Lobbying is a vital element of any democracy and a part of Local Government life. Councillors have an essential role to play in ensuring council decisions that affect their communities are not influenced unduly by the interests of lobbyists. This is often easier said than done. So how can elected members avoid being lobbied into a web of political scandal?

The importance of lobbying in Local Government

Lobbying often labours under the misconception of being a corrupt business, mainly due to scandals that undermine its true purpose. Yet, at the heart of modern professional lobbying, is the serious and valuable process of research, strategy, analysis and, importantly, communication of public opinion to decision-makers.

Lobbying allows individuals, community groups and businesses to have a say in the decisions that affect them. Governments deprived of the views of their constituents cannot accurately represent the beliefs of the publics they stand for.

On a Local Government level, if elected representatives are not in touch with the views of their communities, they are essentially running blind, relying solely on bureaucrats and headlines for advice on decisions that affect their municipalities. This is hardly an effective means of representing the often diverse and ever-changing views of growing communities.

How to recognise lobbying

Lobbying in Local Government encompasses any communication between councillors and the community that includes representations to elected members by special interest groups and individuals with an interest in a particular council decision. Councillors are commonly lobbied by members of the community in an attempt to influence council decisions, which may pertain to a number of issues, including development applications, upgrades to local facilities and revenue decisions, including the setting of rates. A good lobbyist will always reveal who they are representing and what their interest in a particular council matter is.

Inappropriate lobbying

Councillors risk becoming involved in inappropriate lobbying if they are seen to be granting lobbyists preferential consideration or treatment, based on factors other than the merits of a matter. Examples include accepting undisclosed payments or benefits during a decision that affects the donor’s interests and/or disclosing confidential information while being lobbied. Elected members should ask themselves whether the activities they are participating in with lobbyists undermine the principles of impartial decision-making.

Ways to help ensure fair lobbying include:

- Being alert to the motives and interests of those who seek to lobby in relation to a council decision;
- Being aware of which person, organisation or company the lobbyist is representing;
- Ensuring as much as possible that competing parties are treated fairly and consistently;
- Ensuring that confidential information is not disclosed; and
- Ensuring no action is being taken which involves a breach of a relevant code of conduct.

How to maintain transparency

It’s vital for councillors to ensure that any involvement with lobbyists remains completely transparent and open to public scrutiny, which can be challenging given the unique environment in which councillors work. Elected members often have little time during business hours to attend to council matters, have limited availability to support staff, and have a high community demand for their own availability, making it sometimes impossible to avoid informal discussions with lobbyists.

However, there are a number of ways councillors can help ensure transparency. They include documenting meetings with constituents, conducting meetings in official locations where possible, having another person present at meetings, and asking people who have requested a meeting to put their arguments in writing.

It’s clear that we need lobbying in today’s democratic society in order to keep governments in touch with the real world. In order for lobbying in Local Government to work to the best advantage of communities and councils, elected members must remain cognisant of its potential dangers and aware of their obligation to ensure that any lobbying they participate in is fair and impartial.

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Today I did a Google search of Australian Web sites on ‘Local Government skills shortage’ and it registered 33,200 hits in 0.17 seconds, so I figure that it might be a topic on most Local Government leader’s minds.

When we review the workforce demographics of Local Government employees and the employment marketplace, it becomes apparent that there is no quick fix. Then we add the fact that consumers (including ratepayers) are becoming more informed and demanding of the services they require. One of the key challenges for all councils is very clear - how do we provide greater services demanded by our constituents if we don’t have the people to do so?

A number of employers are grappling with this question and are seeking to enhance the organisation in ways which optimise the outcomes of staff efforts, retain the staff they want to keep, and build organisational cultures which are attractive to the talented staff they require for the future.

We get some clues as to the sorts of interventions that may need to be implemented by looking at the workplace expectations of our most recent addition to our workforce, the Generation Y’s. Whilst there are some differences between the various researcher findings, the common expectations identified are great leadership, support for development, the ability to have influence, access to career paths, work-life balance and flexibility. Improving our delivery on some of these expectations may be assisted by the introduction of more appropriate policies, processes and practices. A number of organisations have made good progress in this regard however, the cultural assumptions of an organisation will determine how they are applied.

The definition of culture in this context is the explicit and implicit norms and expectations that guide members in how they interact with their customers and each other. By “explicit” we mean that it is written in policy or procedure. “Implicit” norms and expectations are those that are not expressly stated that will determine whether the flexibility described in the policy manual is really apparent when you need it, or that the leadership style to give some corrective feedback, aimed at enhancing your ability to make a difference, is real, or just talked about.

What is clear from the research, conducted by Human Synergistics, is that a constructive culture delivers better outcomes at an individual, team and organisational level. It is characterised by the types of behaviours which are more likely to support the type of workplace environment attractive to the staff of the future. As a result, many CEO’s are recognising that creating a great culture as the only competitive advantage in today’s high employment environment. Importantly, by using the Human Synergistics Organisational Cultural Inventory, organisations can measure their culture and use this information to guide the implementation of changes for improvement.

Our workforces will always remain more diverse than just one specific demographic grouping, whether it is Generation Y, or when the post-Generation Y group commences their employment some time in the future. Just as customers’ expectations have changed, so have the expectations of the entire workforce. Let’s face it, given a choice, who wouldn’t want great leadership, ongoing development, self-set goals and a chance to really make a difference in a supportive, respectful environment.

Culture and aligned leadership are the key.

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Many workers believe their senior managers are largely a waste of space, doing little to motivate them to go the extra mile at work and failing to help them contribute to the success of their organisation.

A poll of almost 90,000 workers worldwide by workplace consultancy Towers Perrin found many employees did not believe their organisation or senior management were doing enough to help or keep them engaged. Just a fifth said they felt engaged in their work, with more than a third admitting to feeling partly or fully disengaged.

Unsurprisingly, companies with the highest levels of employee engagement achieved the best financial results and were more successful in retaining their most valued employees than those with lower levels, the study found. “It’s impossible to overstate the importance of an engaged workforce on a company’s bottom line,” said Julie Gebauer, Managing Director of Towers Perrin’s Workforce Effectiveness consulting practice. “The Global Workforce Study establishes a definitive link between levels of engagement and financial performance and, for the first time, begins to quantify that link,” she said. “The organisation itself is the most powerful influencer of employee engagement. It demonstrates that, at a time when companies are looking for every source of competitive advantage, the workforce itself represents the largest reservoir of untapped potential,” she added.

The most striking data about the linkage between employee engagement and financial performance comes from a study of 40 global companies that involved a regression analysis of company financial results against engagement data. It found that firms with the highest percentage of engaged employees collectively increased operating income by 19% and earnings per share by 28% from year-to-year. Those companies with the lowest percentage of engaged employees showed year-to-year declines of a third in operating income and more than a tenth in earnings per share.

Among the 5,000 UK employees surveyed, fewer than a third believed senior management communicated openly and honestly with them and two-thirds felt that senior leaders “treat us as just another part of the organisation to be managed” or “as if we don’t matter”. Furthermore, just one in three employees thought senior management had a sincere interest in their satisfaction and wellbeing.

The global study also made a direct link between engagement and the retention of employees. Half of the engaged employees had no plans to leave their company, compared with just 15% of the disengaged. Fewer than 5% of engaged employees said they were actively looking for another job, compared with more than one in four of the disengaged employees. “One of the study’s key findings is that the organisation itself is the most powerful influencer of employee engagement,” said Gebauer. “Personal values and work experience factors have less of an impact on engagement than what the company does - particularly the extent to which employees believe senior management is sincerely interested in their wellbeing. This was the number one element driving engagement on a global basis and also in the U.S.

“People’s views about the company are also shaped more by what senior leaders say and do than by what..."
the individuals’ direct bosses say or do. This too contradicts conventional wisdom and suggests that companies have a real opportunity to dramatically improve both engagement levels - starting with listening to what their own employees have to say,” she added.

Fewer than four out of ten employees felt senior management communicated openly and honestly, and just 44% agreed senior management tried to be visible and accessible. In addition, only a tenth agreed that “senior management treats us as if we’re the most important part of the organisation”. Only marginally better than in the UK, where more than half felt senior management “treats us as just another part of the organisation” or “as if we don’t matter”.

Employees wanted to give more to their companies and their jobs but also wanted a clearer picture of what was in it for them, the survey suggested.

More than three out of four said they loved or liked their job and their organisation. In addition, 83% “look for opportunities to develop new knowledge or skills” and 84% “enjoy challenging work that will allow them to learn new skills”.

Yet, at the same time, just over a third agreed they had excellent career opportunities and more than two-thirds said they were sometimes or frequently frustrated by their organisation’s people-related decisions. While more than two thirds agreed their organisation had a reputation for financial stability, only half agreed it had a reputation as a great place to work.

“At the end of the day,” said Gebauer, “our study paints a picture of a workforce that is energetic, ambitious and committed to working hard and giving its best. This lays to rest the persistent stereotypes that employees are loyal only to themselves and their careers, and are looking to do the minimum to get by.

“But turning people’s energy and ambition into engagement - and ultimately into significant performance lift demands attention, focus and some very different behaviours from senior leaders, as well as clear follow-through on a number of organisational practices. “The challenge for senior management is to recognise the value of employees’ untapped potential and to channel it in ways that yield real improvements in business performance,” she concluded.