

WELCOME TO THE



**Michigan
Municipal
Executives**

2026 Winter Institute



Building a Foundation Through Organizational Culture

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Today's Session



- What is a strong culture?
- Why it matters?
- Milford Experience
- Pentwater Experience
- Gibraltar Experience
- Q&A/Discussion

Poll Everywhere



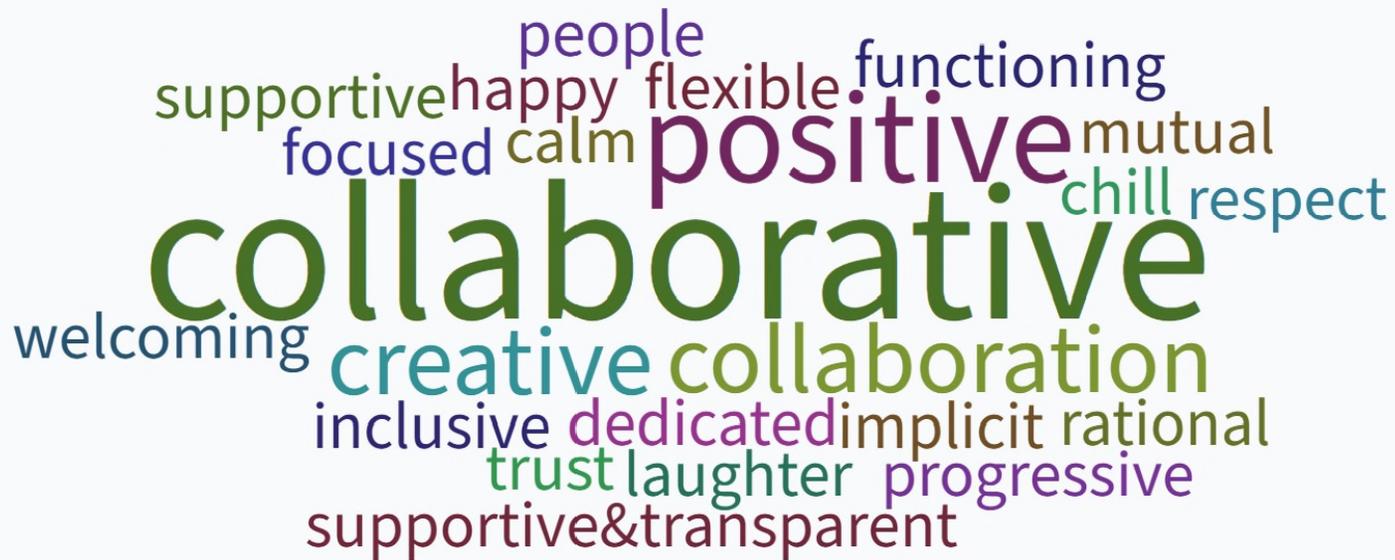
PollEv.com/milfordv713





Activity is full.
Responses are not accepted at this time.

Using 1-2 words, please describe your ideal work environment.



Strong Culture Defined



- **Engaged Workforce** - staff understand role of organization within the community & purpose behind the work
- **Transparent** - communication between management & front-line staff
- **Supportive** - from colleagues and management
- **Positive** - staff feel valued & appreciated
- **Resilient** - able to respond to and adapt from shocks to the system

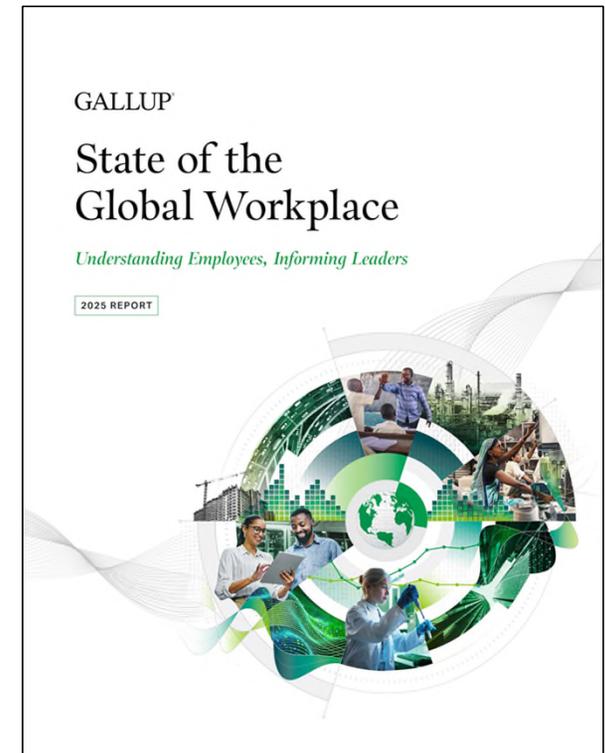
On a scale of 1 (poor) to 5(excellent), how strong is the culture at your organization?



Gallup State of the Workplace Data



- Annual Global Survey on Employee Engagement (across sectors)
- 80+ years of data & research
- Engagement Dropped in 2025 (23% → 21%)
 - Similar to drop during COVID
 - Led by Managers (3% decline)
 - < 35 years old → decline of 5%
 - Women → decline of 7%
 - Disruption of pandemic, hiring boom/bust cycle, supply chain issues, AI, etc.
- Full engagement of employees globally estimated to generate \$9.6 trillion in productivity
- How to fix this? Focus on managers.
 - Ensure leadership staff have management training
 - Teach managers how to coach direct reports
 - Encourage ongoing growth and development of leadership staff



Harvard Study on Teams (Pentland, 2012)



- Study looked at call centers and higher performing teams
- Communication was the “it factor”
- Informal Meetings/Conversation - aligned team coffee breaks
 - 20% decrease in issue resolution time
- Successful Teams
 - Equal time talking/listening
 - Face to face, energetic conversations
 - Direct connections among team
 - Back-Channel/Side Conversations
 - Members explore, bring info back to team
- Findings replicated in professional settings (banks, hospitals, etc.)
- Studying only communication data, researchers could identify highest performing teams

Polco/UKG Whitepaper (2025)



- Do residents of a local government directly benefit from a well-run HR department?
- Cross-referenced Polco National Community Survey data & survey of HR practices
 - Strong correlation to **quality of life** in the community:
 - Employee Performance Management
 - HR Staff Capability
 - Employee well-being
 - Recruiting & Hiring
- Deeper dive with interviews of 10 communities
- Series of recommended best practices for each area, along with short case studies



ICMA Career Compass#117: “Do We Need a New Employer- Employee Compact?”



- Appeal was stability, decent pay/benefits, predictable career trajectory
- Changing needs of employees & what employers can offer.
 - Purposeful Work
 - Autonomy
 - Learning and growth
 - Belonging
 - Appreciation

ICMA | coaching program

Career Compass No. 117: “Do We Need a New Employer-Employee Compact?”

“The long-standing employer-employee compact or relationship no longer works. How do local government leaders begin to create a new mutually beneficial relationship with local government employees?”
By Dr. Frank Benest | Sep 10, 2025 | ARTICLE

Dear Frank:

I am a long-time local government manager and currently serve as an Assistant City Manager in a medium-sized city in the western U.S. We are experiencing a variety of serious challenges which undercut our ability to perform and serve our community.



First, a number of talented employees have recently left our organization and we are having problems replacing them.

Second, those who have stayed seem overly anxious and often exhausted. Many complain about ever-increasing “priorities,” too much work, and lots of stress. Productivity seems to have plummeted. We are certainly not keeping up with City Council and community demands.

Third, most staff (not just the younger ones) expect more from us, including more flexibility, work from home options, help with child or elder care, and support for mental health challenges.

Our agency has tried to respond in some reasonable ways. However, our efforts seem insufficient. How do we deal with all these serious problems challenging our current and future viability as an agency? What do we do to return to normal?

The Milford Experience



Milford – Hiring for Culture



- Two-step Process
- Initial Interview
 - 15-minute, 13 question virtual interview
 - Two-person panel - Manager's Office + Dept. Head
 - Posting, Job Description, & Questions w/ calendar invitation
 - Focus is on culture fit, attitude, work ethic
 - Enables a wide net for applicant pool
- Second Round
 - Traditional, in-person format
 - Applicant pool narrowed significantly
 - Some fit/culture questions, but mainly focused on KSA and critical thinking

Milford – Breaking Bread



"Food may not be the answer to world peace, but it's a start." - Anthony Bourdain

- Celebrate the little (and big) things!
 - Birthdays
 - Welcome Breakfast
 - Last Day
 - Graduations, etc.
 - Family Lunch!
- Go with the Flow



Do you have all the pieces?



Milford Experience – Discipline?



- Traditional, progressive discipline wasn't effective at correcting issues
- New approach needed
 - Still progressive (required by CBAs)
 - Opportunities to reinforce behavior changes
 - Today's magic word: "abeyance*"
 - Progressive discipline calls for suspension of 3 days
 - 1 day served
 - 2 days held in abeyance
 - 30-day target – relatively easy to achieve
 - 90+ day target – requires behavior to shift

Pentwater - Welcome to the Lion's Den



The Den

Full time Staff: 11 including PD and DPW

The Lions

- Employee passed over for manager position
- Employee* dating the employee passed over.
- Appointed employee disgruntled by everyone and disgruntling everyone
- Honorable Mention - Village Council

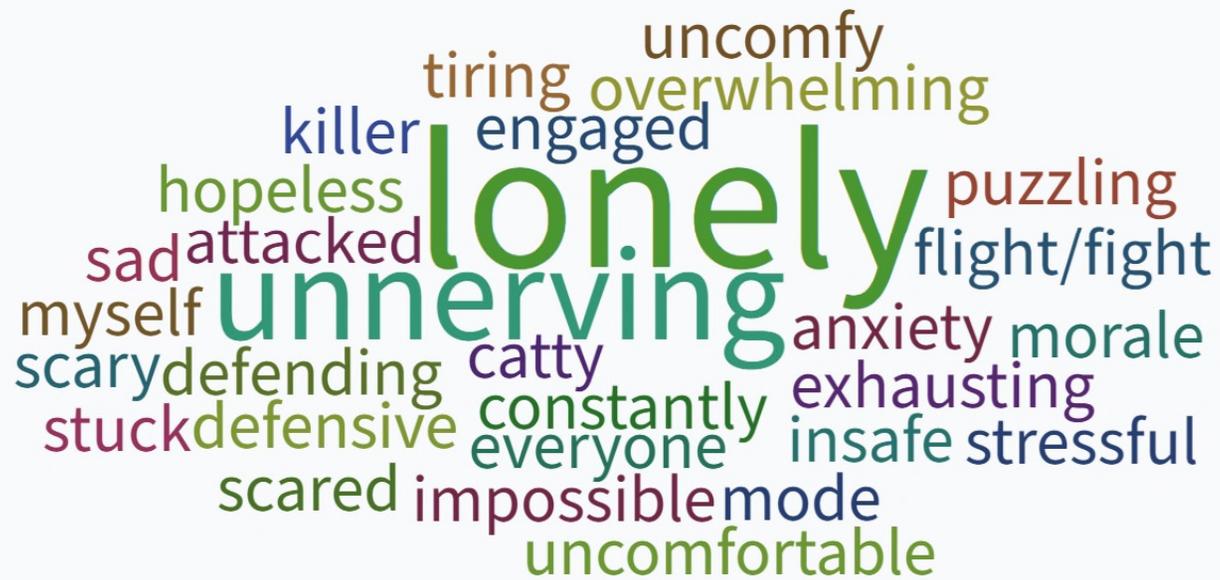
*Appointed themselves as a department head; was not a department head.





Activity is full.
Responses are not accepted at this time.

How has the Lion's Den felt for you?





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How do you think the Lion's Den felt for the lions?



Pentwater - My View of the Lion's Den



Working in the Den

Have you ever felt like you were working in a lion's den?

- What did that feel like?

My Experience: **Isolating.**

- Reality: You always have the *Municipal Manager Pride* to help.

Creating the Den

Put yourself in the Lion's paws.

- What do they feel in the den they made?

Initial thought: **POWER.**

- Reality: Toxic and Uncertain

Pentwater - Tame the Lions



Show empathy and interest while also demonstrating control.

- Meeting of the minds
 - Do not hide, ask for information and embrace small talk that can lead to big talk.
- Introduce and embrace new ideas
 - Ordinance/Zoning
 - DPW
 - "What else can we do together?"
- Breaking bread
 - Prioritize "team meals" whenever possible.
- Small and Simple Acts

Lions' Choice

Choose the toxicity of the den, or build a new one.

No human is strong enough to carry a lion out of the den against its will.





Know when to stop pushing, when to restart, and when to walk away.



Gibraltar - We All Have Problems



Every community has problems, but the difference is often the desire to change.

The Framework:

- The City had been without an administrator for 6 months while struggling to find stability in the position for years.
- Council members stepped in to perform administrative roles, blurring lines for themselves and staff.
- Administrator position created by ordinance - conflicts with Charter.
 - Ex. Administrator is chief personnel officer, however, all hiring and firing is done by council.

Gibraltar - Immediate Issues



- Lack of Leadership/Direction
 - Staff routinely went to the Mayor/council for issues.
 - Collaboration was used for every decision.
- Normalized toxic behavior
 - "I feel bad for mentioning it, it probably isn't a big deal." - an employee about a persistent bullying issue.
- "It has always been this way"
 - Treasurer involved in every closed session.
 - Council members making illegal motions.
 - Cash drawer not being locked.
- No accountability
 - Disciplinary action never taken for serious problems.
 - No documentation.
 - Employees had a free for all.

Gibraltar - Set the Tone



Your job is to do what is best for the city, regardless of pushback from staff and/or council.

- Embrace open, honest communication
 - Education is often needed for council members about what they can and cannot do.
 - Bad past practices wanting to be continued.
 - Desire to make illegal motions.
 - Change is difficult for staff, communicate the change and the why.
 - It has always been done this way is no longer an acceptable excuse.

Gibraltar - Setting the Tone



- Accountability?
 - When no accountability existed before, it can be a shock to the system.
 - Do not waiver or bend, but assist.
 - Early intervention, open communication, and “how can I help you meet this standard?”
 - Documentation!!
- Prioritize the person, not the job.
- It's the little things.
 - Pumpkin carving contest/stocking decorating contest
 - Meeting them where they are.
- Empower staff, especially the department heads.



Competing Values Framework



"I am not asking for input,
but I am here to answer
any questions and address
any concerns."



Q&A / Discussion



- What is something your organization does well in terms of its culture?
- If you could transplant an aspect of the organizational culture from one past job to your current job, what would it be?
- What roadblocks are you encountering towards building or changing culture?

Bibliography/Resources/Quotes



- [Gallup State of the Workforce \(2025\)](#)
- [Building Better Government from Within - Polco/UKG Whitepaper*](#)
- [ICMA Career Compass#117: "Do We Need a New Employer-Employee Compact?"](#)
- [Simon Sinek – Build a Culture by Design, Not Default](#)
- [Harvard – How to Build and Improve Company Culture](#)
- [Forbes –Building a Strong Organizational Culture](#)