



## **Governing for Results in Wisconsin Local Government**

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# About the Whitburn Center

## Mission Statement

The Whitburn Center conducts practical applied research focused on evaluating and improving governance, professional management, and public policy in Wisconsin and beyond.

## Philosophy and Values

Our vision is to build local government, nonprofit, and community capacity to promote the common good. We will bring people together across ideological divides to discover nonpartisan solutions. The Whitburn Center will share innovative, research-based knowledge, equipping our partners to address their most pressing needs, while utilizing equitable, efficient, and effective strategies.

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# Executive Summary

## The Issue

Local government is the level of government most likely to impact Wisconsin residents' day-to-day lives, yet, the democratically elected governing boards making local policy remain understudied in Wisconsin. There is a need to better understand how the group dynamics present on governing boards can influence organizational outcomes. The following report and governance toolkit explain how governance impacts organizational performance, and provides practical tools governing board members can use to immediately improve the performance of their boards.

## The Method

We draw upon a developed body of academic research related to governing behaviors and organizational outcomes. In addition, we share practical tools based on high-quality research, and governance best practices already in use.

## The Findings

Our review of the literature and best practices finds:

- There are clear linkages between governing board behaviors and outcomes.
- Governing boards tend to fail in identifiable ways, including getting mired in unproductive conflict, failing to understand their roles, and failing to define key governing concepts.
- Trust is a key component of governing board success. The level of trust present on a governing board can be identified and increased through deliberate actions.

## The Lesson

We find that governing boards can improve organizational outcomes by improving their governing dynamics. Simple steps during the onboarding process for new board members can give them the tools to understand their role, identify problems, implement appropriate solutions, and measure the impact of those solutions over time. Improving performance through improved small group dynamics is particularly powerful in that it does not require any structural changes or additional funding.

## Introduction

Local government is the level of government most likely to impact Wisconsin residents' day-to-day lives. Streets, sanitation, K-12 education, public safety, local transportation, and community development are all tasks performed by local governments. These entities are overseen by democratically elected officials tasked with creating policies and providing oversight over the direction of their municipalities or school district. But these officials are not directly responsible for operations. The employees actually providing services to residents do not report to elected officials. So, what do city council members, village board members, town board members, and school board members actually do? More important, how can they improve their performance as a group?

In this report we draw upon a developed body of academic research to provide practical advice on improving local governance in Wisconsin by improving the small group dynamics of governing boards. Our goal is not to recommend structural or funding changes, but to confront the Wisconsin governing context as it exists in order to give governing officials resources they can immediately use to improve the performance of Wisconsin local governments. In other words, we are producing a guide on how governing boards can be greater than the sum of their parts.

The report consists of the following sections:

- A breakdown of the types of local governments in Wisconsin, and an explanation of their powers.
- A definition of governance and why it matters.
- A review of academic literature on improving governance through improved small group dynamics.
- A guide to common problems that arise on gov-

erning boards along with tips on how to resolve them.

- A governing board toolkit to empower local government boards to measure, track, and improve their group dynamics.

## *Types of Local Governments*

We begin with a brief overview of the types of local government in Wisconsin. All of these governments have unique features, but have the common characteristic of being overseen by a democratically elected governing board. In this report we focus on towns, cities, villages, and School Districts. All four are given their powers by the state, oversee the delivery of services, and as mentioned, feature democratically elected governing boards. More information about government types can be obtained from the Wisconsin Blue Book, or a review of Chapters 60, 61, 62, 64, and 120 of the Wisconsin State Statutes.

## Towns

Wisconsin has 1,246 towns. The defining feature of a town is its unincorporated nature, meaning, it does not have home rule. In practice this means towns are limited in their authority to powers expressly given to them by that State of Wisconsin. Each town has a board typically made up of 3 elected supervisors (although some may have up to 5), each serving a 2-year term. One person holds the position of chairperson of the board. Most towns do not elect an executive officer, but a town can opt to appoint someone to the position of town administrator to perform administrative functions. The Town board oversees basic services such as fire, garbage, and policing. They can also enact what is called "village powers" that involve approving resolutions, most often dealing with land use regulations. A unique feature of Towns is the annual meeting. The meeting takes place on the 3rd Tuesday of April, and is a

place where both the board and its eligible voting citizens consider town issues, debate, and enact ideas and resolutions. These actions are binding, and the town board cannot overturn them.

### Cities

There are 190 cities in Wisconsin. Unlike towns, cities are incorporated and do have home-rule powers to take actions that are implied in state statute, or that are deemed necessary to their function. A city governs via a common council that is typically made up of elected council members and a mayor. However, there is significant variation as some cities have a council president chosen by the common council, an elected mayor without executive function that serves as a de-facto common council president, or an elected mayor with executive powers. Cities also differ in their approach to professional management; however, about 70 percent of Wisconsin cities hire a professional manager to oversee day-to-day operations (Nollenberger & Simmons, 2016). Cities also vary in the size of their council, and the extent to which they have at-large council seats or district council seats. Finally, there is significant variation in a city's authority depending on whether it is designated as 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th class. Designations are tied to a city's population at the time classes were introduced into state statute.

### Villages

There are 415 villages in Wisconsin. A village is governed by a village board made up of elected trustees and a village president. The village decides how many trustees are elected and if they are elected from the village at-large or from districts. The president presides over meetings and acts on behalf of the board when needed. Eleven villages in Wisconsin have created the position of village manager to perform much the same role as a city manager performs in a city. This person

is appointed by – and can be removed by – the village board. The elected trustees oversee the villages' basic services such as fire and garbage. Like cities, they also possess home-rule powers.

### School Districts

Wisconsin currently has 422 school districts. Wisconsin school districts oversee the delivery of public education. The number of elected school board members vary in size from 3 to 9 members. School board members hire and oversee a superintendent or district administrator serving as the executive of a school district. School districts also vary in their use of at-large or ward-based board seats.

### *What is Governance and Why does it Matter?*

At its simplest, a local government governing board is a small group of people interacting with one another for purposes of creating policy and providing oversight. In other words, local government boards all engage in governance, and governance is a prerequisite to effective government. But what is governance?

Resources are finite, needs are infinite, and values are contested. In a democratic society like the United States, governance can broadly be understood as the structures, relationships, rules, and people involved in passing public policies and implementing public goods and services. The practice of governance involves overlapping power centers, changing personalities, and a great deal of ambiguity. Hence, definitions require nuance. For example:

- Local government scholar James Svara (1990) defines governance as “the way that officials make public policy decisions, implement them, and manage resources and ongoing operations” (pp. 4-5).

- Peters and Pierre (1998) take a reform minded approach to governance, focusing on the networks involved in the creation and implementation of policy. Pierre and Peters (2021) define governance as “the process by which governments, along with their private-sector allies, steer the economy and society toward collective goals” (p. 2).

- Ford and Ihrke (2018) focus on the human side of governance, concluding that governance is, at its core, “a human enterprise in which the perceptions of those involved, regardless of the objective reality of the situation, has the potential to impact governing performance” (p. 1).

The sprawling definitions suggest governance is an ambiguous concept that changes across contexts. As such, it is reasonable to question whether governance is a generalizable concept. An effective way to reduce the ambiguity around governance is to separate the macro from the micro. Macro-level governance refers to the ways in which society as a whole organizes itself to deliver public goods and services. Key questions include: What is the appropriate size of government? What levels of government should be in charge of what? What is the role of the nonprofit and private sectors in providing goods and services? Who, if anyone, coordinates relationships between networks of governing actors? These questions are usually answered by state and federal governments via policy changes and court decisions. The role of local government in macro-level governance decisions is generally limited to advocacy, and collaboration and/or contract-

ing out with private and nonprofit entities providing services.

Micro-level governance refers to the ways in which oversight of an organization occurs. Micro-level governance questions include: Who is the executive of the organization? What policies guide board deliberations? How do board members interact with the executive? How do board members interact with one another? What rules govern the processes of board deliberation? And, most germane to this report, what are the small group dynamics on a governing board, and are they conducive to good decision making?

Figure One details the linkages between good group dynamics and organizational performance in local government. A governing board’s dynamics directly impact the quality of their deliberations. A positive group dynamic results in a productive board focused on issues relevant to their task. A negative group dynamic leads to an unfocused board mired in unproductive and/or irrelevant policy discussion. The quality of deliberations impacts the clarity of the policy guidance given to the municipal executive charged with meeting board goals. Clear policy guidelines allow for goal setting, agreed upon deadlines, and expectations for reporting back progress. Unclear guidelines either lead to paralysis, or disjointed leadership within the organization. Clear policy allows for municipal staff to implement the will of the governing boards, and ultimately meet the needs of residents. Implementation is inconsistent or absent without clear guidance, leaving outcomes uncertain.



Figure 1: Governance Linkages

Another way to think about linkages between small group dynamics on governing boards is comparing it to a game of telephone. The clearer the message at each stage, the more likely it is correctly communicated to the next stage. If the message is muddled from the start, it will be even more muddled at the end. Pierre and Peters (2021) offer a framework for understanding how the board stage in governance works. They conclude goal selection, coherence, and decision-making ultimately lead to organizational outcomes. Without positive group dynamics, there will be flawed or incoherent goals that prevent good decision making. As the next section will demonstrate, there are measurable factors that facilitate (or hinder) a group's ability to create the positive dynamics that enable progress towards a common goal.

### *Literature Review*

A significant body of research focuses on board dynamics during public governing processes. In this section, we review existing research on conflict, regenerative relationships, and accountability. All three of these content areas are critical to building a positive board dynamic conducive to achieving a board's desired results.

### Conflict

Conflict is at the heart of the governance process. An elected board should represent the diverse views of the electorate being served. Hence, some conflict should be expected on every governing board. Conflict within boards can be an indication of an organization's level of effectiveness (See: Gabris, Golembiewski, & Ihrke, 2001; Svava 1999). Conflict types include:

- Relationship conflict: When personal issues drive division between governing board members.

- Task conflict: When there is disagreement over what a board should be focused on.
- Process conflict: When there is disagreement over how a board should be working towards its goals.

Conflict is negative when it adversely impacts a board's overall productivity and effectiveness. Negative conflict manifests as a lack of trust between board members, the failure of board members to take ownership over previous decisions, and the development of entrenched board coalitions divorced from specific policy issues. Ford and Ihrke (2020) highlighted the connection between negative conflict and performance, finding that negative conflict types limited board productivity, which ultimately decreased overall organizational performance.

Conflict serves a positive function when it leads to more informed debate over a board's policy choices. Healthy conflict within a governing group creates space for challenging ideas and critical thinking around decision-making. For example, Heemskerk, Heemskerk, and Watts (2015) showed that positive conflict brings more ideas to the governing debate and ultimately improves decision-making and organizational performance.

But where does conflict come from? Conflict within a governing board arises from a variety of sources, including lack of trust amongst members and staff, loss of clear goals, and a lack of overall vision (Gabris, Nelson, & Davis, 2011). Conflict can be related to ideological differences, poor board leadership, resources challenges, and ambiguity around the governing task. In simpler terms, if board members do not have a clear idea of what they are doing and why, negative conflict is more likely to derail the governing process.

## Regenerative Relationships

Regenerative relationships are those that strengthen through continued interaction and cooperation. While high levels of conflict can derail a governing board, high levels of trust and ownership correlate with increased board performance (Golembiewski, 1995). Within a governing board with regenerative relationships, members will:

- Feel comfortable speaking their opinions
- Accept others' opinions and actions as well intended
- Accept the legitimacy of their colleagues
- Stand behind group decisions regardless of their personal support or opposition

The link between trust, ownership, and organizational performance is similar to the link between other small group dynamics and performance. A high functioning governing team is better positioned to voice the needs of their stakeholders, listen to one another, have productive deliberations, and ultimately to give clear policy guidance in line with the values of their constituents. That clarity translates into better policy implementation from municipal staff, and ultimately better organizational performance.

Creating a culture of regenerative relationships begins with leadership from a governing board chair or president. A leader who emphasizes the value of trust and openness is viewed as credible among the group, which improves the quality of deliberations and outcomes (Gabris et al., 2001). Research on facilitative leadership provides a roadmap on how to establish a culture of trust and openness (Gabris et al., 2011; Heemskerck et al., 2015). A facilitative leader:

- Empowers their colleagues to voice their policy preferences, i.e., proactively seeks others to voice their opinions before closing debates
- Speaks last during governing debates
- Adheres to clear meeting rules like Robert's Rules of Order
- Treats colleagues consistently regardless of their policy preferences
- Never uses positional authority to stifle dissenting opinions.

## Accountability

Mulgan (2000) refers to accountability as a “chameleon-like” concept that is widely desired in government, but difficult to define (p. 555). Kettl (2015) presents accountability as the answer to three key questions: Who is to be held accountable, for what are they to be held accountable, and who holds them accountable? In a board governance context, it is board members themselves that are held accountable for performance, but the agent holding them accountable is more complex. A governing board member is held accountable politically by voters. However, board members may also hold one another accountable for their preparation and professionalism. In addition, a municipal executive and/or municipal staff may hold board members accountable in more subtle ways, including through the sharing (or lack of sharing) of key information.

Ford & Ihrke (2015) took a more nuanced view of accountability as it relates to board governance. They found that in a small group governing board, it is more important that a majority of board members share a common view of accountability than adopt any one specific approach. Articulating a common definition of accountability is a starting point for developing an

organizational mission, and in turn, developing shared vision and goals for the governing board (Ford & Ihrke, 2018). In other words, governing boards should collectively determine how they define accountability, and communicate that to each other and all stakeholders through an accountability statement that states what the group is to be held accountable for, and to whom they are to be held accountable (A sample statement is available at the end of this report). Just like conflict and regenerative relationships, alignment around accountability does not guarantee success, but it does create common expectations that positions a governing board to give clear policy guidance to the municipal executive.

### *Diagnosing and Addressing Governing Board Failure*

The academic literature reviewed in the previous section also provides evidence of how small group dynamics on governing boards impacts organizational performance. As shown, positive governing dynamics are a prerequisite to positive outcomes. Establishing a culture of positive conflict, high levels of trust and ownership, and alignment around accountability creates the conditions for success. In this section, we provide practical advice on how to identify, and address, common ways governing boards fail at their task.

#### Role Confusion

*Problem:* Role confusion occurs when individuals involved in the governing task are unclear of their powers and responsibilities. A common occurrence is when a governing board member attempts to interfere in the day-to-day operations of a local government. This can include calling a department head without notifying the executive, asking a staff member for a work product, working to undermine municipal policies, or unilaterally speaking on behalf of a local govern-

ment without the consent of council colleagues and the municipal executive. All of these actions undermine the authority of an elected or appointed executive, and lead to time consuming non-substantive role conflict.

*Solution:* Addressing role confusion begins with a clear job description for governing board members. This job description should be reviewed as part of the onboarding process for new elected officials, and annually in board development activities. Doing this ensures every council member, executive, and resident has a clear idea of council member roles and expectations. While some role conflict can still occur, council members will have the tools in place to monitor their colleagues and themselves (and take corrective action if needed).

#### Relationship Conflict

*Problem:* Relationship conflict occurs when two or more members of a governing board make decisions based on their personal disagreement with a colleague or colleagues. The defining feature of relationship conflict is the presence of coalitions aligned with issues immaterial to the subject matter being debated. Ultimately, relationship conflict leads to governing decisions predicated on personal conflict rather than policy preferences.

*Solution:* Relationship conflict is hard to overcome because it is often rooted in conflict that predates board services, such as personal issues or ideological disagreement. The first step to overcoming relationship conflict is to have a formal policy banning on personal attacks during meetings. Such a policy can state: "Board members shall focus discussion on the policy matter at hand and refrain from personal insults at all times." The meeting president should be on the lookout for personal attacks, and should stop them when they occur. Regular board develop-

ment activities can also help build relationships outside of the governing process. Lastly, creating a board culture where staff memos on substantive issues are always reviewed prior to debate can create debate that leaves little room for personal attacks.

### Process Conflict

*Problem:* Process conflict occurs when board members disagree on how a decision should be made. Some process conflict should occur as a governing board debates its norms and procedures. Specific actions that are not-routine, such as the development of policies for one-time revenue sources, should also generate some process conflict. Process conflict becomes problematic when process is used to subvert the legislation process, i.e., board members use process to prevent substantive debate, or when discussions around process become a safe harbor for avoiding difficult debates. A board mired in process conflict will fail to make decisions.

*Solution:* The creation and dissemination of policies governing board business can provide answers to potential process conflicts before they exist. When new processes are needed, policy statements should be drafted and adopted to provide guidance in the future. Over time there will be less need for new process documents. It is as important that these policies are publicly available, and, discussed as part of the onboarding of new board members. Some process conflict will inevitably arise. Clear policies can prevent such conflict from derailing the governing board's progress.

### Groupthink

*Problem:* The complete absence of conflict on governing boards can devolve into groupthink. In a state of groupthink, governing board members are afraid to differ from a consensus opin-

ion, self-appointed gatekeepers ensure alternative opinions are quickly dismissed, and the deliberations necessary to advance organizational goals are sacrificed to avoid any uncomfortable debates. A board stuck in groupthink makes decisions to protect its own sense of superiority rather than to advance the goals of the organization.

*Solutions:* Overcoming groupthink requires constant vigilance. Tools to address groupthink include appointing one board member as a devil's advocate tasked with presenting alternative viewpoints. Another strategy is for the board's presiding officer to slow down decision making to ensure there is time for alternative viewpoints to surface. Inviting guest testimony from residents with alternative opinions can also broaden discussions over policy issues before decisions are made. However, the number one tool for preventing groupthink is educating new governing board members on how to spot its symptoms.

### Lack of Trust

*Problem:* Trust is the lifeblood of high-functioning governing boards. A group cannot be greater than the sum of its parts if there is not trust. At its foundation, members of a governing board must accept one another's legitimate right to hold their position, and to engage in the governing process accordingly. During board deliberations, board members should interact in a way that builds mutual trust. This includes feeling free to speak honestly, accepting that others are speaking honestly, respecting decisions once they are made, and being able to compartmentalize debates so disagreement on one issue does not lead to disagreement on other non-related issues. A lack of trust manifests as relationship conflict, the presence of coalitions, and the inability to move on from a decision (i.e. debates are never truly settled).

*Solutions:* Trust is difficult to gain and easy to lose. Building trust begins with an onboarding process for new governing board members in which they can build individual relationships with their colleagues. An annual board development day is a powerful tool to break down barriers to trust. The board president also plays a role in building trust while running meetings; this includes calling out personal attacks, giving everyone adequate time to debate, and ensuring group consensus exists prior to stating a group decision regarding guidance to a city manager or superintendent. Finally, being able to identify symptoms of a breakdown in trust is a powerful tool to stop further erosion.

#### Lack of preparation

*Problem:* Governing board performance suffers when one or more board member is not prepared. A lack of familiarity with issues prior to debate leads to poorly thought-out policy decisions, irrelevant discussion, and creates space for conflict and/or domination of a governing board by a municipal executive. When board members are not prepared, community stakeholders are not represented.

*Solutions:* Municipal staff must ensure information is given to board members in a timely manner in an easy to digest format. Governing board members also must promote a culture where process questions can be asked and answered before, during, and after board deliberations. Boards can and should monitor themselves by creating a job description that clearly lays out board member expectations regarding preparedness. Having such a description allows board members to check themselves and remind colleagues when they are not meeting expectations.

#### **Conclusion**

Governance is ultimately a human-driven exercise featuring all the strengths and weaknesses

that come with the human experience. Conflict, cooperation, confusion, ambiguity, mistakes, hurt feelings and other emotions can all be expected when a small group of people sit down together to discuss pressing policy issues. Nonetheless, democratic governance relies on the ability of individuals to work cohesively as a group in pursuit of high-level goals. As this report demonstrates, there are easy research-supported ways to identify and address the most common issues holding governing groups back. A companion to report is a “Good Governance Toolkit,” a practical guide for governing boards to help them set a strong foundation for success, diagnose and address problems that do exist, and to make the most of their deliberations.

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