

WELCOME TO THE



Michigan
Municipal
Executives

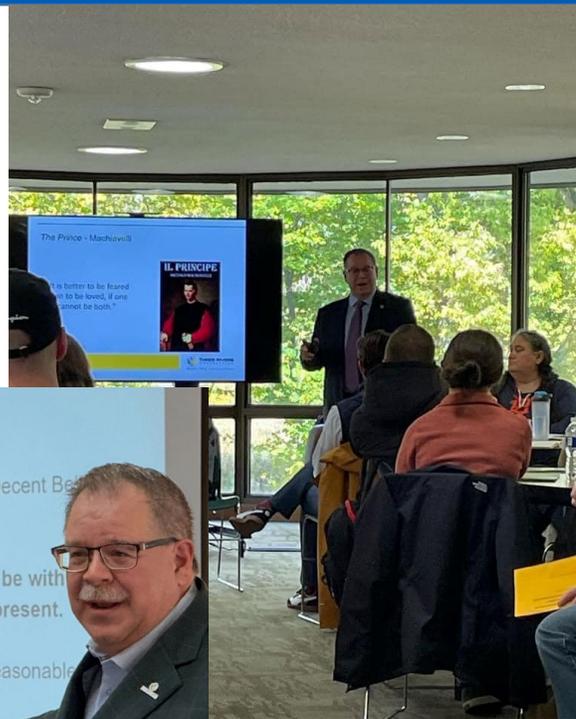
2026 Winter Institute



Championing Civility in our Communities

Reflections from a Recovering City Manager

The History



Speaking Engagements



The History



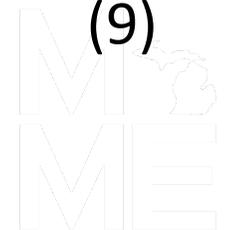
Midland City Managers

Cliff Miles 1973 – 1992 (19)

Karl Tomion 1992 – 2006 (14)

Jon Lynch 2006 – 2017 (11)

Brad Kaye 2017 - (9)



The Question



Are you a citizen, or do you just live here?



What I've learned



- Citizenship is more than residency
- Leadership is more than conflict resolution
- Civility is more than being polite



What is civility?



- Manners
- Disposition
- Value

Preserving conditions that allow disagreement to remain productive



Civility as Manners



- Shared norms of politeness
- Rituals that reduce friction
- Expectations about how public interaction should occur

Manners help, but manners alone will not save a democracy



Civility as Disposition



- A commitment to engagement, not agreement
- Willingness to allow our convictions to be tested
- Respect for people even while disputing their ideas

This is where things get harder—because disposition requires effort and vulnerability



Civility as a Value



- A relational commitment, like dignity or humility
- No guaranteed outcomes
- Once lost, extremely difficult to regain

This is the version of civility that municipal leaders most often carry, sometimes alone, when others abandon it



Why is it civility so hard right now?



Confidence in institutions that once connected us has collapsed:

- Trust in government has plummeted
- Participation in civic and religious organizations has declined
- Social isolation has increased dramatically

At the same time, public discourse has become more caustic



Why is it civility so hard right now?



We resist persuasion

- In 2005 and 2006 researchers at the University of Michigan found that when the misinformed are exposed to corrected facts they rarely changed their minds.
- Political partisans particularly became more strongly set in their beliefs.
- Facts, it was found, did not cure misinformation but rather actually made it stronger.



Why is it civility so hard right now?



We confuse speech with responsibility

- Primary freedom – “I have a right to say it.”
- Strategic choice – The issue is too important for politeness
- Moral equivocation – If you’re offended, that’s on you

Each dismisses the relational cost of caustic discourse



Why is it civility so hard right now?



We overestimate our own insight

- Asymmetric insight – we believe we understand their motives better than they do
- We don't listen, we prepare to respond
- In conflict, nobody thinks they're the bad guy



..if only people were more civil?



But governance is built on tension.

The Farm



- 2023 ADT – 8,709
- Average weight of a Polled Hereford – 1,400 lbs.



Governance: Tension not Consensus



Four democratic values we must balance

- Representation – the will of the people
- Efficiency – expertise, evidence, and competent administration
- Justice – due process, fairness, equal protection
- Individual rights – liberty, property, undue interference

When people feel their preferred value is ignored, civility is often the first casualty



Governance: Tension not Consensus



Four democratic values we must balance

- Representation at the expense of individual rights
- Efficiency at the expense of representation
- Justice at the expense of efficiency
- Individual rights at the expense of community (representation)

You live inside these tradeoffs



Governance: Tension not Consensus



In the face of conflict, governing bodies tend to retreat to efficiency

- Governance is about consequences of decisions, not technical superiority
- Which consequences are we willing to live with?
- What kind of community are we trying to be?



The Question



Are you a citizen, or do you just live here?



Help your boss



Value civility because once it's gone there is no obvious way to rebuild it.

Promote Civil Discourse



Model civil behavior consistently

- Speak with respect, especially when disagreeing
- Avoid sarcasm, condescension, poor body language
- Listen fully before responding
- Admit when you're wrong or unsure

People watch how you disagree more than hearing what you say when you disagree.



Promote Civil Discourse



Set expectations and norms

- Listen actively
- Stick to issues
- Resist the urge to persuade

Remind participants that civil discourse doesn't mean avoiding conflict, but addressing it productively.



Promote Civil Discourse



Acknowledge shared values

- Emphasize common goals – disagreement is more frequently about the how than the what
- Naming shared humanity often softens divisions



Promote Civil Discourse



Encourage curiosity, not combat

- Ask questions:
 - Can you tell me what led you to that point of view?
 - Can you help me understand where you're coming from?
- A key goal is genuine openness and deeper understanding



Promote Civil Discourse



“Thanks for being here today. Before we begin, I want to invite all of us to engage in a way that’s respectful, open, and curious. We may not all agree—that’s expected—but how we listen and speak to each other matters just as much as what we say.”

“Let’s pause for a second. I think we’re getting off track. Can we refocus on the issue, not each other?”

“Strong opinions are welcome here—so is strong listening. Let’s keep this meeting productive.”





Help your team

Speak and listen with the intention of seeking the truth about what you think,

versus telling the world that what you think is the truth.

Be a Citizen



- Engage when it would be easier to withdraw
- Practice humility when expression feels safer
- Negotiate rather than dominate
- Recognize governance is relational, not transactional, and its practice requires ownership of responsibilities as well as rights

Citizens don't demand perfection, they demand process, fairness, and respect.



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Be a Citizen



Model civility and citizenship publicly

- Name tradeoffs honestly
- Stay present under pressure
- Explain why decisions are difficult, not just what they are



Be a Citizen



Protect the process

- Defend due process, even when unpopular
- Apply rules consistently
- Maintain boundaries without contempt

When process collapses, trust follows.



Be a Citizen



Avoid Victory Conversations

- Value being effective over being right
- Conversation to win is a debate or an argument
- Civil discourse seeks to understand consequences
- Use restatement to ensure listening
- Reward listening, not volume





Municipal executives must remember:

Civility does not guarantee agreement

Leadership does not guarantee gratitude

Citizenship does not guarantee ease

Without them, the system itself becomes unworkable



Will you lead from within the complexity – or merely manage around it?

Will you preserve the conditions for self-governance, or surrender them to outrage and exhaustion?



Are you a citizen, or do you just live here?

Resources



- More in Common
- National Institute for Civil Discourse
- The Civility Center
- The Institute for Civility in Government



Jon & Tina Lynch Family Promoting Civility Scholarship

**JON & TINA LYNCH FAMILY
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