



# MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

APRIL 2023

## PRACTICES TO INCREASE RESILIENCY AND REDUCE RISK

For many people, feelings of instability and uncertainty have replaced the certainty and steadiness they were previously comfortable with in their work, homes, and community. The business world has an acronym for the environment in which these feelings magnify, VUCA. A VUCA environment has four challenges: volatility (rapid and unpredictable change), uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. A VUCA environment can destabilize people and they may feel more stressed, unmotivated, or overwhelmed. It may be more difficult for all perspectives to be heard and considered by a City Council or Board of Directors. The likelihood of making bad decisions or decision paralysis increases.

You may have experienced the effects of such an environment in an ugly exchange at a meeting, or a council meeting which goes on into the night with no final decision. If not, odds are that you have heard about it or witnessed it.

Perhaps you and your members have had to deal with sudden changes from the pandemic, social unrest, or natural disasters in your city. If you are fortunate not to have experienced it firsthand, examples are an internet search away.

At the League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust, I work with cities experiencing conflict, and have noticed a recurring dynamic. Most cities I work with have experienced some type of traumatic event or crisis and, as may be the same case with individuals, not managed the fallout with intention. Unless we take time to intentionally create and maintain good habits, bad ones form. As Tami Tanoue, ED of Colorado Intergovernmental Risk Sharing Agency says in her article *Governing Bodies and the Outlier Syndrome*, "liability claims thrive in an environment of disharmony and dysfunction."

How do cities foster a culture which is resilient in the face of disruption? Can city management keep bad habits from forming? How can city leaders increase their capacity to meet uncertainty with understanding, react with clarity, acknowledge emotions and, if a heated meeting occurs, draw on its strengths and resources to rebound?

Here are nine PRACTICES for city councils and administrators to reflect on which can increase resiliency and reduce risk. They are things you and your members likely have in place. However, it is easy to take them for granted and not mindfully exercise them – not making them a practice. Revisiting the practices before challenges occur can help prevent disruption from escalating. Being mindful of them can help moderate the effects of VUCA.

**Processes** – Do you have and follow processes for agenda setting, receiving and responding to complaints, public commenting, and budgeting? Are you orienting new council members and staff to these processes?

**Roles and Responsibilities** – Do you have current job descriptions for administrative leaders, elected and appointed leaders? Do you define the city council's role as a whole separately from the individuals who serve on it? Are the individuals in each role focusing their efforts consistently with their responsibilities (e.g., policy makers are not dealing with daily tasks, administrators are not making policy decisions)?

**Anticipate Change** – Do you take time for strategic planning? Do leaders in your organization discuss signs of emerging change which may signal a need to pivot? Do you occasionally ask whether it is time to change something or develop a new strategy for a future contingency?

**Consider All Perspectives** – When making decisions do you encourage opportunities to understand other points of view? Do you take time to discuss desired outcomes and different points of view rather than debating? Do you share your perspectives on the needs in your community?

**Take a Break** – When issues seem to polarize, do you consider whether you have all the information you need to decide? Do you use work sessions or planning retreats to encourage more robust dialogue? Do you take a short break or deep breath when tempers flare?

**Individual Responsibility** – Are you being a role model for how to thrive in VUCA times? Do you encourage relationship building and collaboration? Do you seek to problem solve rather than blame? Do you make efforts to demonstrate teamwork?

**Communication** – Do you have a crisis communication plan? Have you discussed how you will keep all levels of the organization informed? Do you regularly update each other on your key activities at council and staff meetings? Do you share and celebrate successes?

**Employee Wellness** – Do you formally and informally encourage employee wellness? Do you foster a culture of health through policies and programs? As importantly, do you practice self-care?

**Structures** – Have you documented expectations for council member, staff, and community members' conduct? Are your policies and procedures up to date? Are you clear that once a vote occurs everyone supports the majority opinion? Are you mindful of open meeting laws? VUCA tends to make us mindless and impulsive. This framework is offered as a set of prompts to help you pause and reflect, and recover your resourcefulness when the pressure is on.