

Council-Led, Staff-Supported: Best Practices

The best practices that address **roles and authority** include:

- Defining Roles Clearly
- Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries
- Decisions Belong to the Council

The best practices that address **operations** include:

- Staff Prepare – Council Governs
- Chairs Lead Meetings –Staff Support Flow
- Supporting Informed Leadership

The best practices that address **“How you do your work”** include:

- Use Partnership, Not Hierarchy
- Build Member Confidence
- Accountability Works Both Ways
- Practice the “No Surprises” Rule

1. Define Roles Clearly

Council leads direction. Staff lead implementation.

Council Responsibilities

- Set vision, priorities, and policy direction
- Approve plans, budgets, and major decisions
- Represent community voice and lived experience
- Provide oversight and accountability

Staff Responsibilities

- Provide expertise and operational support

- Implement Council decisions
- Manage programs, contracts, and daily operations
- Prepare information for informed decision-making

✓ Every major activity should clearly show **who decides** and **who executes**.

2. Maintain Appropriate Boundaries

Healthy governance requires role clarity.

Council members should **not**:

- Direct individual staff
- Manage daily operations
- Interfere with supervision structures

Staff should **not**:

- Control Council priorities
- Limit discussion unnecessarily
- Substitute administrative preference for Council direction

✓ Communication flows through the Chair and Executive Director.

3. Decisions Belong to the Council

Staff inform — **Council decides**.

Staff should:

- Present options
- Provide data and implications
- Recommend approaches when appropriate

Council members should:

- Discuss
- Deliberate
- Vote or reach consensus

Avoid staff making policy decisions outside Council authority.

4. Staff Prepare — Council Governs

Effective Councils rely on strong preparation.

Staff support includes:

- Agenda development with Chair input
- Background materials in plain language
- Decision summaries
- Follow-up tracking

Well-prepared meetings allow members to focus on leadership rather than logistics.

5. Chairs Lead Meetings — Staff Support Flow

Chair

- Facilitates discussion
- Ensures participation
- Guides decision-making

Staff

- Provide technical clarification

- Track action items
- Maintain records

✓ Staff should not dominate discussion unless providing requested expertise.

6. Support Informed Leadership

Staff strengthen Council leadership by:

- Translating technical information
- Explaining federal/state requirements
- Identifying risks early
- Offering implementation realities

✓ Good staff support empowers — not replaces — member leadership.

7. Use Partnership, Not Hierarchy

Council-led does **not** mean adversarial.

Strong practice looks like:

- Mutual respect
- Shared problem solving
- Transparency
- Early communication

✓ Think: *Leadership partnership with distinct roles.*

8. Build Member Confidence

Staff should help members succeed by:

- Providing orientation and training
- Offering mentoring support
- Encouraging questions
- Creating accessible materials

Confident members lead more effectively.

9. Accountability Works Both Ways

Council holds staff accountable for results.

Staff hold Council accountable to law, policy, and timelines.

- Effective governance happens when Councils embrace a wide range of perspectives and
- thoughtful debate.
- Governance is most effective when there is open, respectful disagreement.
- The best governance happens when ideas are tested, not just agreed upon

10. Practice the “No Surprises” Rule

Best partnerships operate with:

- Early notice of challenges
- Shared planning
- Continuous communication

Surprises erode trust.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Council leadership drives direction
- ✓ Staff expertise enables success
- ✓ Clear roles strengthen trust
- ✓ Preparation supports informed decisions
- ✓ Partnership—not hierarchy—creates effective governance