

Political Acumen

Workbook & Reference Guide



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EquiP

> Elected Member Skills and Knowledge Check

Political Acumen

1 point for each = 15 total for section

(check relevant boxes below)

Do you (know)

- ☐ How to correct unprofessional behaviour from your colleagues during a council meeting?
- ☐ How and why your behaviour is likely to affect your electoral aspirations?
- ☐ What grandstanding is and why it should be avoided?
- ☐ How to ask astute questions?
- ☐ How to disagree with your colleagues without causing them to stop listening to you?

Can you (do)

- ☐ Use standing orders?
- ☐ Identify positive and negative behaviours in a political context?
- ☐ Identify and self-correct when you are grandstanding?
- ☐ Frame an “open” and a “closed” question?
- ☐ Demonstrate active listening?

Have you (done)

- ☐ Called a successful point of order to challenge unprofessional behaviour?
- ☐ Reflected on your own behaviours and adjusted any negatives to positives?
- ☐ Had to deal with the media using political acumen?
- ☐ Used an open question instead of a positioning statement?
- ☐ Led a divided discussion to consensus?

Total __ / 15

> Introduction

Meet Mary, Equip Facilitator

Mary Bourke served five terms as Mayor of South Taranaki District from 1992, before choosing not to seek re-election in 2007. She is older and greyer now, having since survived governance roles in health, education and the philanthropic sectors.

As an Equip Professional Development Associate, she is passionate about unlocking the wisdom of groups and communities who can (if allowed) design the best solutions for their own problems.



Mary Bourke, Equip Facilitator

The Essentials

One of the challenges for councillors is the need to constantly upgrade their technical skills and knowledge to enable them to make well informed contributions as governors.

Equip's focussed digital modules and workshops will help elected members to grow their governance and related skills. These modules, based on the *Elected Member Skills and Knowledge Check*, will allow councils to provide a nationally consistent set of induction training modules on generic topics.

This Political Acumen module is one of the ten digital modules developed by Equip.

Each of the 10 video modules come with a set of questions and exercises to help participants and their councils to test the development of their knowledge and skills. Local governance support staff can oversee and sign off each module completion.

Purpose

- > To enable councils to provide a nationally consistent set of induction training modules on general topics.
- > To build and measure technical skills and knowledge across all elected members.
- > To assist all elected members to be able to make informed decisions and contributions to effective council strategy and plans.

Four key areas of focus

- > The first key things you need to know as a councillor
- > The top 5 big issues for local government
- > What (and who) to ask
- > The most likely challenges you'll come up against

The ten topics

1. Governance 101
2. Financial Decision-Making and Transparency
3. Asset Management and Infrastructure
4. Quality Decision Making
5. Political Acumen (this one)
6. Cultural Awareness
7. Strategic Thinking
8. Ethics, Values, Integrity and Trust

+ Technical topics

9. Standing Orders
10. Conflicts of Interest

Political Acumen - purpose

To inform elected members about the value of political acumen to the positive outcomes of council decision-making.

Political Acumen - learning outcomes

By the end of this module you will be able to:

- > describe the value of effective participation;
- > recognise and modify unprofessional behaviour in yourself and others;
- > know which questions to ask and when; and
- > identify how your behaviour might affect your electoral aspirations.

> What is governance?

Governance is about being part of the conversation that sets the direction of your organisation.

Direction setting is done via you and your governance group's strategy development. To do this well requires:

- > participating respectfully – developing trust and confidence;
- > listening actively – understanding other points of view;
- > seeking input from management and the general public - consulting; and
- > being accountable – being transparent and honest.

Your role as a councillor is further complicated by the role being a representative one as well as a governance one.

It's worth remembering that it's impossible to please all of the people all of the time; therefore good governance and/or leadership is about being prepared to make some tough decisions.

Equip's Five Foundations of Governance Excellence

1. Leader of community aspirations, direction and strategy
2. Collaborative culture, working to collective strengths while valuing individuals' input
3. Taking collective action for your community
4. Action and accountability as a good corporate citizen
5. Commitment to continuous improvement and personal development

Explanation

Leader

As a leader of community aspirations, direction and strategy you have an advocacy role as well as an influencing role. You are contributing to the design of how community aspirations will be met, and with that settled; you are an advocate of those aspirations and the path that has been agreed to meet them. There may be a step in between if you are doing a consultation process – at which stage you are seeking input on a proposal rather than a decision. So your challenge is to listen to feedback rather than to try and justify the proposal. That bit comes when the proposal has become an agreed course of action.

Collaborative culture

The councils who work best for their communities are those who work collaboratively, enjoy high levels of trust, confidence and respect amongst themselves and with senior management.

Collective action

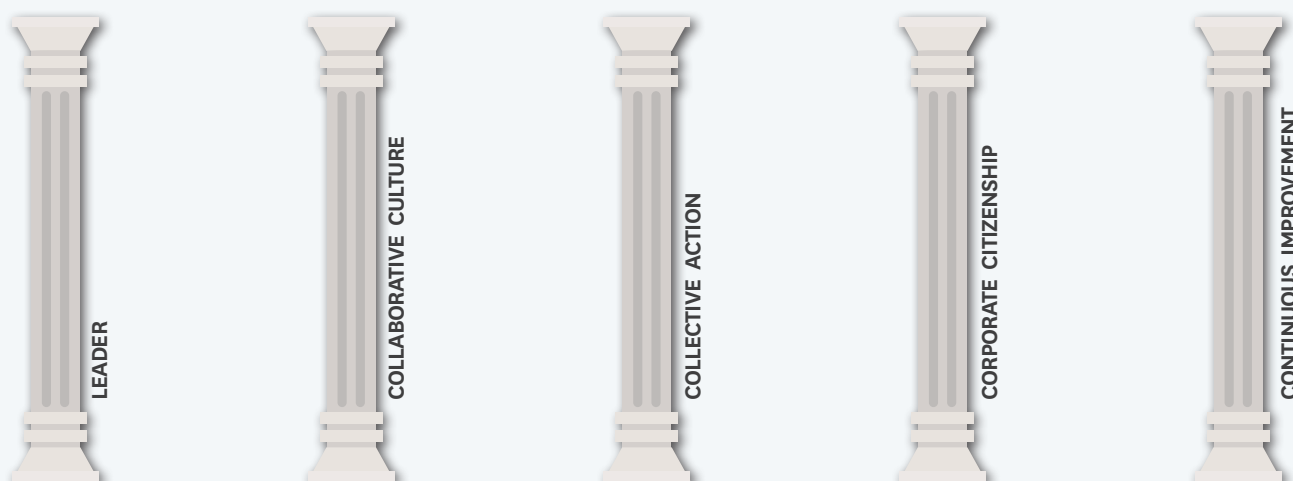
Taking collective action is about understanding the notion of collective responsibility. There will be times when you may not agree with the final decision that has been made – but the notion of collective responsibility requires that you accept the decision and work with it in the wider interests of the community.

Corporate citizenship

Good corporate citizenship entails being ethical, meeting your legal responsibilities, and being financially prudent.

Continuous improvement

This is about regularly evaluating your own performance as well as the performance of the council as a whole. There are plenty of tools to do this. Contact equip.pd@lgnz.co.nz to get started!



What is this skill called political acumen?

- > Political Acumen relates to a type of discernment, an awareness of others and what's going on around you – even an emotional intelligence in a political context if you like.
- > It's a great attribute to have when you want others to hear your point of view - it's the added quality that makes others pause to hear what you have to say.
- > It's often reciprocal because how you behave will affect how others behave towards you.
- > When you show an interest in others – they will show an interest in you.

*The more **political acumen** you cultivate, the more value you will add to council decision-making: the more fun you will have; and the more effective you will be.*

Why is Political Acumen important for your role?

Political Acumen is important because having more of it means you can influence and steer decisions in a positive direction while maintaining your relationships along the way!

The more you can stand back and look at the big picture of what's happening, the better you will be at making measured and rational decisions. An ability to read the room and understand people means you're in a great position to steer discussions in a beneficial direction.

Watch and listen carefully to those around you. Confidence does not always mean competence. Just because somebody knows the Standing Orders inside out does not necessarily mean that they know what's best for your community.

Securing a place at the table - which is code for getting elected – is just the start of your journey in local government – or any other governance entity for that matter. Developing and enhancing your Political Acumen will make you someone who will be listened to and respected.

Unprofessional behaviour to watch out for

Now that you are elected, it's important that your behaviour - both in and out of the council meeting room - is credible and trustworthy.

Here are some things to be aware of:

- > **Preparation**
 - » Don't turn up to meetings without reading your papers or being unprepared in any way. This makes you look unprofessional and other people at the table may think that you don't take the role seriously. You also won't know what's going on and will not be in a position to influence decisions in the way that you had hoped to.
- > **Arrive on time**
 - » Don't arrive to meetings late. In unavoidable cases, if you do arrive late, stay silent until you have caught up with what is taking place in the meeting. Asking questions that have already been answered will undermine your confidence and credibility.
- > **Let others speak**
 - » Avoid interrupting your peers. Others may be interested in what the speaker has to say and will resent you interrupting the speaker and their train of thought.
- > **Avoid emotional reactions**
 - » Try to avoid negative emotional reactions - such as negative body language (e.g. crossed arms, frowning), getting angry, sighing or looking exasperated, loudly shuffling papers, etc.
- > **Do not 'grandstand'**
 - » Grandstanding is when someone boasts about their achievements or holds the floor to prevent others from speaking or asks questions designed to expose someone else's shortcomings. This is a form of gratification seeking or ego boosting and has the opposite effect - it reduces your credibility with your peers.
- > **Do not ask multiple questions**
 - » Asking multiple questions in a formal meeting context is not helpful. If you do have many questions on a subject, it is best to ask them prior to the meeting. Asking too many questions can derail the conversation, confuse the listeners and fluster the people who are being questioned. All of which prevents the building of trust and confidence.

> Check what you know

Check what you've learned so far. Answers are on a later page, so no peeking!

1. Scenario

Unprofessional Behaviour

A council meeting is in progress with a discussion about a new swimming pool proposal on the table. Comments have been going back and forth in a very productive way. A councillor named Brown has added a comment and is invited to add more feedback about the swimming pool proposal.

At this point a councillor named Blue arrives late and flustered commenting on being held up by traffic. They unpack papers and stationery making a lot of noise and huffing and puffing.

The chair welcomes them and updates them on the issue under discussion, being the new swimming pool proposal. Councillor Brown begins to add their feedback about which option they prefer when Councillor Blue starts sighing and interrupts in an emotional way about what is wrong with the proposals and how little faith they have in the parties involved.

The chair then states that the agenda papers confirmed that the parties involved are keen to work with the council and that a verbal update has been received which provides a way in which all the parties may be able to get involved.

Councillor Blue says: "Oh, ok, I haven't had a chance to look at the papers as yet....."

a) List the unprofessional behaviours demonstrated by Councillor Blue in the scenario.

b) Review the module to find out how to modify the unprofessional behaviour and note your answers below.

2. Questions to ask – fill in the blanks!

As a new elected member, you are not expected to know everything from the outset but asking sensible questions and listening carefully to the answers will take you far in knowing what's going on.

Questions which are open-ended and based on the issues at hand provide an opportunity to clarify and enlighten everyone. They also provide an opportunity to encourage others to think beyond what they might have been thinking.

- a. Ask _____ questions that seek to understand the issues.
- b. Be aware of your _____ language and tone of voice.
- c. Know the _____ in your council or ask someone to explain them to you.
- d. Ask good questions that will _____ the whole group.
- e. Use _____ listening techniques.
- f. _____ model the behaviour you'd like to see.

3. What are astute questions?

Write out a few sentences that describe what astute questions are.

4. How to disagree respectfully

Which one of the points below does not fit in with the others as a way to disagree respectfully?

- a. Seek first to understand.
- b. Make sure people get to hear your point of view.
- c. Be polite and clear when you do disagree and why.
- d. Deal with the issue, not the person.
- e. Be consistent with your responses.
- f. Be an active listener.

5. Foundations – fill in the blanks!

Equip's Foundations of Governance Excellence

- a. L _____ of community aspirations, direction and strategy
- b. C _____ ive culture, working to collective strengths while valuing individuals' input
- c. Taking c _____ ive a _____ for your community
- d. Action and acc _____ as a good c _____ porate c _____ zen
- e. Commitment to c _____ tin _____ s im _____ ment and personal development.

> Check what you know

Check what you got!

1. Scenario

a) The unprofessional behaviours demonstrated by Councillor Blue in the scenario were:

- > Being late
- > Being unprepared
- > Interrupting others
- > Emotional/irrational reactions.

b) The behaviours could have been modified by:

- > Leading by example
- > Being firm but fair in all dealings with fellow members
- > Demonstrating the types of behaviour you'd like to see
- > Reviewing your own performance on a regular basis
- > Using Points of Order if necessary (Standing Orders)
- > Referring to the Code of Conduct.

2. Questions to ask


- > Ask **open** questions that seek to understand the issues.
- > Be aware of your **body** language and tone of voice.
- > Know the **protocols** in your council or ask someone to explain them to you.
- > Ask good questions that will **inform** the whole group.
- > Use **active** listening techniques.
- > **Role** model the behaviour you'd like to see.

3. What are astute questions?

Any sentences that contain the following points are correct.

- > Questions to which the answers will inform the discussion
- > Questions that will encourage others to take a broader view
- > Questions that are succinct and seek knowledge and insight
- > Astute questioners will make strategic use of the “open” and “closed” techniques.

4. How to disagree respectfully

- Seek first to understand.
- Make sure people get to hear your point of view. 
- Be polite and clear when you do disagree and why.
- Deal with the issue, not the person.
- Be consistent with your responses.
- Be an active listener.

5. Foundations – fill in the blanks!

Equip's Foundations of Governance Excellence

- Leader** of community aspirations, direction and strategy
- Collaborative culture**, working to collective strengths while valuing individuals' input
- Taking **collective action** for your community
- Action and **accountability** as a good **corporate citizen**
- Commitment to **continuous improvement** and personal development

> Can you do?

You might recall these questions from the Political Acumen Skills and Knowledge Check.

1. Use Standing Orders?

What are Standing Orders and how do you use them in a council context?

2. Identify positive and negative behaviours in a political (council) context?

Look at the behaviours listed on the left side in this table below and note which are negative and which are positive on the right-hand side.

Behaviours	Positive or Negative?
Asking a lot of questions before meetings to gather data and information for decision-making.	
Arriving late at a meeting because you were busy reading the papers required.	
Sometimes sitting back and listening during a discussion in a meeting because you're trying to understand the facts.	
As a passionate person you sometimes shout and raise your voice during meetings to ensure your fellow members understand how important it is to you.	
Asking multiple questions during a meeting because it's an important issue to you.	
When you disagree with a peer during a meeting it's necessary to interrupt them to steer them right.	
When a topic is important to you, it is fine to hold the floor for long periods of time.	
If an issue is a 'hot button' for you it's ok to talk to the press about it even if that means sharing information from meetings.	

3. Identify and self-correct when you are grandstanding?

Can you describe in a sentence what grandstanding is?

4. Frame an open and closed question?

Write two examples each of open and closed questions.

5. Demonstrate active listening?

Write a short description in your own words explaining what active listening is.

> Can you do?

1. Use Standing Orders?

What are Standing Orders and how do you use them in a council context?

Standing Orders have been developed by LGNZ to enable the orderly conduct of meetings. They incorporate legislative provisions related to meetings, decision-making and transparency. They are a framework of rules and guidelines for making decisions in a council context. They are based on the principles that public-decision making processes should be open, transparent and fair and contribute to a well-functioning democracy that the public can trust.

They are also designed to ensure meetings run smoothly and that all members have the opportunity to contribute equally and can be adapted to suit the needs of different types of meetings. Elected members must obey the standing orders. Note that while a meeting of the governing body which is charged with making major decisions should have a high level of formality, the same is not required for a committee, which may be meeting a community delegation. Much less formality is required in this case.

2. Identify positive and negative behaviours in a political (council) context?

Behaviours	Positive or Negative?
Asking a lot of questions before meetings to gather data and information for decision-making.	Positive
Arriving late at a meeting because you were busy reading the papers required.	Negative
Sometimes sitting back and listening during a discussion in a meeting because you're trying to understand the facts.	Positive
As a passionate person you sometimes shout and raise your voice during meetings to ensure your fellow members understand how important it is to you.	Negative
Asking multiple questions during a meeting because it's an important issue to you.	Negative
When you disagree with a peer during a meeting it's necessary to interrupt them to steer them right.	Negative
When a topic is important to you, it is fine to hold the floor for long periods of time.	Negative
If an issue is a 'hot button' for you it's ok to talk to the press about it even if that means sharing information from meetings.	Negative

3. Identify and self-correct when you are grandstanding?

Can you describe in a sentence what grandstanding is?

Grandstanding is when you boast about your achievements, hold the floor to prevent others from speaking, or ask questions designed to expose someone else's shortcomings.

4. Frame an open and closed question?

Write two examples each of open and closed questions.

Open questions are questions that require more than one word answers - so any suitable questions that gather more information through the answers would be good examples.

Closed questions are usually those that elicit yes or no answers or one word responses that probably wouldn't add much further to the discussion.

5. Demonstrate active listening?

Write a short description in your own words explaining what active listening is.

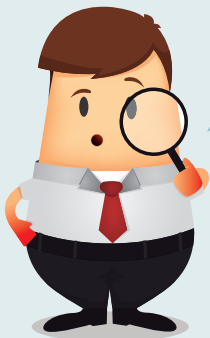
Active listening requires that the listener fully concentrates, understands, responds and remembers what is being said. Active listening refers to a pattern of listening that keeps you engaged with your conversation partner in a positive way. It is the process of listening attentively while someone else speaks, for example, paraphrasing and reflecting back what is said, withholding premature judgement and advice.

> Wrap Up

Political Acumen - A Definition:

< Political acumen is the ability to see the 'big picture' and apply a political lens to every decision you make. Understanding how the key drivers of your council related to each other based on your depth of perception and assessment of the all the variables and the ability to make sound judgments and quick decisions. >

Source: SOLGM
Competency Framework



Connecting the dots

How Political Acumen relates to Equip's Five Foundations.

1. Influence decisions in the right strategic direction to serve community aspirations.
2. Earn respect from colleagues and ensure they value your input.
3. Collective responsibility is easy when you've had a positive influence.
4. Sound, enduring decisions.
5. Continuous self-awareness ensures that your political acumen evolves and grows.

What are astute questions?

Any questions that contain the following points are correct:

1. Questions to which the answers will inform the discussion.
2. Questions that will encourage others to take a broader view.
3. Questions that are succinct and seek knowledge and insight.
4. Astute questioners will make strategic use of the "open" and "closed" techniques.

Remember to always listen actively to the answers! A good question is pointless if you didn't really hear and take in the answer.

What is grandstanding?

- > Grandstanding is when you boast about your achievements...
- > or hold the floor to prevent others from speaking...
- > or when you ask questions designed to expose someone else's shortcomings...
- > ...it's definitely not something you want to be caught out doing!

< **Hot tip!** Think of someone you know that is politically astute that you could emulate! >



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PO Box 1214
Wellington 6140
New Zealand

P. 04 924 1200
E. equip.pd@lgnz.co.nz
W. lgnz.co.nz/equip

Equip is LGNZ's Centre of Excellence. We deliver tailored services, best practice guidance, business solutions, and governance and management support to strengthen the local government sector.