

**You Can't Stand in the Rain and Expect to Stay Dry:  
Why Municipal Leaders Need a Clear Lens for Leadership**

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After working with elected officials for nearly 25 years — including some very formative years at AMM — I can say one thing with certainty:

Municipal government is different.

It is the level of government closest to people's lives and closest to the decisions that shape communities over time. Roads. Recreation. Housing. Growth. Infrastructure. Public safety. The things that determine whether a community simply exists — or thrives.

And unlike so much of modern politics, municipal government is still overwhelmingly driven by people who step forward for the right reasons.

Not fame. Not power. Not building a personal brand.

Municipal government is filled with people who put up their hands when nobody else would. People who coach hockey, run businesses, raise families, and still choose to sit through long meetings and difficult conversations because they believe they can help move their communities forward.

That matters.

And frankly, in today's political environment, it matters more than ever.

Because politics is changing.

Over the last decade, leadership at every level has become louder, more performative, and more combative. Every issue can become a fight. Every disagreement can become public. Every decision can become a social media battleground.

And here is the hard truth:

You can't stand in the rain every day and expect to stay dry.

Even good leaders get pulled into it. Even people who start for the right reasons can slowly shift from trying to make a difference to trying to win every argument, every vote, and every news cycle.

And this is human.

Most people do not enter public service looking for conflict. But once conflict starts, instinct takes over. Once we publicly take a position or feel challenged, almost every instinct pushes us toward winning the fight. Not because we are bad people — but because we are human.

The problem is that leadership cannot simply become about winning every argument. It has to remain grounded in why you entered public service in the first place.

These headline-grabbing challenges do not emerge because municipal leaders are bad people. They arise because the environment itself changes how people operate.

And while municipal government remains deeply connected to community, service, and real-world impact, it is not immune from these pressures.

Which creates an enormous challenge — but also an enormous opportunity.

Because at a time when so much public leadership feels reactive and performative, municipal leaders can still lead differently. To build trust. To create clarity. To ground decisions in something bigger than the fight itself.

But to do that, leaders need a lens.

Municipal leadership rarely presents clean, binary choices. Most decisions exist in shades of gray, balancing competing priorities, limited resources, and legitimate disagreements about what matters most.

Growth versus preservation. Investment versus restraint. Speed versus consultation.

These are not simple choices — and they rarely have perfect answers.

That is exactly why leaders need something that keeps them grounded when the pressure increases.

Leadership author Simon Sinek popularized the idea of “starting with why,” and there is a reason the concept resonated so strongly with leaders across sectors. In municipal government, however, “why” is more than a branding exercise or campaign slogan.

It becomes an anchor.

Your “why” is the thing that reminds you why you ran in the first place. It is the lens that helps guide decisions when criticism gets louder, compromise becomes harder, and every issue starts to feel like a fight that must be won.

When your “why” is clear, decisions do not necessarily become easier — but they become clearer. Clearer for you to decide, explain, and for your community to understand.

And that clarity matters because people ultimately respond to leaders they trust. Leaders they understand. Leaders who show up consistently over time. Leaders whose actions match what they say.

People do not need to agree with every decision. But they do need to understand the lens behind it.

Imagine a fictional municipal council in the community of Spruce Lake Hollow.

The first councillor ran on a practical platform focused on building a livable town within the realities of the local tax base. They communicate regularly with residents, provide consistent updates, and have a clear sense of what they stand for.

The second entered politics focused almost entirely on stopping a specific development near their neighbourhood.

The third deeply values listening and community input but can sometimes struggle to filter competing perspectives and pressures.

The fourth approaches decisions strategically, carefully weighing optics and positioning before taking a public stance.

Now imagine council is debating a divisive development proposal that would bring jobs and tax revenue, but also significant opposition from nearby residents concerned about traffic, noise, and growth.

All four councillors receive the same information. All four care about the community. All four genuinely believe they are acting in the public interest.

But while the issue is difficult for everyone, one councillor approaches it with far greater clarity.

The first councillor already has a lens. Their decision is grounded in the reasons they ran for office in the first place: long-term sustainability, practicality, communication, and building a community people can afford to live in and believe in. That lens does not automatically make the decision easy — but it does make the path clearer. Residents may still disagree with the outcome, but they can understand how the decision was reached.

The others struggle in different ways.

The second reacts almost entirely through opposition to development itself.

The third becomes heavily influenced by whichever voices are most immediate and emotional.

The fourth carefully evaluates how the issue will land politically and publicly before deciding where to stand.

Different lenses — or a lack of lens — lead to different leadership.

Importantly, this does not make one councillor good and another bad. Municipal leadership is not that simple. Every council table includes people with different priorities, different experiences, and different ideas about what their communities need most.

That is not a threat to democracy. That is democracy.

Strong leadership does not mean everyone sees the world the same way you do. Nor does it require abandoning your own “why” to find compromise. But it does require making space for perspectives beyond your own and understanding what others are trying to protect or build.

The challenge is not disagreement itself. It is losing sight of why you entered public service in the first place.

As municipal leaders across Manitoba begin thinking about future campaigns, priorities, and the next chapter of leadership in their communities, there is value in asking a few simple questions:

- *Why am I running?*
- *What lens will guide my decisions?*
- *Am I still leading from that place?*

Because in a political environment increasingly focused on winning every fight, the leaders who leave the greatest impact are often the ones who stay most grounded in why they started.

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*After more than two decades working at the intersection of communications, strategy, and public affairs, The MacAfee Group was created to help organizations lead with clarity, confidence, and purpose — especially when the stakes are high. As a full-service agency, The MacAfee Group helps organizations define their purpose, build practical strategies, and most importantly, deliver meaningful results.*