



Everyday Ethics for Local Officials

Grandstanding Crosses the Line

August 2002

QUESTION

We have an individual on our governing body who is running for re-election. His colleagues are very frustrated with him because he consistently uses the meeting to grandstand. His comments on agenda items are shamelessly self-promotional and often prolong the meeting significantly because of the time they take. A number of his colleagues have talked with him about this issue to no avail. What are your thoughts and, if you agree such conduct is inappropriate, what should we do?

ANSWER

First, let's define some terms. The dictionary defines "grandstanding" as "playing or acting so as to impress onlookers." Public meetings were not created as opportunities for elected officials (or wannabe elected officials) to impress each other, the media or the public. The purpose of a public meeting is to accomplish the public's business in as productive, efficient and professional manner as possible.

A Greek philosopher once noted that "time is the most valuable thing a [person] can spend."¹ Public meeting time is an exceptionally precious resource. Most local officials recognize this and avoid yielding to any temptation to grandstand.

Grandstanding is a subset of a larger category of problematic meeting behavior: wasting meeting time (for example, rambling debates and asking questions that would be unnecessary with advance preparation for the discussion).

What can escape grandstanders is the ethical dimension of their behavior. Wasting meeting time implicates two values: *responsibility* and *respect*.

The Public's Time

How does grandstanding waste the public's time? There are likely to be individuals in the audience who are waiting an opportunity to speak or for later items on the agenda. They will be frustrated and resentful of an elected official who is prolonging the meeting in a

self-serving and unproductive manner – particularly when the audience members have taken the time to come and participate in the agency’s business. (The irony of this situation is that, in an effort to endear himself to voters, your colleague is likely to be having the opposite effect.)

Why should the grandstanding public official (and others) care about the public’s frustration? The sense that public meetings are unnecessarily long may ultimately discourage the public from attending the meetings (or watching them on cable) in the long run and alienate them from civic affairs. As a result, the public will be less informed and less supportive of the agency. Grandstanding therefore diminishes the public’s respect for the agency and its ability to address community issues. It also plays in to popular (and usually inaccurate) caricatures of self-serving and self-centered politicians.

Staff Time

Grandstanding also wastes staff time at the meeting. Although staff is being paid to sit through the meeting, unnecessarily long meetings mean that staff is being used unproductively. Staff time is a public resource. It is never ethical to waste the public’s resources.

Colleagues’ Time

Another precious resource is one’s fellow elected officials’ time. Serving on a public agency governing board inevitably takes time away from one’s family, work and personal interests. The purpose of discussion at governing body meetings is to gather and share information helpful to the body’s ultimate decision. By definition, grandstanding and other public meeting time-wasters use colleagues’ time for an altogether different purpose: self-promotion.

To the extent that public service gets too frustrating for individuals, the time-abuser has diminished another community resource: people’s willingness to engage in public service. This too can be an ethical issue because it deprives the jurisdiction of its potential leaders.

The Other Side?

The grandstander may respond to these observations by saying “Hey, what about all the time I give to the community? What’s so wrong if I get some free public exposure in return? I am not doing anything illegal.”

This is an especially dangerous line of thinking. First, it puts public officials on an extraordinarily slippery slope. Looking for ways to “get something in return” for one’s public service is the kind of thinking that has gotten public officials into serious legal troubles for misusing public resources (including for campaign purposes) for personal

benefit and accepting bribes. Grandstanding is of course a much different issue, but there is a common thread in the analysis that local officials may want to ponder.

The bottom line is one should never expect personal advantages in return for public service. Public servants can have the satisfaction of having contributed to the betterment of their communities, but those who are looking for more individual benefits from public service are looking for ethical troubles.

Moreover, local officials sell themselves short when they key their ethical standards to what the law allows or prohibits. The bottom line is that just because conduct is legal, doesn't mean it is ethical. A public official who sets ethical standards by what the law allows and does not allow is using a false ethical compass. As indicated above, there are a number of ethical issues relating to using meeting time to grandstand, even though the conduct probably does not sink to the level of violating the law.

Everyone's Doing It

The grandstander/meeting-time-waster may also point out that the public and his rival candidates the seat he is seeking re-elected to make the same abuse of the public comment time. Hard as it is, a tit-for-tat approach to misusing meeting time is not the best approach. The moms of the world have it right when they admonish that two wrongs don't make a right.

Aspirational Goals

Other relevant ethics code provisions relevant to this topic include:

- **Respect**
I listen carefully and ask questions that add value to discussions.
- **Fairness**
I support the public's right to know and promote meaningful public involvement.
- **Responsibility**
I come to meetings and I come to them prepared.
I do not promise that which I have reason to believe is unrealistic.
- **Compassion**
I realize that some people are intimidated by the public process and try to make their interactions as stress-free as possible.
- **Trustworthiness**
I remember that my role is first and foremost to serve the community.

I do not use my public position for personal gain.

Other sample ethics code provisions are available under the "ethics codes" tab of the Institute's website at www.ca-ilg.org/trust.

What to Do?

Perhaps the more difficult question is what to do about grandstanders and other meeting time-wasters. Your colleagues have already taken a good first step by discussing the issue forthrightly with the offender.

Some agencies have adopted self-imposed limits on elected official comments. For example, a southern California water agency's "Code of Civil Behavior" includes this board member commitment to:

Limit the length of comments during board meetings to three minutes per director per item and do not repeat points that already have been stated by other directors.

This levels the playing field a bit and ideally will send the message that grandstanding by either elected officials or the public is not a productive use of public meeting time.

Similarly, some agencies have adopted codes of ethics and values that address these kinds of issues. For example, the City of Sunnyvale's code of conduct specifically says that city council members should "[b]e respectful of other people's time. Stay focused and act efficiently during public meetings." It also says council members should "[f]ully participate in City Council meetings and other public forums while demonstrating respect, kindness, consideration, and courtesy to others."

In a similar vein, the City of Santa Clara's Ethics and Values Statement emphasizes the importance of communication, particularly effective two-way communication that involves listening carefully and adding value to conversation. The statement also emphasizes the value of collaboration and acknowledges that city officials are part of an overall team. Interestingly, both the Sunnyvale and Santa Clara codes of ethics are phrased in the positive – describing what affirmative behavior city officials should engage in as opposed to what behavior is prohibited. Moreover, Santa Clara has taken the additional step of convening meetings with council candidates to discuss the city's ethics and values statements, so candidates are aware of and can be held accountable for behavior inconsistent with those values (for example, grandstanding during public comment time).

Author John Updike observed, "A healthy male adult bore consumes each year one and a half times his own weight in other people's patience." Patience is the great lubricant of a civil society. To the extent that grandstanders and other meeting-time-wasters exhaust the public's and their colleague's patience, the civility and health of our civic institutions are put at risk.

This piece originally ran in *Western City Magazine* and is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) Ethics Project, which offers resources on public service ethics for local officials. For more information, visit www.ca-ilg.org/trust.

Endnote:

¹ Theophrastus, from Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.