

In Search of Civility



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The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation's 3,068 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public's understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit www.naco.org.

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Civility: a: civilized conduct; especially: COURTESY, POLITENESS b: a polite act or expression

As defined by the *Merriam Webster Online Dictionary* 2010

“Civility is claiming and caring for one’s identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else’s in the process.”¹ ...and it begins with us.

Institute for Civility in Government Co-Founders, Rev. Cassandra Dahnke and Rev. Tomas Spath

If adult Americans will not model civic responsibility, how can we expect our young people to be any different?”

Richard Riley, *Former Secretary of Education*

What is Civility?

Civility is much more than just behaving politely, but it is a good place to start. This behavior shows that the individual has a deep abiding respect for others and their opinions. Civility also requires maintenance of self control, especially in dialogues with others with whom we disagree.

Our first president, George Washington, by the age of sixteen, had handwritten his 110 Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior, which were based on a set of rules composed by the French Jesuits in 1595. Each rule, from the first, “Every action done in company, ought to be with some sign of respect, to those that are present,” to the 49th, “Use no reproachful language against anyone neither curse nor revile,” and to the last, “Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience,” revolved around how one should behave in the presence of others and in conversation.

The state of civility throughout history has been a topic of several books. A sampling of these include: *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing codes of Conduct in Early Modern England*; *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth Century Urban America*; and *Civility and Society in Western Europe, 1300-1600*.

As members of American society, we witness a lack of civility on a regular basis. It is missing in interactions that we have with business people, it is missing in social intercourse with our peers

and coworkers and above all, it is missing in the discourse of our nation’s political leaders.

This lack of civility can be seen in conversations in our neighborhoods and on televised political moments. What accounts for this lack of civility? The continuing polarization of our society along racial lines, socio-economic lines, religious lines, political lines, generational lines and by special interests has brought us to an impasse.

In mid June 2010, KRC Research released the results of a National Civility Survey¹ conducted online in April 2010. The results of this survey show that two out three Americans believe that civility is a major problem and three out of four believe that it has gotten worse in the past few years. Seventy two percent of the respondents in this survey believe that the most uncivil place in society is in government and politics and this is followed by 69% who believe that traffic and our roads are the most uncivil place. Eighty five percent of the people surveyed believe that politicians should pay the price on Election Day for uncivil behavior in their governing activities.

As politics get more heated and proponents of “talk radio” get more outspoken, many other people have adopted the behavior that is ever present through the media and frequently played out at the national level. This outspokenness and lack of civility has unfortunately also crept into the governing process at the local level.

Jim Taylor, PH.D in his recent article “*Politics: Is Civility Dead?*” says “perhaps there has always been uncivil discourse, but because of the limits in the size of the audience that it could reach, we rarely heard it. . . Due to the emergence of cable television, talk radio and Internet, “squeaky wheels” now have a means of making their voices heard by millions.”²

The Institute for Civility in Government³ is a non-profit organization that reaches out through educational programs and membership to address the lack of civility in society. They believe that one of the key threats to effective and efficient government is the persistent and growing polarization in our society along lines of race, social-economic groups, religion, age, politics and special interests.

They have taken as their challenge, improving civility in the governing process because:

- A. It is public
- B. It is something in which we all have a stake
- C. It is a venue where change can be affected
- D. It influences other areas of our lives together in community.⁴

Recently, student leaders from 14 different colleges and universities issued a joint statement that they believe can help guide the public discourse of elected officials and their constituents. Convening at Allegheny College at the Center for Political Participation, these “Ten Tips to Improve Civility” were released during a national conference called Pathway to Civility.

The tips include the following recommendations.

1. Listen to opposing views
2. Seek shared values
3. Acknowledge the legitimacy of opposing positions
4. Identify the problem at-hand, focusing on it rather than on larger conflicts
5. Avoid political caricatures, labels and generalizations that may not truly present the views of your adversaries
6. Accept that disagreement will exist without giving up your own convictions
7. Clarify what is being said before attacking and/or responding
8. Recognize the value of solutions beyond those offered by traditional political platforms
9. Consider the consequences of what you say and do
10. Hold yourself personally accountable for your own political actions

These tips were drawn up by delegates to the convention that represented people with all types of political ideologies and they believe

these ideas will help get civility started.

So what do you as a county official do when your local commission meetings have become hotbeds of hostility? When one official constantly interrupts another or one uses undesirable language to object to a point and to get his/her point across and these comments are mean spirited? Does your county have local officials who grandstand for the television cameras with smart quips and constant interruption ever since the meetings have started being broadcast? Do local officials and participating county residents frequently yell at each other, interrupt each other and just generally show intolerance for another point of view. Then you are not alone.

John C. Gillespie, Esquire, recently released a paper entitled “The Need for Civility in Local Government Dialogue,” published by the New Jersey State League of Municipalities. His premise is that local public officials should display and demand public civility, public tolerance and civil discourse all around them. He says that when our political leaders are rude to each other, it gives the public permission to do the same thing. Often members of the public are nastier to the public officials in meetings and discussions than the officials were with each other. He also mentions that the major challenge for local officials who must work and live closely with their constituents on a regular basis and see them at the supermarket, on the softball fields, and other local meeting places throughout the community is the restoration of civility and the improvement of the tone of their conversations. Mr. Gillespie lists Ten Commandments of Public Civility at the end of his paper. Among these very practical commandments are:

1. Thou shalt not rudely interrupt a colleague midsentence; nor “speak over” a colleague while she/he is speaking;
2. Thou shalt not assume that shrillness of tone is a substitute for substantive dialogue;
3. Thou shalt not resort to “zingers” designed solely to embarrass your target;
4. Thou shalt not allow legitimate critique of policy and practice to become a personal attack aimed at the person

who devised the policy or implements the practice;

5. Thou shalt always recognize that your colleagues were also elected, just as you were, and deserve the same level of respect for having run and won;
6. Thou shalt not ridicule or belittle a colleague, or a member of the public, simply because he or she disagrees with you on an issue.

Many counties have begun tackling the lack of civility at the local level. Some are adopting codes and ordinances on decorum in public meetings while others have adopted a set of core values for civility and ethical behavior throughout the county.

Howard County, MD Public Library launched a community-wide initiative with the intention of making the county a model of civility. The goal is to make the county a role model for enhancing respect, empathy, consideration and tolerance. To get its civility program started, the county library turned to the book “Choosing Civility: The 25 Rules of Considerate Conduct” by Dr. P.M. Forni, a professor at Johns Hopkins University and the cofounder of the Civility Project. Dr. Forni believes that “It is time to rethink our relationships for the sake of the common good.”

The county, on its own, has developed 15 Principles of Civility that support the initiative that can be used to infuse civil behavior into the business, community and personal lives of its residents. It has also created something called The Civility Café.

The History of the Civility Movement in Howard County

The project was started in 2006 by a presentation from Dr. Forni on the County Library’s Professional Development Day. The theme of civility resonated with the library administrators and other community leaders and as a result the Library, partnering with Howard Community College and Leadership Howard County started this initiative in February 2007 launching it with a presentation on the principles of civility by Dr. Forni.

Interest grew about the initiative and before long more than 50 government agencies, nonprofits, businesses and schools and education systems located within the county became partners in encouraging civility. The Initiative held a Choose Civility Symposium in spring 2008 and nearly 350 community leaders and individuals were in attendance. Using funding from major sponsors and supporters of the initiative, 2,000 copies of Dr. Forni’s book were purchased, half of which went to the school system and community college sparking great interest in the issue.

As the initiative grew, the County Library stepped up to become the lead organization.

Why this Initiative is Important

Howard County, MD embraced this civility initiative, but why did it thrive in this community? The first is simply because it is already one of the most civil communities in the country and it celebrates this accomplishment. And second, it is a highly educated community, where residents aspire to live the vision and appreciate the reminder that “Civility is a journey, not a destination.”⁵

As Howard County pursued this initiative, and improved its own quality of life, it also expanded to other communities in the region and beyond, inspiring these communities to take a step toward civility.

In order to make this program a success, it was necessary to obtain outside grants and sponsorships. More than \$50,000 has been donated by various county based businesses and the leadership organizations in the county. These donations have been used to purchase magnets, posters, stickers and other promotional materials.

In January 2009, the county introduced its Civility Strategic Plan that is a model that can be used by other communities to establish a Choose Civility program.

In order to become an established part of the county framework, a leadership and support structure was developed that included a lead organization, a Board of Advisors, whose honorary Chair is Congressman Elijah Cummings, and various committees. The Board of Advisors is composed of 15 to 20 people who represent very

diverse segments of the community and provides the strategic, visionary and goal oriented direction to the program.⁶

The 15 Principles of Civility that were established by the county are:

- Pay attention
- Listen
- Speak kindly
- Assume the best
- Respect others' opinions
- Be inclusive
- Acknowledge others
- Respect other people's time and space
- Apologize earnestly
- Assert yourself
- Accept and give praise
- Take responsibility
- Accept and give constructive criticism
- Refrain from idle complaints
- Be a considerate guest

In his State of Howard County Address in January 2009, County Executive Ken Ulman said "Choose Civility "in some ways, has come to define us."



Other Programs

The Florida League of Cities has created a compilation of information on Civility in Government Resources on its website. One of these is The Collins Center for Public Policy. The Center has established a program called Civility in Democracy⁷ and features 10 keys to civility. Other resources available for local governments on this website include sample ordinances, policies and civility pledges and the aforementioned Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior written by George Washington.

One of the samples included is the Code of Core Values for Civility and Ethics from the City of Dunedin, FL⁸ which includes a pledge officials must follow and is included as part of the orientation of the commission, all boards and committees. The code includes the following language:

- Civility – I pledge to help create an atmosphere of respect and civility where individual Commissioners, City Manager, department heads, staff, committee and board members, and the public are free to express their ideas and work to their full potential.
- Ethics - I pledge to maintain the highest standards of professional behavior and to comply with the laws, regulations, and policies under which we operate

The Institute for Local Government in Sacramento, CA has also published, as part of its series "Everyday Ethics for Local Officials," guidance called "Promoting Civility at Public Meetings: Concepts and Practice."⁹ These papers are written in response to questions that have been raised by local officials. This discussion centers on the role that disagreement can play in a governmental setting and analyzes civility. It also includes an observation from Dr. Martin Luther King, about civility and its role in making governmental change:

In a neighborhood dispute there may be stunts, rough words, and even hot insults, but when a whole people speaks to its government, the dialogue and the action must be on a level reflecting the worth of that people and the responsibility of that government.

The discussion moves on to whether or not civility can be legislated and suggests some guidelines that should be followed when conducting business in the public sector. The first guideline suggests that you “Separate the people from the problem. Recognize that other thoughtful and caring people have very different views on how best to address their community’s many complex problems.”

In addition to county-wide civility initiatives similar to Howard County’s, other local governments have established rules, regulations and ordinances that govern civility and decorum in their county meetings and interactions with the public. Washoe County, NV has adopted informal rules of decorum that are included as part of the agenda for every Board meeting in the public comment section. The statement reads as follows:

The Chairman and Board of County Commissioners intend that their proceedings should demonstrate the highest levels of decorum, civic responsibility, efficiency and mutual respect between citizens and their government. The Board respects the right of citizens to present differing opinions and views, even criticism, but our democracy cannot function effectively in an environment of personal attacks, slander, threats of violence and willful disruption. To that end, the Nevada Open Meeting Law provides the authority for the Chair of a public body to maintain the decorum and to declare a recess if needed to remove any person who is disrupting the meeting, and notice is hereby provided of the intent of this body to preserve the decorum and remove anyone who disrupts the proceedings.

Other counties, such as Ware County, GA have established rules that govern public meetings and included a section on decorum in these

rules. Ware County’s section says:

Members of the public who wish to speak at official meetings and work sessions of the Ware County Commission are expected to adhere to the rules of decorum as outlined herein. Unless otherwise directed by the Chairman, all remarks should be directed to the Chairman and not to individual commissioners, staff or citizens in attendance. Personal remarks are inappropriate...Any person engaging in this type of behavior shall be ruled out of order by the Chairman, and at the Chairman’s discretion, be removed from the assembly hall.

Cowlitz County, WA has incorporated its decorum rules into its County Charter as part of the authority granted to the presiding Chair by giving him the authority to preserve order and decorum. Smith County, TX has established a section of its county code called “Rules of Procedure, Conduct and Decorum at Meetings of the Smith County Commissioners’ Court” and has empowered the County Judge, as the presiding officer, to enforce these rules. The code also states that the Sheriff, or a designated deputy, is present at all meetings acting as the bailiff.

Pinellas County, FL commission has established its own rules for Public Participation and Decorum as has Erie County, NY and in both of these counties the Chair has the authority to have an individual removed from the meeting. In many of these counties, including Polk County, WI, the Chair of the commission or board meeting is charged with maintaining civility and decorum in all board meetings.

As Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, an English writer who died in 1762, said, and it still applies today -

Civility costs nothing, and buys everything.

(Endnotes)

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3. Institute for Civility In Government, About the Institute, www.info@instituteforcivility.org
4. Id.
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8. City of Dunedin, Code of Core Values for Civility and Ethics
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Resources

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