

Canadian Comparisons

THE SAYING, "SO MUCH IS DIFFERENT AND YET SO MUCH IS THE SAME" IS ONE I'M SURE OTHERS WHO HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THE LGMA MANAGEMENT EXCHANGE HAVE EXPERIENCED.

Like Australia, Canada is a big country and one of enormous diversity and with over 3,600 municipalities, has many challenges for all levels of government. I was fortunate enough to attend the annual conference of the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA) which was held in Québec City and then visited the City of Portage Le Prairie in the Province of Manitoba.

One of the key roles of the local government leader is to assist the elected members in planning for the future. In June 2018, CAMA undertook a survey of its members to identify overarching trends and, unsurprisingly, the outcome very much reflected the issues we face here in Queensland and Australia. They included the growing fiscal crunch, the war for talent, Municipal restructuring, disruption, innovation, reconciliation and populism. On the subject of populism, and maybe because of the political narrative of their southern neighbours, the discussions around populism in Canada has a greater

tone of pushback. Even at the elected level, the loss of respect and objectivity in political debate appears to be starting to be more widely recognised as not being in the community interest.

Similar to Queensland in recent times, Canada has seen an increase in the turnover of the equivalent of the CEO, being the city administrator (CAO). CAMA has taken active steps in acknowledgement of this, including the preparation of collateral around political acumen and the truths and the elements required by a successful leader to ensure the appropriate level of situational knowledge across the municipal landscape. We know and recognise these truths, however, the importance of reflecting on them frequently and ensuring we are applying them cannot be overestimated. CAMA's 10 truths are:

1. INTEGRITY

Maintaining your integrity is crucial to achieving success as a CAO. This rings true in all of your actions as well as supporting ethical behaviour on the part of your elected officials.

2. ROLES

Council, the CAO and other Senior Administrators must all have a clear grasp of their role in municipal governance. Council

orientations, training and mentorship are key to understanding the boundaries and mitigating the risk that comes with blurred lines between roles.

3. PRIORITIES

As a CAO your actions should be aligned with those of Council. Take the time to learn what Council's priorities are and do not be afraid to clarify if needed.

4. TRUST

Establishing trust is a cornerstone of leadership and lays the foundation of political acumen. Trust is not a given and must be earned through your actions.

5. RESPECT

Even if you do not agree with your political leaders or the decisions they make, you must always respect them and demonstrate this respect to your staff and the public.

6. TRANSPARENCY

Maintain a culture of no surprises and no secrets between you and your Council. Being transparent and honest is vital to building relationships that will support your career now and into the future.



7. RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

Work at building rapport at all levels. Whether it is your staff, your Council, your municipal neighbours, the media or interactions at the provincial or federal levels, relationship-building goes a long way toward achieving the goals of your municipality.

8. NEUTRALITY

Leave the politics to the politicians. The role of CAO is to remain neutral on issues while offering the best advice possible to the elected officials making the decision and providing leadership to other municipal staff.

9. COMMUNICATION

Communication is not only what you say but what you hear. Take the time to listen to Council, residents and other stakeholders to truly understand where they are coming from and be honest in the information you provide. Be open and respectful in your discussions with Council and never take anything personally.

10. FEEDBACK

Do not be afraid to ask for feedback. Meeting with your Council formally and informally can help ensure you are aligned with the strategic plan they have set for the municipality. Finding a mentor can also be a valuable resource for working through challenging situations and having someone to go to for support.

Against this backdrop, the conference had an obvious theme around well-being and resilience and there was much discussion around the dynamic and sometimes buffeting environment the local government leader works in.

Many challenging questions were posed of leaders including, did I have an impact on someone today? When you have a conversation with someone, did they leave your presence more energised or more depleted, after all no one leaves a conversation with you neutral. And particularly importantly, are you providing a psychologically safe workplace by providing clear direction and setting clear expectations, and do you create an environment of civility?

My host was Nathan Peto, the City Administrator at the City of Portage Le Prairie located on the Manitoba prairie lands. Without question there were many more differences than similarities between Portage (as the locals call it) and Gympie when it came to topography and climate. Very much supported by the rural industry, they are currently seeing hundreds of millions of dollars of investment in food processing plants. However, apart from the flat landscape which appears to go on for hundreds and hundreds of kilometres, the most distinctive feature of course was the climate which sees January with an average

high temperature of -10°C and an average low temperature of -20°C.

Nathan attended the LGMA state conference in Townsville and the highly successful Management Challenge which was showcased at the conference was an initiative which Nathan took away to be explored further by CAMA.

It is vital that local government practitioners constantly seek to interact with their peers.

In response to a question about learning and development, a CEO of one of Queensland's largest councils stated the importance of getting out of the municipality, getting out of the state and getting out of the country. It is imperative that we take every opportunity to broaden our horizons and our knowledge base and stay abreast of what is happening in local government.

Bernard Smith
CEO, Gympie Regional Council



Bernard Smith, Teagan Collier, Nathan Peto and Tyne Peto at the Local Government Conference in Townsville