. Assumptions / Caveats _____
7. Decision Implication (so what) _____

If you cannot explain it plainly, it will not survive debate.

What Survives Cross-Examination

Traceable

- ✓ Source can be produced.
- ✓ Method can be replicated.
- ✓ Definitions match the claim.

Comparable

- ✓ Same job / same unit.
- ✓ Same time period.
- ✓ Adjustments disclosed.

Material

- ✓ Changes the decision.
- ✓ Not a rounding error.
- ✓ Costed, not just stated.

Survivability
beats
cleverness.

SURVIVABILITY

The One-Number Trap and the Better Alternative

The One-Number Trap

One number becomes the whole story.

The Better Alternative: A Defensible Frame

Headline Estimate
Sets the direction

Supporting Checks (2)
Confirm it behaves as expected

Stated Caveat
Names the boundary

A small framework
beats a big claim.

Act III

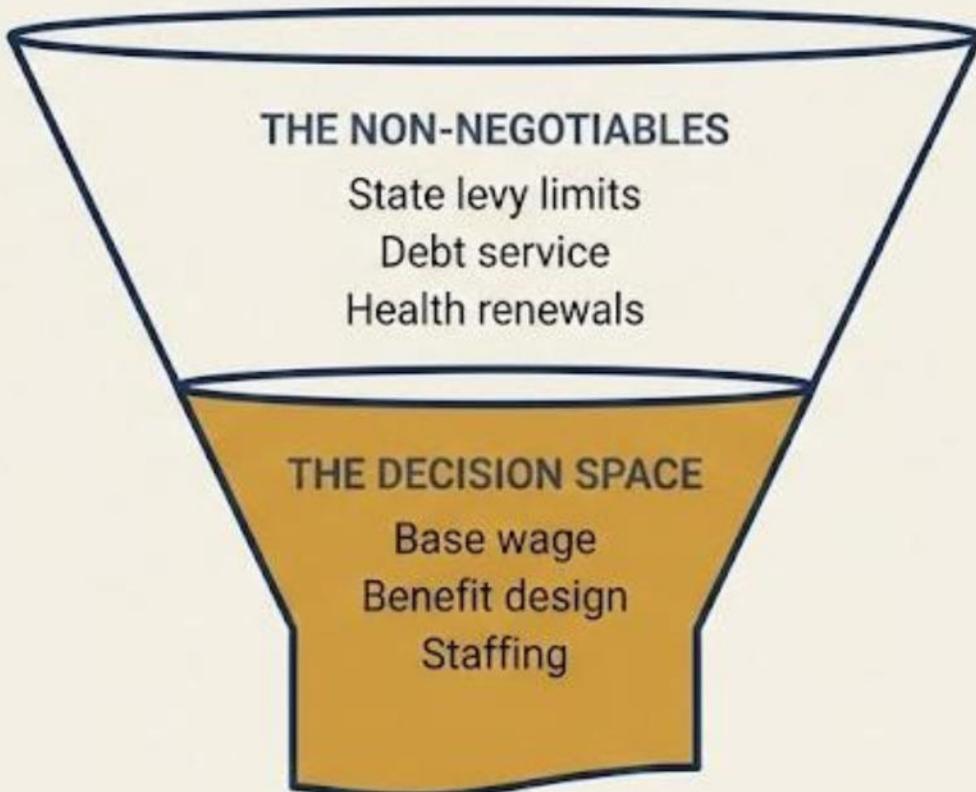
Constraints, Tradeoffs, and the Decision Space

The Data You Have vs. The Data You Need

Available	Decision-Useful	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Easy to export• Familiar reports• Historical habits• What others ask for	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Directly tied to a claim• Comparable across parties• Defensible definitions• Changes a decision	Not all available data earns a seat at the table.

SELECTION

Constraints vs. Choices

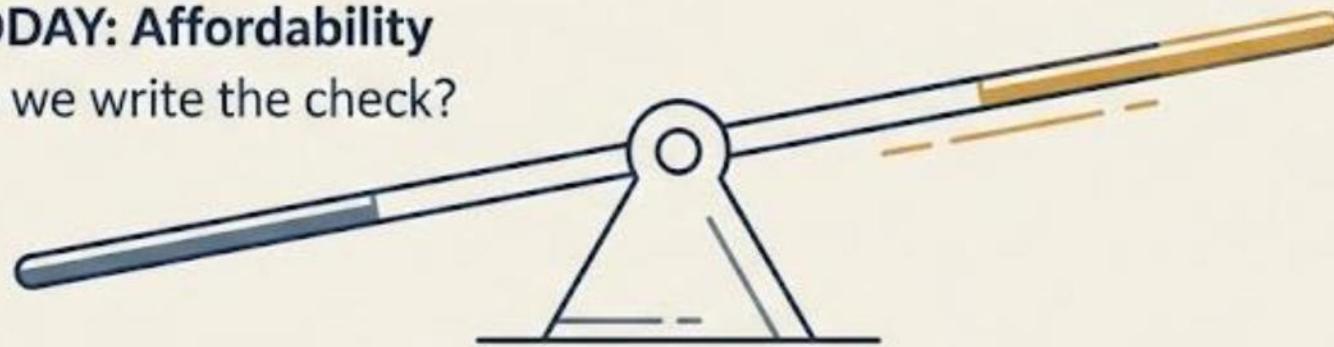


Key Insight: The real work happens in the space that remains after constraints are accounted for.

Affordability vs. Sustainability

TODAY: Affordability

Can we write the check?



TOMORROW: Sustainability

Can we sustain
the commitment?

Short-term fixes
can undermine
long-term viability.

One-time money cannot fund recurring wage increases.

Recurring vs One-Time Choices

Recurring

- Base wage changes
- Step or longevity design
- Ongoing benefit commitments

One-Time

- Lump sums
- Timing adjustments
- Temporary premiums

Start With the Baseline

BASELINE (before proposals)

Current Commitments
existing contract, benefits, staffing



WHERE SURPRISES HIDE

Known Changes
benefits, staffing, timing



Baseline Next-Year Cost

PROPOSALS (on top of baseline)

Baseline Next-Year Cost



Proposed Changes



Total Next-Year Cost

Debate the baseline before debating proposals.

How Labor Costs Become Volatile

Baseline Structural Costs (Stable)

Wages on filled positions
Benefits and premiums



Capacity Stability (Risk Entry Point)

Vacancies and turnover (capacity problem)
Training (consequence of turnover)
Predictability erodes here



Shock Absorption Costs (Volatile)

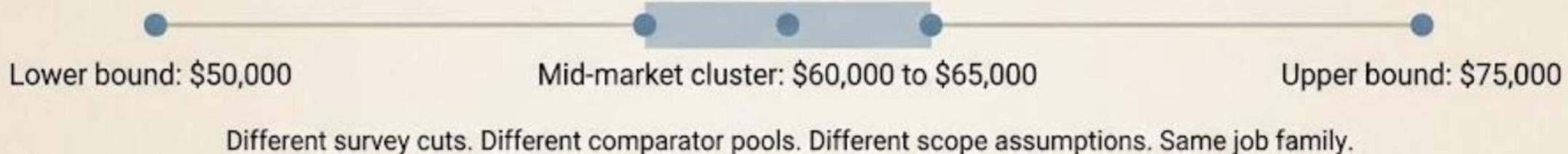
Overtime (compensating mechanism)
Backfill (compensating mechanism)
Disproportionate cost volatility

Small staffing disruptions can produce disproportionate labor cost volatility, even when wage rates are controlled.

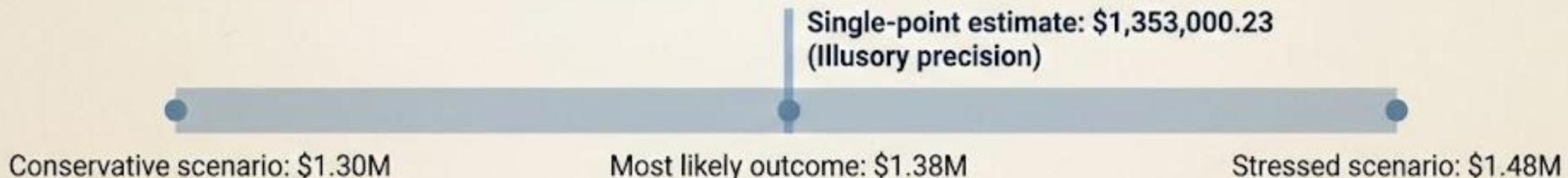
Wages are negotiated. Volatility is operational.

Ranges Signal Judgment. Precision Signals Risk.

Position-Level Cost Range (Concrete, Familiar)



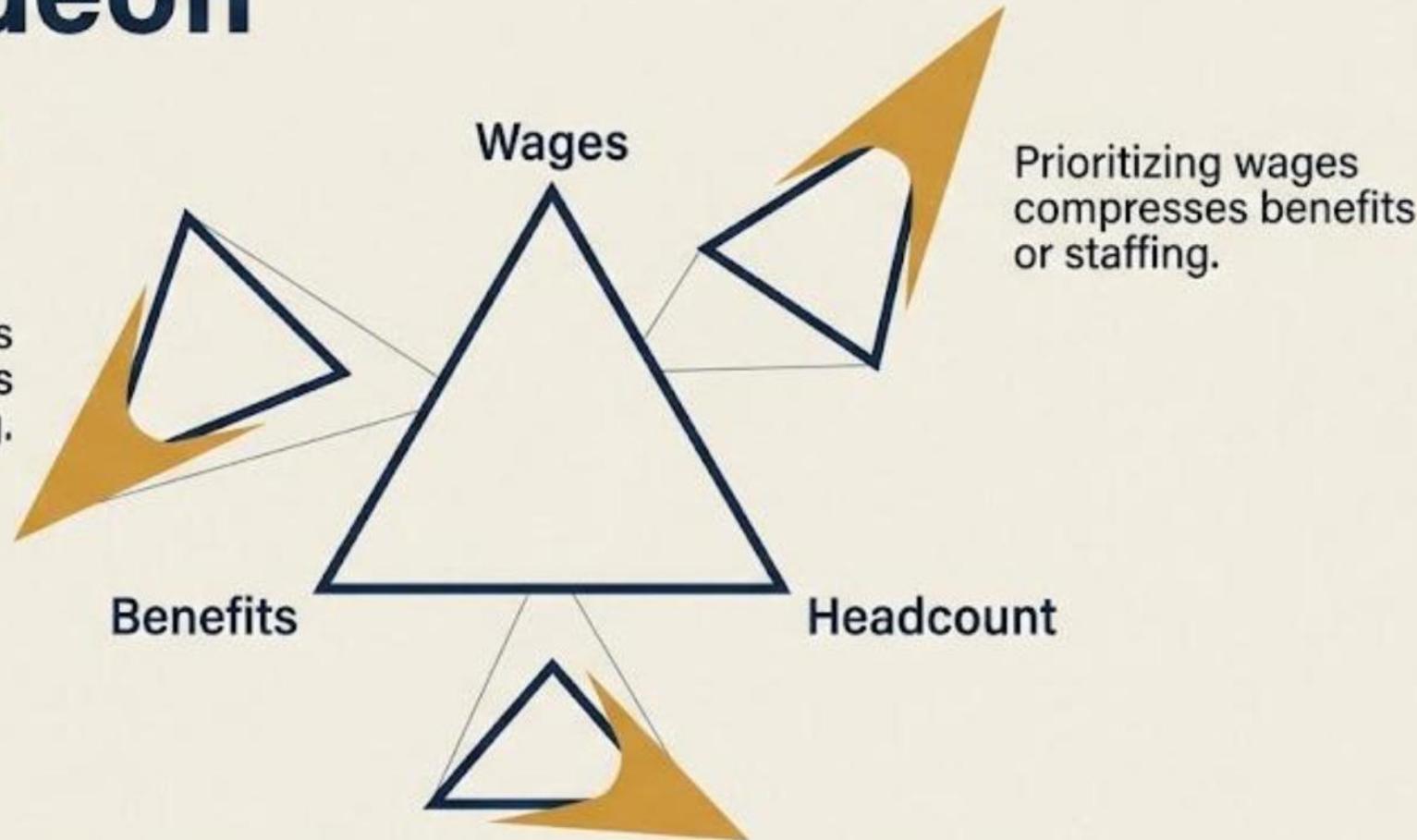
Aggregate Cost Range vs False Precision



Boards decide under uncertainty. Ranges clarify risk. Single numbers disguise it.

The Tradeoff Triangle

Enhancing benefits
constrains wages
and staffing.



In Wisconsin local government, the perimeter is fixed. Tradeoffs are unavoidable.

Act IV

How Comparisons Become Defensible

Comparisons Are Designed, Not Discovered



The comparison choice is part of the argument.

Labor Market vs Comparable Pool

Labor Market Lens

Recruitment and retention reality

Comparable Pool Lens (Bargaining)

Defensible comparison under scrutiny

Overlap exists, but the lenses are not interchangeable.

- Where candidates can realistically work
- Turnover and vacancy signals
- Scarcity and hard-to-fill roles
- Often higher-cost reference point

- Proximity is often the anchor
- Similar population and tax base
- Similar services and organization structure
- Consistent public-sector comparators

Bargaining claims live or die on the comparable pool.

Comparability Is an Evidentiary Judgment

		Timing Alignment	
		Same time period	Different time period
Job Alignment	Same job or same role	Best evidence Directly comparable. Minimal explanation required.	Explain and align Comparable role. Different timing. Requires transparent time adjustment and disclosure.
	Different job or different role	Question and justify Role differs. Same timing. Requires careful interrogation before use. Substantive equivalence? Comparable skill, scope, and labor market?	Do not use Fails both job and timing alignment.

Comparability requires judgment, not just matching.

'Matching Jobs Is a Judgment Call'

Elements That Must Align for Comparability

- Core duties and responsibilities
- Level of accountability and authority
- Required knowledge and qualifications
- Scope of impact

Elements Where Professional Judgment Applies

- Local procedures and work methods
- Tools, systems, and technology
- Work volume and scale
- Reporting relationships

'Judgment is acceptable only when the matching logic is explicit and documented.'

Definition Drift Is Where Fights Start

Same Term Used by Both Parties

- Base wage
- Total compensation
- Turnover
- Vacancy rate

Where drift occurs

Underlying Definition Choices

- [What is included]
- [What time period]
- [What population]
- [What source]

Define it once.
Use it consistently.

Act V

Wage Competitiveness As Judgment

Mean vs. Median: Choosing the Center

Mean (Average)

- Uses all data points
- Sensitive to outliers
- Can be pulled upward by one aggressive employer



Median (Middle Observation)

- Resistant to outliers
- Reflects a typical peer
- Less stable with small peer groups



In small peer groups, neither the mean nor the median is neutral. Each reflects a choice.

Center measures inform judgment.
They do not replace it.

Practical Credibility Zones for Statistical Measures

1. The mean: Diluting Leverage

Average converges as sample size increases, diluting individual point impact. Skewed data requires larger N for stability.

Fragile	Stabilizing	Robust
< 10 (High leverage)	10–25 (Outliers matter)	25–50+ (Defensible summary)

2. The median: Stabilizing Position

Position-based measure, meaningful sooner than the mean. Needs N to keep the middle from shifting.

Fragile	Stabilizing	Robust
< 5 (Meaningless)	7–15 (Intuitively useful)	20+ (Stable, resists outliers)

3. Percentiles: Justifying Resolution

Trade robustness for resolution. Finer percentiles require significantly more data to populate the shape.

Fragile	Stabilizing	Robust
< 10 (Essentially fiction)	10–30 (Broad meaning)	50–100+ (Behave as expected)

4. Linear regression: Separating Signal

Estimates relationships amidst noise. Needs enough data to distinguish signal from coincidence and identify structure.

Fragile	Stabilizing	Robust
< 10 (Do not trust)	10–25 (Analysis begins)	30–50+ (Reliable inference)

Relative Rank Is Context, Not Proof

Peer Group Hourly Wage Data (n=8) | Uneven Distances

Rank 1: \$45.32 (Peer A)

Rank 2: \$41.01 (Peer B)

\$4.31 gap (9.5%)

Rank 3: \$39.00 (Peer C)

Rank 4: \$37.82 (Peer D)

\$1.18 gap (3.0%)

Rank 5: \$33.79 (Peer E / Your Position)

Rank 6: \$33.63 (Peer F)

\$0.16 gap (0.5%)

Rank 7: \$33.53 (Peer G)

\$0.10 gap (0.3%)

Rank 8: \$32.90 (Peer H)

\$0.63 gap (1.9%)

Relative rank
shows order.
Dollar gaps show
consequences.
Rank alone is
insufficient.

Ranks are ordinal; distances between ranks are uneven and meaningful.

How Neutrals Read Rank

Rank is often a tie-breaker, not a verdict.

They ask: 'X out of Y' and whether the result sits near the middle.

They look for drift over time, not single-year noise.

They resist leapfrogging unless the justification is unusually strong.

Rank is read in context, alongside peer selection and cost evidence.

Rank frames
the
discussion.
It does not
decide it.

Act VI

From Analysis to Defensible Practice

What to Prepare Before Bargaining Opens

Core Exhibits

- Agreed definitions (wages, benefits, headcount)
- Comparable job matches and exclusions
- Effective date and pay basis consistency
- Source documentation ready to produce

Comparisons

- Defined peer group with stated rationale
- Same time period and pay structure
- Mean, median, and rank calculated consistently
- Adjustments documented, not implied

Narrative and Framing

- What the data shows and does not show
- Known limitations stated in advance
- Assumptions made explicit
- Explanation that holds under questioning

**Preparation
is about
defensibility,
not volume.**

What Belongs at Hand vs. In Reserve

At Hand

Information you must access instantly

- Core claim
- Definitions
- Comparable data
- Cost impact

In Reserve

Information ready when conditions change

- Alternative cuts
- Sensitivity checks
- Source copies
- Edge cases

Backup is not weakness. It is preparedness.

When to Leave a Number in the Background

Does it survive scrutiny?

(Same definition, same peers, same time window.)

Does it improve understanding?

(Clarifies the issue rather than distracting from it.)

Does it change the decision?

(Meaningfully affects the available choices.)

Discipline is
choosing
what not to
lead with.

If “No” repeats, keep it out of the headline.

Keep it available as backup.

The Three-Bucket Rule for What You Bring

PRIORITY

Core Exhibit

- Must be true
- Must be traceable
- Must be comparable

Support and Context

- Helps explain
- Anticipates questions
- Strengthens credibility

Background Only

- Useful to know
- Risky to feature
- Kept for internal judgment

Discipline is choosing what not to feature.

Red Flags That Undermine Trust

Moving Targets

Numbers or assumptions change without being acknowledged.

Cherry-Picked Peers

Comparables selected after the outcome is known.

Definition Drift

Same term used differently across tables or discussions.

Mystery Math

Calculations presented without sources or explanation.

Trust erodes quietly.

If something must change, say what changed and why before you are asked.

Your Standard Going Forward

DEFINE

Terms, scope, and time window before numbers are shown.

DOCUMENT

Peer selection logic, job matching logic, and assumptions.

DISCLOSE

Limits, caveats, and known weaknesses early.

HOLD THE FRAME

Use the same definitions and standards over time.

Credibility is built by consistency, not by precision.

This is the standard applied to every table, every year.

Beyond the Spreadsheet

**Spreadsheets are necessary.
Judgment determines whether
they hold up.**

Everything
else is
secondary.

Selection

Framing

Sequencing

Defensibility under scrutiny is the goal.