



**Institute for Civility in Government
Report on Results of Workshop for City of Culver City
1.27.22**

The Stated Goals

1. Facilitate a two-part civility training and workshop curriculum with community stakeholders to be conducted over the course of a single day.
2. Help the City of Culver City begin to establish guidelines for broad, civil engagement.

The Process

On the morning of December 4, 2022, the Institute for Civility in Government (ICG) conducted a virtual two-hour civility training program followed by an afternoon workshop that brought civic leaders, stakeholders, and citizens together for the purpose of breaking ground on a set of civility guidelines. The explicit goal of the entire day was to help the City of Culver City (CCC) achieve a greater understanding of how to apply the practical mechanics of civility, and then begin the process of codifying it in a manner that could produce more civil, more productive engagement outcomes on range of contentious issues.

The Morning Assessment – Applied Civility Training

The ICG's assessment of the morning session is that attendees were vitally engaged with the ideas and techniques presented. The response was thoughtful, intelligent and participants brought questions and concerns that indicated not only had they listened closely but had also brought their own personal experience to bear on the material presented.

It is important to note that there was a significant technical challenge that makes it difficult for ICG staff to present a deeper, more nuanced assessment of attendee engagement in this report.

- 48 hours before the event, ICG was notified by CCC that for security and privacy reason that they it could not present on Zoom, which precluded video as a means of communication. This is mentioned here because Zoom had been ICG's stated venue from the very first submitted proposal because video is essential to the design of the curriculum. The impact of this last-minute change meant that attendees could not see nor engage with each other during the Q&A – something that we believe presented a significant challenge to establishing trust and building a sense of community participation. In addition, being unable to see the attendees limited ICG's ability to gauge more accurately the affective response of participants in real time.

This created an even greater challenge during the afternoon, workshop session.

The Afternoon Assessment – Workshop and Guidelines

“The City of Culver City is civility challenged.”

---Culver City Resident, December 4, 2021

It appeared that attendees returned from the lunch break vitalized by the morning curriculum and were eager to engage the process of breaking ground on set civility guidelines for the city. The tone set by Rebecca Rona at the outset was warm, welcoming, and encouraged a disciplined approach for the afternoon's work. The Human Relations Advisory Committee (EHRAC) members were engaged but not overly directive. Community members arrived ready and eager to be heard.

Workshop Hour One:

The first hour of the afternoon was most successful in terms of producing civil outcomes. It's more casual and exploratory nature generated a relaxed enthusiasm alongside a sense of willingness to discover. During this period, there were many moments of civil connection, but there is one exchange that seems

emblematic of the success during hour one in which a resident raised an issue that became a recurring theme throughout the day.

In the context of an affordable housing conversation, this resident expressed real concerns that:

“City leaders focus on who is speaking - not what is being said.”

It seemed reasonable to extrapolate that the subtext of this comment reflected the experience of many of the houseless in the city who feel their voices are less valid because they do not present themselves physically in ways that are traditionally comfortable for other housed resident and city leaders.

After this comment was made, an ICG facilitator asked if one of the EHRAC members would be willing engage in a civil dialogue with the commenting resident using the techniques presented in the morning session. Rebecca Rona volunteered. What ensued was a conversation between the two attendees that achieved the foundational state upon which all productive, civil dialogue is built – by the end, both parties felt seen and heard. They chose to use the techniques offered by the training (and the facilitator) to help them engage in ways that placed the dignity and respect of the other above the need to be “right.” Indeed, one of the lessons from this exchange is precisely that – if both parties properly heard, there is less need to be “right.”

Insight:

After it was over, both parties were asked how they felt about the exchange and they both confirmed that they left the conversation feeling received and understood. It is important to note here that these kinds of exchanges are how a culture of civility is grown. It is patient process, one based on hundreds of small moments like this when a demonstrated willingness to engage honestly and respectfully with our differences creates the conditions for safety and trust to take root. The goal of the afternoon was to begin drafting a set of civility guidelines, but after this moment it became clear to ICG staff that there is much work like this to be done before a set of meaningful, city-specific, and enduring guidelines can be implemented. The bigger lesson here is to understand that true civility cannot be imposed externally but is rather something that grows naturally

out of an internal commitment to principles of civility wherein respect for the dignity takes precedence above all else.

Workshop Hour Two:

It is the opinion of the ICG staff that the second hour of the workshop was more challenging and less successful than the first, largely because of two factors:

➤ Challenge #1:

The inability to see the public participants made it difficult to know who was talking. It made the process feel disembodied, impersonal, and lacked a sense of community participation.

Insight:

In spite of this challenge, however, ICG staff was impressed with how EHRAC committee engaged and received the impression that many residents of the city are genuine, highly intelligent, and care deeply about their community. This is contrast to many communities we have encountered where the need to attack takes priority over the need engage to problem solve.

➤ Challenge #2

ICG staff had planned to use instant, on-line polling to assemble a set of early, draft guidelines from the live voting of participants. On-line polling is a feature of Zoom, but not one that could be implemented using the Webex forum. ICG was advised that Webex can perform instant polling, but the specific Webex platform chosen for this event did not allow for it, and it was too late to switch. The impact of this on the guideline drafting process was significant.

The inability to perform instant polling, combined with the inability to see and then improvise an informal polling mechanism (such as raised hands) produced a less efficient and less empirical outcome than was originally intended.

Insight:

As was mentioned earlier, it became clear to the ICG staff that CCC may not yet be ready for the drafting of guidelines at this time. It seems there is still significant amount of impacted mistrust in the city that cannot be

overcome by imposing a set of quickly drafted guidelines that do not reflect a deeper understanding of the causes that led to the current conditions. The group did a good job of putting aside grievances in favor of accomplishing the day's stated goal, but the process of germinating a true culture of civility from which a set of enduring principles and guidelines can emerge will require a more complex methodology than a single, disembodied voice session can accommodate.

The Guidelines:

All of this said, there was a drafting process that took place, and it has genuine value. It is important to note here that ICG was not permitted to record the event, nor was it given access to recording made by the city – information ICG received after the event had taken place. What follows are the most salient ten guidelines taken exclusively from staff notes.

- 1. Focus on content – not who is saying it.**
- 2. Focus on issue – not person**
- 3. Honor the talk time of other**
- 4. Respect the right of everyone to be heard**
- 5. Listen outside of yourself**
- 6. Extend benefit of the doubt to other**
- 7. Honor the dignity of yourself and others**
- 8. Speak Truthfully.**
- 9. Leave your anger at the door**
- 10. Support your point of view with facts.**

Observations and Recommendations:

In spite of obstacles and challenges, ICG staff believes the training and workshop had a net positive impact on the participants. The list above represents a good beginning toward the ultimate goal of drafting a set of civility guidelines that the city can use to transform its current culture. At the same time, we want to be clear that this list is exactly what was intended – a start. There is much work for the city to do before a final list can be assembled and published, starting with a deeper dive into two primary issues that came up during the workshop:

- Understanding how city leadership's unconscious bias may be contributing to the current climate. The resident who feels, "City leaders focus on who is

speaking – not on what is being said.” In the context it was raised it was referencing the houseless. Does this comment also apply to people of color? Do those with more resources garner more respect and more access? Do those with less resources garner less respect and therefore less access? These may not be deliberate choices, but often it is our unconscious beliefs that direct our behavior because they exist below our awareness.

- Tone policing was an issue of real concern for residents. Tone policing is what happens when people in positions of power don't like what is being said and cite “improper tone” to dismiss the content. This is one of the dangers when attempting to apply civility too broadly or glibly - it becomes a way to negate the value and content of another's point of view. Number 9 on the list of guidelines above is a good example: *“Leave your anger at the door.”* While the intention is to ask people not to raise their voices or express their anger publicly, asking someone to “leave it at the door” is a directive that can be easily construed as an attempt to dismiss someone's legitimate feelings. Anger is an appropriate response in some cases. The goal of civil discourse is not to repress the feelings and experiences of others, but rather to create the conditions for them to be expressed and received in a manner that does disrespect the dignity of anyone else. It is a subtle distinction, but critical to the success of creating a lasting culture of civility.

Conclusion

ICG applauds the CCC for making the commitment to transforming its current condition of rancor and skepticism into a more civil and ultimately more productive culture of civility and respect. ICG also believes that the CCC has a citizenry quite willing and capable of collaborating with its leadership in ways that may not be properly valued due to the current climate of incivility. We also found EHRAC members to be thoughtful, earnest individuals also capable of administering civility to a citizenry anxious to have a say in its own future. All of this portends a successful outcome for civility in the City of Culver City and we are deeply grateful for the opportunity to have been a part of the first steps of your journey.

Please reach out if we can be of further service in any way.