

Surviving the Suplex: How Elected Officials Can Overcome Polarizing Politics and Serve with Impact



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Municipal politics is one of the most underestimated, complex, and misunderstood areas of leadership in Canada. From the outside, it looks like council chambers, ribbon cuttings, and debating about crosswalk locations. But on the inside? It's often brutal, personal, and dripping with pressure. Honestly, some days it feels like an old-school pro wrestling match: Seven elected officials enter a ring. Steel chairs fly. Suplexes land. Trust is tested. And if one person crawls out alive after 60 minutes—it's a miracle. That's municipal politics: policy by cage match. And jokes aside, the polarization we're seeing in local government is real—and it's dangerous to the health of our councils and communities.



What Makes Municipal Politics So Polarizing?

Polarization in municipal government isn't rooted in ideology—it's grounded in personal and highly emotional local issues. These are the types of challenges that directly impact residents' day-to-day lives and create passionate, sometimes volatile, responses. Some of the most common polarizing issues include:

- Land use and rezoning decisions - Infill and densification targets, particularly in established communities - Disputes over the use of community facilities - Perceived poor service delivery - Budget decisions and tax increases - Changes in municipal leadership or administration - Long-standing tensions with community organizations - Infrastructure priorities (like roads, parks, and snow clearing) - Service levels, especially in rural versus urban areas - Transparency, public engagement, or the lack thereof

Why Don't We See This at the Same Level in the Private Sector?

One of the questions I've pondered during my studies to overhaul municipal governance. Why don't we see the same level of blowups in the private sector, particularly with corporate boards. The answer lies in one fundamental principle: boards all share a clear and common goal—succeeding for shareholders. Yes, there may be disagreements, but there's an understanding that decisions need to be made in the best interest of the company. In municipal government, the 'shareholders' are the public. But unfortunately, elected officials can sometimes lose sight of that. They get wrapped up in personal agendas, ideological standoffs, or the desire for individual recognition. Great elected officials realize that it's not about them—it's about the people they serve. It's about the sidewalks that get poured, the roads that get cleared, the community groups that thrive, and the local economy that grows. Once an elected official truly embraces this, they begin to let go of personal wants and instead work toward compromise and collaboration for the greater good.

A Teachable Blowup: Edmonton's Density Debate

Let me say clearly: I have enormous respect for the City of Edmonton and the current and past Councils. It's the city I grew up in, and I've admired its achievements for

decades. But a recent issue surrounding infill and density targets in older communities brought the intensity of municipal politics to light. The situation became so heated that a councillor swore at another during a public meeting over whether to extend meetings through the summer. It was raw, emotional, and caught on record. And while it may seem like just a moment of frustration, it serves as a reminder that even a single outburst can taint the credibility of a whole council. Reputations take years to build—and seconds to destroy. That’s the truth in public life.

Now the local media is completely focused on a 3 second dysfunctional action rather than the great things that are being achieved by the Council and Administration.

A Recent Model of Success: The Town of Hanley

On the other end of the spectrum, I had the privilege of supporting the Town of Hanley during an extremely polarizing issue involving their Agricultural Society. Residents were deeply divided over how the grounds were being used and whether the relationship with the society was working. Council was in a difficult position. Emotions in the community were high. But rather than shy away from the issue, Hanley’s council faced it head-on. They held a town forum and allowed residents to express their frustrations openly. For over two and a half hours, over 100 residents asked unfiltered, unmoderated questions. And the councillors? They were incredible. They answered every question professionally, honestly, and respectfully. They didn’t get defensive. They didn’t point fingers. Most importantly, they listened. While the issue didn’t disappear overnight, the tone of the community changed. Trust began to return. There was an overwhelming sense that—even if people still disagreed—Council was willing to listen and act in the community’s best interest. That forum, in my view, marked a turning point—and Hanley should be proud.

Skills to Overcome Polarization as an Elected Official

- 1. Let Go of the Need to Win** Great elected officials know that winning every debate isn’t the goal. True leadership is shown in the ability to bend, to compromise, and to change one’s mind based on new evidence or insight.
- 2. Practice the 24-Hour Rule** When emotions are high, give yourself time. Wait before replying to a tense email or reacting in a meeting. That pause can be the difference between progress and permanent damage.

3. Find a Trusted Confidant Every leader needs someone they can trust completely—a sounding board who offers honest feedback without judgment and keeps sensitive discussions confidential.

4. Lead with Empathy Understanding doesn't mean agreeing. It means seeing others' perspectives and recognizing their frustrations. Empathy builds bridges, not walls.

5. Truly Listen Some of the most respected moments in politics come when someone says: "I've listened, and I've changed my mind." That's courage. That's leadership.

6. Invest in Real Training Most elected officials come into office with little to no training. Governing isn't instinct—it's learned. Training in conflict resolution, public speaking, financial literacy, and governance is critical to success.

A Laugh That Tells the Truth

When I teach municipal finance, leadership or governance, I often joke: "I'm only 25 years old—just look at what municipal government has done to my face!" (I am 50+) 😊 It always gets a laugh. But that laugh comes from shared understanding. This work is emotionally draining. It ages you. It challenges you. But those who take it on do so because they care. Because they want to serve. Because they love their communities.

Final Thoughts: Council Is a Team

Being on council isn't about outperforming your colleagues—it's about working with them to build something greater than any one person. The best councils understand that success is measured not in wins or losses, but in the strength of their roads, the soundness of their budgets, the trust of their residents, and the quality of life they provide. Put your community ahead of yourself, and you're already on the path to becoming a great elected official.

The Power of the Team: Councils That Win Together

One of the most critical yet often overlooked elements of municipal governance is the concept of teamwork. Too often, elected officials forget that while they may have run individual campaigns, once elected, they become part of a unit. A council is not a group of lone performers—it's a team. And like any team, councils either succeed together or struggle together. In professional sports, we celebrate the Superstars—the Hall of Famers—but the truth is, even the greatest players are only as good as the team they play with. The same holds true in municipal government. Some elected officials may stand out due to their communication skills, leadership, or longevity, but it is their ability

to collaborate, compromise, and support their fellow council members that defines their legacy. Great councils work together, and they understand that success is not about individual credit. It's about collective impact. Better infrastructure, stronger budgets, more efficient service delivery—these are the results of unified leadership. It's time we brought this concept front and center in council orientations across the country. Council members must be taught from day one that they are not in competition with each other. They are teammates. And teammates don't just work together—they depend on each other, protect each other, and lift each other up. This is especially important in an age where criticism can go viral in minutes, and social media can turn misunderstandings into reputational damage. In these moments, a strong team dynamic can mean the difference between collapse and cohesion.

Municipal councils can learn a lot from this approach. What if we viewed council work with the same emphasis on unity, strategy, and results? What if our elected leaders viewed themselves not as individual crusaders, but as board members responsible for steering a multi-million-dollar public corporation? Shifting our mindset in this way doesn't dilute democracy—it strengthens it. Because strong governance isn't just about debate. It's about outcomes. And outcomes come from collaboration, shared vision, and a deep respect for the roles and contributions of every member of the team.

About the Author *Tim Duhamel is the President of the Bloom Centre for Municipal Education, a leading provider of municipal professional development in Canada. With decades of experience in municipal finance, leadership, and strategic governance, Tim has helped hundreds of municipalities through education, in-person workshops, online courses, and consulting services. His passion lies in empowering municipal leaders and staff to thrive in complex and demanding environments.*

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