

Leading Through Conflict and Change

A practical guide for strengthening trust, communication, and collaboration in public institutions

Public-sector leaders work in environments where decisions affect employees, communities, stakeholders, and systems.

Technical expertise matters. Policy matters. Process matters.

But when trust deteriorates, communication breaks down, or people feel excluded from decisions, even technically sound solutions can struggle.



Watch for These Signs

- meetings repeatedly surface the same unresolved tensions
- departments operate in silos
- stakeholders feel decisions are happening to them rather than with them
- leaders avoid difficult conversations until problems escalate
- public engagement feels performative rather than meaningful
- organizational change is producing resistance, confusion, or mistrust



Five Practices for Leading Through Complexity

- 1 Diagnose Before You Decide**
Before selecting an intervention, understand who is affected, where trust exists, where it does not, and what has already happened.
- 2 Distinguish Disagreement From Dysfunction**
People do not need to agree on everything. They do need processes for working through disagreement productively.
- 3 Engage People Early**
Participation after the major decisions have already been made is not meaningful engagement.
- 4 Create Space for the Difficult Conversation**
Avoidance does not eliminate conflict. It usually delays it.
- 5 Match the Process to the People**
A town hall, mediation, facilitated dialogue, retreat, listening session, and strategic planning process solve different problems. The tool follows the need. Not the other way around.



Take This Into Your Next Leadership Meeting

- Where is lack of trust affecting our ability to execute?
- Whose perspective is missing from the decisions we are making?
- What conversation are we repeatedly postponing?
- Are we solving the visible problem or the conditions underneath it?