

# Political Acuity and Staff-Council Relations

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**Key words:** Core competencies in municipal government, political acuity, public service training, political-civil service relations

**Abstract:** “He just doesn’t get it.” This common criticism has been uttered by mayors, councillors and political staff about civil servants and by civil servants about other civil servants and elected officials and their political advisors. There is a growing body of literature that deals with the relationship between the civil service, elected officials and their political advisors. Some of this focuses on the federal level of government in Canada. Mallory (1967) argued that since the Dorion Report of 1965, little had been done to inform or reform our understanding of the political-administrative dichotomy and that the Minister’s Office in particular was in need of reform. Campbell and Peters (1988) talked about what they called the “presumed separation in tasks of politics and those of administration” and Atkinson and Coleman (1985) explored “blurred distinctions” as they considered traditional roles. Savoie (2003) provided the most in-depth consideration of the relationship and how it was changing. Aucoin (2008) wrote much about new public management and new political management. Blakeney & Borins (1998), Kernaghan & Langford (2014) and Inwood (2012) wrote about traditional roles of civil servants and elected officials and their staff. Recently, Constantinou (2013) has written about political acuity at the provincial level. At the municipal level in Canada, the work of Siegel (2015 and 1994) has provided the most helpful insight into roles and responsibilities as well as behaviours and best practices.

Based on interviews with mayors, councillors, political staff and senior municipal officials, this paper examines the relationship, where tensions exist and the importance of political acuity for civil servants. This paper proposes a framework for a new approach understanding political acuity and argues that political acuity should be a core competency in municipal government and provides a roadmap for training civil servants.

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## **Political Acuity and Council-Staff Relations<sup>1</sup>**

...the space between legislator and public servant is not adequately buffered. In fact, the space is razor thin and in significant jeopardy for public servants and good governance in general. – Fiona Crean, Ombudsman of Toronto, 2012

In her annual report to Council, Toronto's Ombudsman Fiona Crean wrote "It has never been tougher to be a dedicated public servant in Toronto." (Office of the Ombudsman, 2012) Crean was speaking of a deterioration of relations between civil servants, council and the mayor that had become quite difficult for residents and partners, as well as civil servants and elected officials themselves. The case of Toronto stands as a particularly unusual example of an extreme of a variety of negative behaviours and circumstances, but the challenge of creating highly effective work environments in municipal government remains. As governments at all levels strive to do more with less and tackle more difficult problems, more effort has to be made to find ways of developing a mutual understanding of the traditional roles of civil servants and elected officials so as to avoid unnecessary and unproductive conflict.

### **Political-Administrative Dichotomy and Political Acuity**

This paper considers the political-administrative dichotomy in the context of

municipal government and focuses on the notion that better understanding of the traditional roles and responsibilities between and among these "parts" can avoid unnecessary and unproductive conflict.

The political-administrative dichotomy is a term used to describe the traditional structure and function of the two "classes" of individuals in our system of government. Civil servants are those who are permanent, non-partisan employees of the government, hired for their skills, expertise, experience and education. They are expected to serve the elected government of the day, or council, by providing good information so that those elected officials can make informed decisions. After those decisions are taken, the civil servants are expected to implement those decisions to the best of their abilities. The politicians are representatives of the public who are elected to set direction and make decisions.

Political acuity is a set of core competencies that, together, strengthen one's capacity to survive and thrive in organizations, especially in the public sector, where one's leaders are elected. Political acuity can be defined as a way of thinking and behaving; putting information and skills together to better guide choices and behaviour in a given context in order to accomplish one's goals and objectives. (Constantinou, 2013 & 2014, Hartley et al., 2013) The core group of competencies includes personal/self-knowledge and interpersonal skills, a capacity to read people and situations, a capacity for proactive and strategic

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank the participants of this study for their enthusiastic participation and insights, as well as the journal's reviewers, who were extremely helpful in their comments and suggestions.

stakeholder engagement and alignment and the ability to use environmental strategic thinking and scanning to understand the context. (Constantinou, 2013 & 2014) Typically, political acuity is thought to be necessary for civil servants who deal with elected officials, but the definition and application of political acuity is broader than that. These are the skills necessary to advance one's personal and professional goals and objectives in any organization. (Ferris et al.) It has particular relevance and importance in all forms of government where the leadership is elected, but is no less important in other types of organizations. Given this, while the need for these skills may be more acute for civil servants who deal with politicians directly, anyone who deals with stakeholders – internal or external – can benefit.

This paper will consider a new framework for understanding what the dichotomy means at the municipal level and provide a roadmap for new ways of educating and training civil servants, elected officials and their political advisors so as to move towards a better understanding of each other and a more highly effective municipal government.

### **Objectives and Research Questions**

In order to better understand how the political-administrative dichotomy is understood and lived in the municipal experience, this study employed a series of specific questions to guide the interviews and data collection. They are listed below.

- Is the traditional model of the political-administrative dichotomy relevant or antiquated?
- Is there a shared understanding of the roles and the demarcation?
- Is there tension, and if yes, how does it manifest itself? Is it a good or bad thing?
- In this context, how is it that some officials can flourish and others flounder? What is political acuity? What role does it play in this relationship? Can it be learned/taught? If yes, how?

The research questions guiding this qualitative study assisted the author in designing an interview guide that was used in structuring meetings with key senior players in municipal government (see Appendix A). The data from these interviews provide some important insights into the nature of attitudes about the structure and function of municipal government, as well as ways to work towards reducing unnecessary tension and conflict, improving behaviour and ultimately performance. Further, this study will help to determine whether the conventional thinking as described in the literature regarding the political-administrative dichotomy is relevant at the municipal level of government in Ontario.

### **Thesis**

The political-administrative dichotomy is very much a part of the structure and function of municipal government (Siegel, 2015), as it is at the provincial and federal levels, and it is one of the great strengths of our system of responsible municipal government. But it is a great source of challenge and conflict. Given

this is a fundamental and core element of the structure and function of government at the municipal level, only those with political acuity can effectively function and flourish in such an environment. (Siegel, 2015) Despite popular opinion that “you either have it or you don’t”, political acuity can be taught and learned, and developing this important competency will help to develop a mutual understanding of the roles each plays, and to avoid unnecessary and unproductive conflict.

## **Methodology**

This study focuses on Durham Region municipalities (DRMs) in Ontario (see Appendix B), and utilizes a literature review as well as survey interviews with key players in the senior ranks of the DRMs. An interview guide of five open-ended questions was prepared by the researcher so as to engage the key informants in a conversation about the dichotomy and political acuity. This guide helped to frame the discussion, and allowed the informants to provide their own sense of the definitions, issues and evolution. Interviews were conducted either in person or on the phone or video conference during a two-week period in May 2014.

A convenient (stratified) non-random sample of 40 current and former mayors, political staff, commissioners and/or senior-level civil servants was invited to participate, and the findings and analysis are based on their responses. The conclusions and recommendations are based on both a literature review and the responses of the key informants.

This methodology was undertaken to ensure that a good representation of municipalities (big, medium, small, as well as urban and rural) was selected that would afford greater possibility for comparison, to generalize results of the study and to leave the opportunity open for future comparative work. The case of Toronto is unique in Ontario and Canada (although Vancouver and Montreal are similarly sized and complex), and it is believed that it would be certainly interesting, but likely not a good comparison to other municipalities. This sample should provide a greater insight into municipalities generally in Ontario.

The year 2014 was an election year for municipalities in Ontario. One might assume that the final year of a mandate may represent a period of increased tensions between civil servants and elected officials. During the interviews, respondents were asked if the pre-election period altered behaviours in any measurable way, and respondents universally reported that it did increase the frequency and intensity, but that evidence of this type of behaviour or “tensions” was “evident and consistent” during the entire mandate. These results might display a slightly heightened reality because of timing.

This paper focuses on the most senior executive – elected and non-elected – within DRMs. While the study could have been expanded to include other civil servants below the top line of the municipalities, such a limitation is a reasonable start to the exploration of this important topic. Future researchers should consider expanding this

cohort of respondents as well as the number of overall participants.

### **Political-administrative Dichotomy in Municipal Government**

A review of the foundational literature teaches us that this concept is central to structure and function of municipalities in Canada. (Sancton, 2011; Sancton & Young, 2009; Lightbody, 2006; Tindal & Tindal, 1984; Higgins, 1977; Plunkett, 1968) Beyond simply stating its structural and functional existence, the research is beginning to provide some insights into the subtleties and nuances of how it works. At the federal and provincial level, Inwood (2014) provides some foundation for our understanding of traditional roles. Blakeney and Borins (1998) provide thoughtful dialogue about the theory and practices, along with numerous examples of where some challenges lie. Siegel (2015) has made an exceptional contribution to our understanding by focusing specifically on municipalities and pursuing the idea of a separation of politics and administration in a very focused way, providing not only a thorough review of the existing literature, but also adding his own insights. Slayton (2015) provides a series of examples of inappropriate behaviour in *Mayors Gone Bad*, a look at the more sensationalized examples of ethical behaviour of mayors who cross lines, some directly related to their traditional roles.

In attempting to build on this literature, this study started each interview with a question about the existence and efficacy of the political-administrative dichotomy in their municipality. Respondents were quite

consistent in their responses. First, all respondents reported that it exists and forms a very real and ongoing structure and function. One current/former mayor reported:

I am reminded every day this exists, either because I ask myself “is this an appropriate request to make of our civil servants?” or because they are so kind as to tell me when it is otherwise.

One current/former civil servant responded by saying “I wish I didn’t have to worry about our respective roles so much.” Here, the respondent suggested that much consideration must be given to respecting roles and responsibilities, and that it would be a lot easier on everyone if s/he did not have to. A current/former political staffer reported “Why can’t we just have one conversation about who does what and then get on with it? Why do I have to have this conversation every day?” The responses indicate that this disagreement stems from the notion that politicians and political staffers often do not accept and respect the roles as they are traditionally defined.

The respondents were indeed consistent and of one opinion – the dichotomy exists, they understand the theory as to why it exists, they believe in the theory, but find it omnipresent and difficult to accept.

### **When the Dichotomy Creates Tensions**

All respondents reported that the dichotomy created tension, and each had examples to support their assertions. One current/former

mayor reported that the dichotomy was identical to a union environment that created an “us versus them” mentality, regardless of the goodwill of individuals involved. S/he suggested “it gets us off on the wrong foot from the get-go.” One current/former civil servant summarized eloquently the feelings of all respondents when s/he said:

Our problem is we either can't make it work because it intentionally creates the tension, or we can't make it work because people don't have the skills to make it work. There are those who seem to do better at it than others – I think they know something we don't.”

The respondents suggested that any tension that was evident was caused by the other side. Current/former politicians and their staff reported that they came to office with the best of intentions, to represent their constituent's needs and to “serve the community and deliver results”. The current/former civil servants reported they went into public service to do the same. Each thought the other to blame for struggling to deliver. As these concepts were discussed further, it became apparent that the source of the tension was often either a misunderstanding of the details of the traditional roles that each had, or a lack of acceptance of that role. One current/former civil servant said:

Does it make sense, after all the work the experts do to analyze a situation and put forward recommendations, that someone with no background in the field make the decision?

A current/former elected official said “Is it fair that I am directly accountable to the people and I can't get the civil servants to do what I want?”

The responses suggest there are the instances where there is a disagreement about role, or who does what. Typically, this was described as a difference of opinion as to whether some request or task was “political” or not. Most respondents reported that this typically gets “bumped up” to the highest level of the bureaucracy, usually involving a commissioner or the CAO/City Manager. Respondents suggested that these are usually contentious and result in people “digging in their heels” and usually get resolved in one of three ways:

1. The parties both back off and the task does not get done; people go back to their desks, and move on.
2. The parties negotiate a compromise and the task, in a new form, gets completed, with few residual persistent after-effects.
3. Disagreement about roles results in conflict – usually angry and vociferous – parties go away unsatisfied and negative feelings persist and cloud future relations and exchanges. In some cases, they seek solutions in motions at council or meet with Human Resources or legislative officers (Conflict of Interest Commissioners, Ombudsman, etc.) about pursuing some action or sanction. There is a persistent after-effect.

All respondents suggested that the first two interactions were more typical than the third, but each and every respondent had an example that would be characterized by number three above. Not surprisingly, current/former civil servants responded that the frequency of difficult exchanges and encounters as outlined in number three above increased slightly in the 12 months before an election.

One current/former mayor suggested that the civil service was mostly concerned with what s/he called a “perverse notion of public service” suggesting that they have been taught that the dichotomy divide is really bigger than it should be. S/he suggested that because municipal government is not made up of political parties vying for power, “civil servants should serve the government of the day, and that means doing everything that is not illegal and unethical” because they are not forced to choose between parties and play favourites, but simply support “the team the people sent to run the government.”

In analyzing all the responses and examples provided, there emerged four examples of things current/former civil servants believed were “off-side”.

**1. Special treatment.** Requests that sought “special treatment” for a councillor/mayor or constituent. There were no shortages of examples for this type of request. Typically, the request manifests itself as either “queue-jumping” or minor modifications/exceptions that do not have to go to council for approval. Cases of easements, driveway size, construction/renovation outside of

permit approvals and inspections, were among the many examples. Current/former civil servants often reported that they felt very uncomfortable with requests where they were asked to treat a constituent differently than any other when they discovered they were president of the ratepayer’s association or a political fundraiser for the councillor. One current/former councillor reported that “it is one thing to try to help out a constituent by trying to get us to ease up on requirements; it’s another when that person is tied to their electoral success – beyond simply being an elector.”

## **2. Political process and campaigning.**

Requests that provided information for dealing with competing candidates and other information related to the “political process of campaigning.” One current/former civil servant reported that s/he recalled being asked to assemble data that highlighted the behaviour of a candidate for council, for the period that person was a trustee. The councillor who made the request was trying to use the data to demonstrate their main opponent in an upcoming municipal campaign had a pattern of “bad decision-making and financial management” while on the local school board. The respondent said they tried to explain why this was “wrong” and then ultimately said “no”, refusing to undertake the request.

**3. Going beyond the rules.** Requests by elected officials that sought civil servants to bend or breach guidelines, policy, rules, bylaws for personal interest purposes or constituent interests. In these instances, respondents suggested that it is one thing for an elected official to want staff to give a

constituent the benefit of the doubt, or exercise discretion favourably, but it is another thing for them to want them not to follow the rules. As one respondent said, “that’s when it becomes a problem for me.” All current and former civil servants reported that they don’t get the request “often”, but they do get them, and once they have said “no” a couple of times, elected officials try to find someone else who will say “yes”.

#### **4. Involvement of staff in activities outside their traditional roles or job description.**

One current/former civil servant said “...my job is to provide planning advice, not communicate to respond to media questions.” Another stated that s/he was invited to attend a town hall meeting to address any technical questions that might arise about zoning issues, and as soon as the session “got a little hot” the ward councillor pointed to her/him and said “S/he’s the bad guy...ask him why we can’t move forward with this project.”

One current/former civil servant reported that s/he continually got requests for assistance with things that were really more the responsibility of a colleague, and when s/he finally asked the current/former councillor why s/he kept asking her/him to do things that were rightfully the responsibility of another civil servant, the current/former councillor said “S/he doesn’t really get it the way you do.”

Almost all of the current/former civil servants indicated that they had been subject of such a request, or put into a difficult situation, each providing examples similar to those

above. One current/former civil servant reported that:

We are never invited when there is good news and never given any credit when things go well, but if we have to say ‘no’ to someone or they is someone needed to be blamed, all of a sudden we are invited and get to stand front and centre.

Each of the current/former mayors and councillors as well as current/former political staff suggested that civil servants were “not flexible” about what they did to support elected officials. One current/former political staffer reported that “Civil servants seem to work really hard, but it isn’t always aimed at being helpful to us.” Another stated that “if they would just put themselves in our shoes, they would see we aren’t trying to do anything wrong.” One current/former mayor suggested “we should tell public servants that serving the mayor and councillors is serving the public.”

All groups suggested a strong chief administrative officer (CAO) or city manager can help to manage these issues when they arise, and ideally s/he would manage these requests through their office so that most civil servants would not have to manage inappropriate requests.

All respondents explicitly stated that tensions between the elected and non-elected parts of their municipality were impeding highly effective municipal government, increasing instances of conflict and unnecessary tensions, and that they believed that “political acuity,” as defined above, would improve this situation dramatically. Each part

of the political-administrative dichotomy reported that when the key players had “political acuity” everything worked better or was resolved more effectively.

### **A Shared Understanding of Political Acuity**

All respondents said virtually the same thing when defining political acuity. The words “knowing” and “savvy” were repeatedly used, as were “sixth sense” and “understanding”.

One current/former political staffer said “political acuity means understanding how things really work and being on-side with getting things done.” A current/former mayor said that political acuity is “a state of understanding and knowing that means you can anticipate future events and individual behaviours in a nuanced context.”

A current/former civil servant said that political acuity means “a knowledge of what matters to the key players and why, and then occupying that space intelligently.” Another said “political acuity means you know how to stay out of the media and out of trouble.”

One current/former political staffer reported that the civil servants s/he had worked with who had demonstrated high forms of political acuity were those who knew to give me a “heads up” when something was going to be controversial or challenging, and “the really good ones figured out how to avoid those things altogether.” One current/former civil servant said that s/he always ensured that s/he seemed willing to help them achieve their goals and objectives: “I always found a way

to be helpful, without crossing any lines.”

One current/former civil servant said “political acuity means not only understanding the traditional roles espoused in the political-administrative dichotomy, but to accept them, and find productive ways of working together when tension between the two parts exists.”

### **Political Acuity as a Learned Competency**

The shared sentiment of respondents was that political acuity is both an art and science. That is, that some things can be learned, but other components were innate personal characteristics that some were lucky to have and others unlucky to be without. One current/former political staffer reported that s/he felt that some civil servants were operating outside their comfort zone – they had moved up the ladder simply because they had been with the city long enough, and now they were having to deal with elected officials on a regular basis, and they “weren’t very comfortable doing it, and weren’t very good at it.” One current/former mayor suggested when someone was good at “it” that it was “a thing of beauty to behold.” Another current/former mayor suggested that s/he would work with the ones that “get it” and work around the ones that “did not.”

When asked about improving political acuity skills, there was unanimous agreement. All participants in this study believed that political acuity is very important and that there should be extensive training associated with it.

One of the fascinating parts of this was the notion that, consistent with a previous study at the provincial level (Constantinou, 2013 & 2014) current/former elected officials and their political staff, did not see the need for them to get political acuity training; only civil servants. There was a universal belief among current/former elected officials that the need for political acuity improvement lay with the civil service learning more about the elected officials and their issues or “world” and not the other way around. One current/former councillor reported that “...we don’t need political acuity training, we are political and couldn’t get here without it.” Another current/former councillor said “...we have political acuity in spades. It’s the civil service that doesn’t get it.” This is clearly an area for further research.

Current/former civil servants unanimously agreed that both elected officials and their staff, along with civil servants, need political acuity training, and that some form of that training should include them being in the same room talking through issues and coming to agreement on how disagreements or conflicts should be handled. One current/former civil servant reported that:

...at some point we have to move beyond a theoretical level of training and discussion and put civil servants and elected officials in the same room. Then and only then will the training and education be real, but it can’t be just on-the-job training where we have to get used to working with them; it has to be deliberate sessions for dialogue, information-sharing, role-play and case studies; otherwise, it’s

“baptism by fire”, and not everyone survives that or learns that way.

One current/former civil servant reported that s/he has noticed that not a lot of permanent staff wants to move up into management, because as s/he said:

...the few extra dollars and what you give up – job protection, vacations, etc. – it’s not worth it. But the worst part of it is having to deal directly with elected officials and their staff. It is too stressful and often means you are often put in unfair positions. They don’t play by the same rules as us – usually they don’t have any rules at all...except that they always look out for number one. I came to work here so I could serve my community, not be the victim in an episode of House of Cards!

Current/former civil servants suggested that education and training in the area of political acuity had to include a multitude of forms, and, as one suggested, it has to start with orientation and include ongoing dialogue and training – custom-designed and appropriately tailored for all levels. Virtually all current/former civil servant suggested that bringing outside facilitation and engaging elected officials who were from other municipalities or retired would be best for most training, as it removes the awkwardness that comes from some of these discussions.

One current/former civil servant suggested that the first phase should include a theoretical base, the second the demystification of roles and motivations, then

a more nuanced discussion based on scenarios and cases, and then ongoing dialogue about how to deal with really difficult issues constructively. Another suggested that “if this is going to work, it needs to be a deliberate attempt to create a new culture and new way of doing things; otherwise it won’t really fix the problem.”

### **Recommendations for Advancing New Approaches to Political Acuity as a Core Competency**

In reviewing courses available for core-competency training at the municipal level, there are courses that consider issues related to political acuity. The Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario (AMCTO) offers a course in staff-council relations as part of its Executive Diploma in Municipal Management. The curriculum states:

Relations and interactions between the executive and the legislative branches of municipal government form the most important link to the smooth running of municipal government. This course will help you understand the nuances of this relation to help you manage any potential crisis and conflicts better.

The AMCTO Municipal Administration Program (MAP) includes as a learning objective and outcome to “know the roles and inter-relationships of councillors and staff” and “offer suggestions for improving municipal policy making, and the interaction

of councillors and staff within the process.” (AMCTO, 2015, 7-8)

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) do not offer training on political acuity. The Schulich School of Business’s Executive Education Centre offers a Master’s Certificate in Municipal Leadership that includes a one-day module on political acuity.<sup>2</sup>

The Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC) also does not. The Institute on Governance (IOG) does offer a program titled “Strengthening your political savvy”, but it is focused on the federal level of government.

Two things are very clear from the data collected. First, there is general acceptance that political acuity, as a core competency, would result in better relations between both parts of the political-administrative dichotomy, and that better relations would result in a more effectively run municipality – better able to serve the public. As one current/former mayor said:

If I didn’t have to spend so much time moderating disputes about appropriate roles and responsibilities between these two parts of the system, we might actually better achieve our business goals and objectives. And there is a lingering effect of these disputes on ongoing business operations. Parties to these disputes don’t just go to their respective corners and

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<sup>2</sup> This course module is taught by the author

forget about it. They simmer and stew. Next thing I know projects slow down, communications are twisted and broken, and ongoing relations are difficult. If both sides dig in their heels, then it is a protracted period of discord – my experience is, these guys have long memories.

Second, there is both a need and a desire for more dialogue and to work to improve political acuity as a core competency. While the two parts of the system may not agree on who needs it, they do agree it is important and that it involves a multitude of approaches. As one current/former civil servant reported, “It’s unfair to send me into that room [council chambers] without the right kind of training. I need better awareness and protection.” As one current/former political staff reported “it’s not fair to anyone if we bring civil servants to brief the mayor if they don’t get it. It’s a waste of everyone’s time.”

Based on the responses, the development of a new approach to political acuity as a core competency should include the following components:

**1. Acknowledge the need.** The case of DRMs suggests a need for enhanced knowledge and skills related to political acuity for senior staff, both elected and not elected, and efforts put in place to better define its meaning, and provide supports to develop this competency, including training customized to relevant levels and roles within the municipality.

**2. Begin a dialogue.** Start with a foundational discussion that acknowledges the traditional

roles and responsibilities of both parts of the political-administrative dichotomy. This ought to be part of orientation and part of an ongoing dialogue.

**3. Applied learning.** All approaches should attempt to contextualize the discussion so as to be more effective. Included in this should be experiential education techniques such as assignment-specific training, role-play, job-shadowing and road trips. For example, staff should attend some council meetings to better understand that forum. This, coupled with discussions afterwards, use of case studies and coaching/mentoring can work very well to demystify roles and behaviours.

**4. Elected officials need political acuity too.** Any effort to work only with the civil service starts with a flawed premise, that that one part “has it” and the other does not. Both parts need to work together, and dialogue and conflict resolution are critical parts of the plan going forward.

**5. Ethics and values are critical.** In all of the approaches to developing political acuity for both parts of the political-administrative dichotomy, ethics and ethical behaviour should be a consistent theme.

### **Future Research**

Participants engaged quite enthusiastically in the study and this suggests that an opportunity exists to channel this energy not only into additional research, but also ongoing efforts to advance this cause. Based on the responses, there appears to be an interest in a concerted effort to develop and implement a multi-pronged

education and training effort in DRMs. All respondents reported that they believed political acuity could be taught and learned. While respondents suggested some forms of education and training mentioned above, additional research focusing more directly on forms of pedagogy would be helpful.

These results are specific to DRMs, but perhaps they also exist in other municipalities and exploring this further would be very helpful to further understanding this area of research and to better informing the development of a proactive education and training program relevant to the sector as a whole. Expanding this study to more participants, at more levels within municipalities, and including more municipalities across Ontario and Canada would be very helpful and informative.

## **Conclusions**

The data collected as part of this study suggest that this system exists and works well, but it is not without its problems. Most respondents suggested that the successful balance of these competing visions or motivations was important to effective municipal government. All agreed that this relationship is regularly tested and that it affects optimal function. And all agreed that political acuity as a core competency is critical for municipalities to reduce unnecessary and unproductive conflict.

## **Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire**

Semi-structured interview guide for current/former government officials (mayors, councillors, political staff, top-tier civil servants)

Interview Questions:

- The literature about government teaches us that there is a separation in our system of government between the administrative arm of government and the political. This has been called the political-administrative dichotomy. Is this demarcation real and relevant today? Does it work? Does it serve the people in your municipality well?
- Where do tensions exist between the political and administrative parts of government?
- Can you give an example?
- What is political acuity? What does it mean to you?
- What characteristics or competencies does someone have if they have political acuity?
- What can we teach/train them? How can we teach/train them?

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**About CJLG:** The Canadian Journal of Local Government (CJLG) is an independent, peer reviewed journal aimed at better understanding local government in Canada. While maintaining independence, the Canadian Journal of Local Government is supported by AMCTO, a professional association for municipal managers in Ontario, Canada.