



GEORGE CUFF

George B. Cuff, FCMC, our governance zone expert, has been involved in local government in one way or another since 1970. He has been a recreation and youth specialist, a department head, a mayor for 12 years, and a consultant/advisor to municipalities since 1976. He is the author of seven books on local government policy governance. His latest book is *Life's Lessons Inside City Hall – a collection of short stories* and he has also written hundreds of articles and columns in *Municipal World* since 1984.

The CAO

An unbiased advisor?

People often ask me where I get my topics from for the articles I have written over the years (now numbering, I believe, over 400). The answer is: they come from a variety of places and sources: some from a major review that I have been commissioned to do, others from questions or observations offered at one of my seminars, and some from conversations – by telephone, by email, or in person. In this instance, the topic comes from the mouth of a friend who was buying me coffee. He asked how members of council determine what course of action to take on this or that issue and how they avoid being influenced by the bias of others. As he commented, “It’s hard to tell what the truth is.”

Free from bias?

Everyone has biases. Wikipedia defines bias as “one-sided, lacking a neutral viewpoint, or not having an open mind.” Each of us is impacted by the views of others almost from birth. We carry or reflect at least some bias in terms of how we interact, learn in school, accept criticism, provide feedback, back this political party or that, choose which television station to watch, or what media to connect to through our personal communication systems. While many of us like to believe we are “open-minded,” we would not likely be described as having a “neutral viewpoint” or being vacant-minded. Rather, it is more likely that those who know us well would express that we have opinions and often are heard giving them expression (sometimes without the invitation).

For the past 40 years, I have urged mayors and councils to understand they are *political*, whereas their administration is not; that they choose from a standpoint of “What do we think the majority of the public would agree to?” The CAO and their administration, on the other hand, present advice from an apolitical perspective. Generally speaking, that is true. Or is it?

Is a CAO value-neutral?

Can it be truly argued that someone serving in the role of a seasoned, well-trained, and appropriately educated CAO would be completely neutral about the issues being presented to the council by the administration? Would they not be expected to speak or write to an issue from the perspective of one trained or educated in the social sciences or in planning or as someone with 20 years of engineering experience? If the CAO was previously the manager of a heritage foundation or had served as the executive assistant to a cabinet minister charged with oversight of the climate change file, would they not be likely to speak more clearly to the preservation of a historical site or a natural park area, rather than promoting a high density/commercial zoning for the site under review?

CAOs bring their past to the table. This should always be expected. In most instances, they were likely hired because the council doing the recruitment found their mix of training, experience, and education was the most acceptable of any of the candidates and the most likely to prove beneficial to the council and community. Should they now be

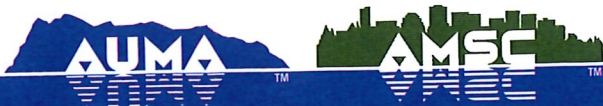
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expected to set that aside and enter a discussion as a blank slate, prepared to be influenced by the arguments put forward by their direct reports who also are certain to have been impacted by their own mix of training and experience? Does a council look for the candidate who seems to be the least “political”? Is that really their criteria?

Not us plus one

I have long argued that a CAO is not needed as an extra member of council. I am not comfortable with the CAO who becomes the “buddy” of the mayor or individual members of council (i.e., always out together, golfing together, socializing together). The community does not need more of them; those who were elected serve as the representatives of their public(s). Regardless of how prestigious their professional backgrounds, no member of a council is expected to play that role once elected. Like it or not, council members are the politicians. As a body, they do not need a back-up cast or the hallelujah chorus. However, every council does need advice that is untainted by what has been cast as the best “political” choice.

But can a CAO who brings to the table all of their own experiences and perspectives be truly expected to provide clear, unbiased administrative advice that, regardless of the ultimate council decision, will be understood as standing the test of time and unmoved by the politics of that day?

Ironically, I would argue “yes.” It is my firm belief a CAO should be expected by their council to argue each issue from a solid administrative background with a strong emphasis on logical options and the potential consequences that separate the one choice from the others. Every mayor and council will of course recognize that their CAO is not impervious to the commentary that might be raging in the community on a particular issue. But, and this is the key, they should be quite sure the CAO will be able to set all of that aside to answer the fundamental questions on each agenda matter: What makes the best sense both now and into the foreseeable future based on what I know to be administratively sound? How does our administrative recommendation fit with the strategic goals as articulated by this council? Will our budget be able to digest the planned expenditures emanating from this decision or is a major adjustment needed and can that be supported?

None of these questions beg a political answer from the CAO. The moment that seems to be the case, call the lawyer. A council should be assured that it and only it will be making the political call, which may be completely contrary to the CAO’s (and the administration’s) best apolitical judgment.

Does this mean that every report from staff to council is administratively pure? Likely not; all of us are human and are continually under assault by this opinion or that on all manner of topics. However, to the extent possible in any environment as complex as a local government, the best advice any council can receive must be as free from political bias as possible with solid options that are carefully described, weighed, and judged. The one recommended must meet the tests described above – i.e., sound administratively, reflective of council’s strategic priorities, and budget sensitive. **MW**