

# Conflict Management For Local Officials



Conflict has always come with the territory of serving in office. Indeed, conflict is simply a part of the human condition. However, over the last few years public service has devolved from “hard” to “brutal” as the conflict has become more mean-spirited and almost impossible to manage. I have been working with elected officials for almost 40 years and without any doubt, this is the toughest, most brutal time to serve your community that I have experienced.

Dealing with those who are driving the conflict brings to mind the old adage about wrestling a pig – eventually you realize that both of you are covered in mud and the pig is enjoying it. It can be emotionally wearying just to endure the constant slings and arrows of trolls who thrive on creating conflict as an end to itself. It is even more frustrating and hurtful when it is a colleague on the council modeling the worst behaviors of divisiveness.

Sometimes you can feel so ground down that it becomes easy to forget that you originally ran for office because

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~Ron Holifield

you love your community and wanted to create a future that is better than it would have been without your influence. Sometimes just surviving the daily onslaught of incoming social media slime missiles can take all you have just to get through the next meeting.

Managing the political insanity can feel like “mission impossible” with no simple answers. But Ronald Reagan was

right when he said, “There are no easy answers, but there are simple answers. We must have the courage to do what we know is morally right.”

There really are simple answers to managing conflict as an elected official, but they are not easy answers. The simple answer is to rise above the pettiness and political “gotchas” and lead like the authentic servant leader you know in your heart you want to be. Find your true north and follow it. Be true to your core values regardless of how loud the critics are. In the short run, it will be brutal as the rock throwers try to intimidate you. But in the long run, being an authentic servant leader will actually reduce the conflict and build deeper support among a broad base of your community who yearn to follow character-driven leaders.

The personal cost of leadership has never been so high; but, the need for character-driven leaders who put service above themselves has never been more critical. Walking the talk of authentic servant leadership really is the simple answer for the dysfunctionality

and hatefulness that inspires so much civic discourse these days.

I realize that the forces of hatefulness and mediocrity make walking the talk difficult – the rock throwers do not want you to thoughtfully deliberate, they want you to obey. If you have the courage to be true to your values, 11 simple commitments will provide you the path for success.

Because I am committed to creating a future that is brighter and healthier and more beneficial to all citizens, I will:

- Base my decisions on the next generation more than the next election, committed to the ideal that my loyalty must be to the entire community (both now and in the future) and not merely to those who selected me.
- Focus on mission, vision and values as the benchmark for my decisions and recognize that my responsibility is the pursuit of the greatest good for the entire community and not the satisfaction of any particular group's agenda.
- Make decisions based on fact-based evidence and not allow myself to be manipulated into bad decisions for the future based on the decibel level of critics.
- Recognize that “it takes a smart man to know where he is stupid” and have the wisdom to be smart. Accordingly, I will value those who have the courage to tell me what they really think and will listen sincerely to those who disagree with me to truly understand their perspective, recognizing that understanding other perspectives makes me a better leader.
- Embrace my responsibility to govern rather than to manage; recognizing that if I am doing staff's job I am not doing my job, while also understanding and embracing the appropriately exercised governance role of holding staff accountable.
- Place a greater emphasis on solutions than on the problem;



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while refusing to offer solutions before I understand the problem.

- Understand that mutual trust is the foundation for everything and that if I refuse to trust others, they will be unable to trust me.
- Protect the integrity of the process more than the rightness of my position; I will fight hard for my issue but then unify behind the governing body when the decision is made, because the decision was made with integrity of process, even if I disagree with the outcome.
- Understand that my deeply held beliefs, values and positions will be strengthened, not compromised by courteous, respectful and civil discourse. I will not treat someone as the enemy just because we disagree.
- Treat everyone with dignity and respect because of who I am as a leader, not because of how they treat me or what I think about them.
- Be a role model for civility. I will not treat my colleagues or staff in any way that I would be embarrassed if my five-year-old

child treated someone the same way.

May you have the courage to walk the talk of an authentic servant leader, and in so doing leave a legacy that matters. 🌱

**Ron Holifield** is CEO of Strategic Government Resources (SGR) that helps local governments recruit, assess and develop innovative, collaborative, authentic leaders. Holifield's current clients include more than 550 local governments in 47 states. Holifield has also provided strategic consultation to some of the leading companies in America, including American Express, Xerox, IBM, PeopleSoft, Verizon, Aramark, Space Imaging, NASA and many more. He previously served almost two decades in city management with six different cities. Learn more at [www.GovernmentResource.com](http://www.GovernmentResource.com).

Holifield's weekly 10 in 10 Update on Leadership and Innovation has more than 60,000 readers. His second book, 4th Dimension Leadership: a Radical Strategy for Creating an Authentic Servant Leadership Culture, has just been published and is available on Amazon. Contact him at [Ron@GovernmentResource.com](mailto:Ron@GovernmentResource.com).