

Local Government – Enhancing the Relationships between CAO and Council

by

Ann Marie Mitchell

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Supervisor: Guy Nasmyth, PhD
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Ann Mitchell, 2021

COMMITTEE APPROVAL

The members of ANN MITCHELL's Thesis Committee certify that they have read the thesis titled Local Government – Enhancing the Relationships between CAO and Council and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Leadership:

Guy Nasmyth [signature on file]

Walter Lepore [signature on file]

Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon submission of the final copy of the thesis to Royal Roads University. The thesis supervisor confirms to have read this thesis and recommends that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements:

Guy Nasmyth [signature on file]

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Abstract

This study attempted to understand the critical relationship between the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and municipal council, and further how it affects stakeholders. A review was made of the literature on local government in general, CAOs, and leadership. Qualitative research, and specifically exploring personal experience, was the best approach to understand the nature of this alliance. This research adheres to the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Policy. A broad Canada wide survey was used (866 responses), followed by narrative interviews (five CAOs and five politicians) to generate the data. The responses confirmed that the CAO/council relationship was indeed a critical one, further, that the largest contributor to the downfall of this relationship was role clarity. Through the research a systems model was developed to demonstrate the interactions between cause and effect.

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Executive Summary

Local government has a bad rap. Most citizens and stakeholders do not trust this level of government and with the increase in polarization driven in part by social media; it is more challenging today to work in the public sector. Local government has always struggled with challenges, whether it was the difference of their entity compared to private sector or to other levels of government. Having worked in this sector for over twenty-six years, I would like to contribute to the scant research in this area. In the position of Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), or City Manager, for the past sixteen years it has been my honour to give back to my sector by mentoring younger CAOs. My experience has taught me that the unique relationship between the municipal council and their one employee, the CAO, seems to be the underpinning to successful organizations in local government. Prior to settling on a research question, I spoke to many local government practitioners who are very knowledgeable and respected in the field.

Municipal World Inc. is a Canadian media brand that has worked to connect municipalities with the information, products, services, and people they need since 1891. The flagship monthly magazine, *Municipal World*, has been continuously published since 1891 – longer than any other municipal magazine in the world. The magazine is devoted to promoting effective municipal government. In the spirit of improving local government, *Municipal World* chose to partner on this initiative. Working with *Municipal World* has allowed this study the ability to address municipalities of every size and organizational structure across the country.

Municipal World's tag line is:

Published 12 times a year, *Municipal World* is Canada's municipal magazine. Since 1891, when we first began informing those in the municipal sector on the latest developments in the field, we've maintained our reputation as a cutting-edge

communication brand. And, as your needs to effectively serve the community you work, live and play in have evolved, so have we!

Municipal World has dedicated many of its articles and master class sessions to the challenges that continually occur in the staff/Council dynamics, as well as role clarity in municipal governance. Additionally, as this is a Canada-wide issue facing local government having a Canada-wide organization as a partner was imperative.

The CAO/Council Relationship

Across the country the dynamics of the CAO/council relationship are problematic in local government. This study focused on enhancing the trust and respect of this unique relationship. The results of both the survey and narrative inquiry clearly showed that this relationship was critical not only to the municipal organization, but also to the stakeholders and communities served. Although the legislation varies from province to province the issues are consistent. Various provincial governments have enacted mandatory codes of conduct for municipal council; however, the consensus is that they are not effective as politicians do not want to police themselves. Using systems thinking, the CAO/council relationship was examined inside the larger lens of municipal government, as this allowed a holistic view. A systems model was developed from the data showing that role clarity was the largest contributor to the breakdown in the CAO/council dynamic. Additionally, it was discovered that there were many contributing factors to this breakdown. While there is not a substantial amount of literature on this unique relationship, it has grown over the past 5-10 years.

Inquiry Focus

Acknowledging that the intricate relationship between municipal council and their one employee, the CAO or City Manager, and understanding the number of challenges the

breakdown in this relationship causes led to the overarching theme of the inquiry. The thesis question was, “How do we enhance the trust and respect between the CAO or City Manager and Council?”

Sub Questions

- Is this relationship critical to the overall organization and community it serves?
- How does role clarity factor into this relationship?
- How does the CAO role differ from its private sector counterparts?
- Does the current legislation and governance structure work to enhance this critical relationship?

As mentioned, the project scope was focused Canada wide as this is an issue that, at various times, has been faced by many municipalities throughout their history.

Methodology

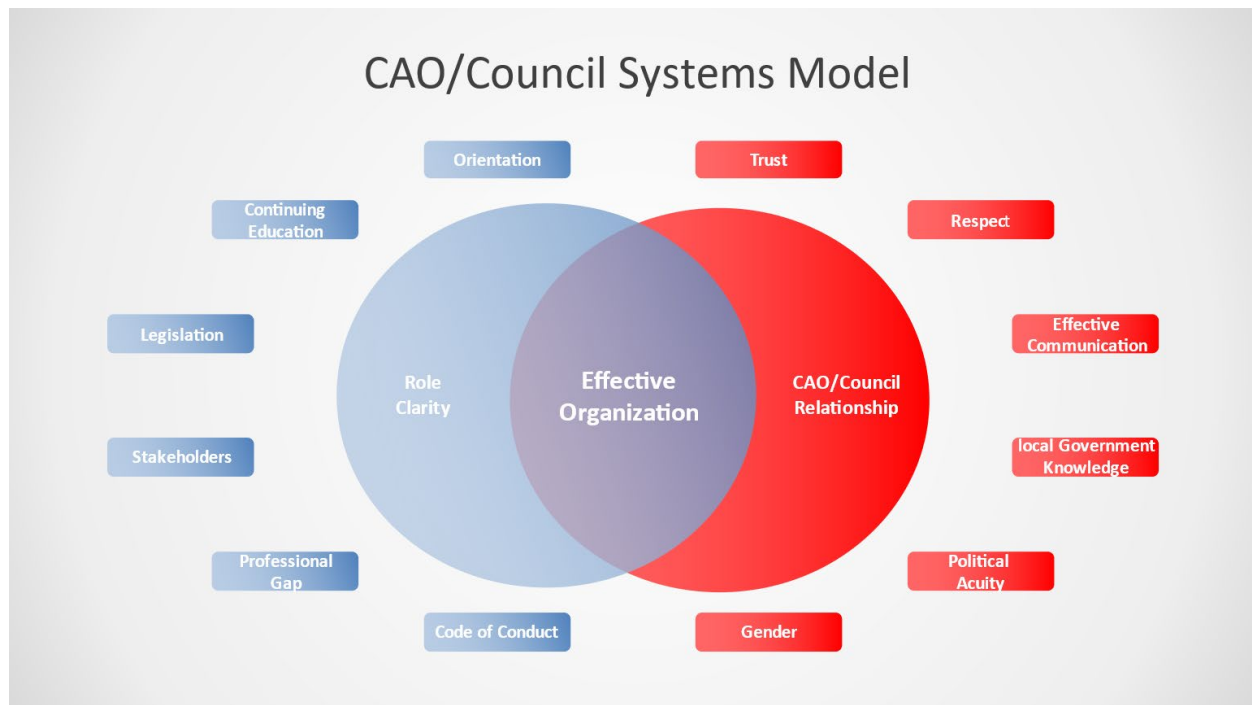
This was a qualitative research project, using an appreciative stance. Systems thinking was also applied. The inquiry engaged a cross Canada survey distributed in the fall of 2020 through *Municipal World*. There were 866 responses to the survey. The responses to the survey informed the narrative interview questions. Of the respondents to the survey, over 400 indicated that they would like some further follow up conversation on the CAO/council relationship. This suggests a significant interest among council members and senior staff in enhancing this critical relationship. Once the data had been collated from the survey responses, narrative interviews were set up with five politicians and five CAOs. To assure diversity, these participants were selected from various locations across the country, and from various sizes of municipalities; additionally, the research attempted to balance the gender of the respondents.

Findings and Conclusions

The following key findings arose from the data collected during the two methods mentioned above:

- The CAO/Council relationship is critical to the success of the organization.
- Understanding role clarity is critical to a successful CAO/Council relationship.
 - Code of conduct affects the issue of role clarity.
 - Council orientation affects role clarity and the CAO/Council relationship.
- There is a growing professional gap between administration and politicians.
- A lack of understanding from stakeholders affects the CAO/Council relationship.
- Fair and equitable communication is essential to the CAO/Council relationship.
- Leadership on Council and in the CAO role is becoming increasingly important.
- CAO experience in local government is more critical than a specific designation.
- The size of municipality has an impact on the CAO/Council relationship.
- Gender factors minimally into the CAO/Council relationship.
- How council manages expectations affect the CAO/Council relationship.
- The current governance structure is the only way it could work.
- No CAO position is a small but growing trend.

The following systems model depicts the results of the research:



While the findings were extensive the overarching theme was that they contributed to the breakdown in the CAO/council relationship in one way or another. Due to the complex and unique nature of this relationship there are a multitude of layers and factors that impact the dynamics.

Recommendations

The findings and conclusions, when considered in concert with specific points from the relevant literature, resulted in the following recommendations:

- The CAO position should be legislated in every province and territory.
- There should be a standard CAO designation.
- There should be a mandatory code of conduct for elected officials in every province and territory.
- There should be governance training for all elected officials.

- We need to clarify the legislation on both the CAO and Council roles.

The results of the study will be shared in two upcoming Municipal World articles.

Additionally, presentations will be made to CAMA (Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators) and provincial associations across the country, both administrative and political.

This research project itself, and in particular the conclusions and recommendations were informed by relevant literature including works by Siegel, Cuff, and McIntosh. Additionally, Hume and Long's theories and insights were beneficial. Earlier writers such as Nalbandian and Savars have contributed to this area and laid valuable groundwork.

The overall strong response to this research supported the fact that this is a critical relationship than requires further study in order to gain greater understanding. With so many local governments in Canada this is a critical area of study, and by researching this area it will bring a greater awareness which will lead to much needed change.

Chapter 1: Focus and Framing

Local government has a bad rap. Most citizens and stakeholders do not trust this level of government and with the increase in polarization driven in part by social media; it is more challenging today to work in the public sector. Local government has always struggled with challenges, whether it was the difference of their entity compared to private sector or to other levels of government. Having worked in this sector for over twenty-six years, I would like to contribute to the scant research in this area. In the position of Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), or City Manager, for the past sixteen years it has been my honour to give back to my sector by mentoring younger CAOs. My experience has taught me that the unique relationship between the municipal council and their one employee, the CAO, seems to be the underpinning to successful organizations in local government. Prior to settling on a research question, I spoke to many local government practitioners who are very knowledgeable and respected in the field. While council code of conduct is an area that is of interest to me, it factors into the larger issue of role clarity, which in turn adds to the success or failure of the staff/council relationship. I expanded this further by asking the significant question, “How can we enhance the trust and respect between the CAO or City Manager and the municipal council?” My background and experience have emphasized the need to study this particular issue as it is one that continues to be a struggle for local government practitioners.

This issue is not limited to one area in my region but is a greater problem across the country. As such I wanted to work with a Canadian organization, one that focused on the field of local government. My thesis partner, *Municipal World*, is Canada’s foremost publication on local government in this country. Many articles in this publication concentrate on improving and enhancing local government; in fact *Municipal World’s* mandate is, “Municipal World Inc. is a

Canadian media brand that has worked to connect municipalities with the information, products, services, and people they need since 1891” (Municipal World, n.d.). Many articles and podcasts focus on governance, which includes the critical relationship between CAO and council.

Significance of the Inquiry

The relationship between the CAO and their Councillors is something that is so often discussed and yet never solved or even evolved. The challenges between municipal council and their sole employee are the main topic of conversation and training in local government circles. Additionally, CAMA (Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators) and all of their provincial association counterparts that represent CAOs or City Managers have spent considerable time and effort addressing the CAO/council dilemma. In this study alone, the response to my survey elicited over 800 responses, and over half of these respondents wished to discuss the subject further. This is clearly an issue that needs to be explored, discussed, and examined further. As an experienced Chief Administrative Officer, I mentor others in this role, and the relationship between CAO and council is of considerable concern. I would contend that it is the number one deterrent to people leaving or not entering this profession. A very recent article in *Municipal World* describes the exodus as such: “We are also seeing administrators coming into the profession from other sectors and staying for a few years and then leaving for other work because the municipal sector is not a fit for them” (Lang, 2021, p. 5). I would further contend that many professionals choose not to enter the local government field at all, due to the caustic nature that is evident.

Role clarity between CAO and members of council is the largest contributor to the breakdown of this critical relationship, and legislation, in the form of mandatory code of conduct for council, has been passed in some provinces to address these shortfalls. It has not been wholly

successful as this unique relationship is nebulous, and one which changes depending on the municipality according to varying factors including, but not limited to size and location. As an experienced Chief Administrative Officer, I mentor others in this role, and the relationship between CAO and council is of considerable concern. I would contend that it is the number one deterrent to people leaving or not entering this profession.

I chose to embark upon this research to study this distinctive relationship and the impact it has on the overall organization as well as the community and stakeholders impacted by it. As someone who is in the position of Chief Administrative Officer, I am extremely passionate about local government. The unique relationship between a municipal CAO or City Manager with their political masters differs greatly from those of their private sector counterparts. “Thus, the public sector manager is somehow held to the same leadership standards as her or his private sector counterpart but will have a much more limited mandate for action. This poses a unique problem for the public sector manager” (Siegel, 2015a, p. 20). As Siegel stated, there is a distinctive difference between leading in the public and private sectors. More specifically leading in the local government sphere you must adhere to the will of the politicians as they set the vision and direction, and you are the administrative arm that implements this vision. While you are the head of the organization and as such can strengthen the corporate culture, there is the unique relationship between the CAO and municipal council that must be balanced. The aspect of role clarity between politicians and administrators is so pronounced that this subject has been discussed and dissected repeatedly. “The expertise of a CAO can be a community asset or liability depending how and when it is used – given the situation” (McIntosh, 2009, p. 6). As McIntosh outlined, the need for understanding of this critical role and more specifically the relationship into how and why it works within the framework of local government needs to be

researched. Local governments are not simply providers of municipal services, they are builders and sustainers of communities. I would further contend that they are the framework of our country.

Organizational Context and Systems Analysis

Local government in Canada is the foundation of our communities. The structure of local government, which includes towns, cities, and counties of every size and shape, has continually been facing a challenge of attracting and retaining both administrative and political staff (Hume, 2016). Further adding to the complexity is the number of stakeholders that the public sector must interact with. A large number of these challenges can be attributed to the general misunderstanding of roles between political and administrative arms of local government. As Hume (2016) asserted, “As the world becomes more urban – 75% will live in cities by the 2050s – and cities assume a greater and greater importance in the global marketplace, the need for smart, effective, municipal leadership expands” (p. vii). “Communities are not served well by elected officials and appointed staff members striving to duplicate the efforts of one another” (Cuff, 2007, p. 4). This quote highlights the importance of ensuring that our municipal organizations across the country are being run effectively. Below, in Figures 1 and 2, I have inserted two organizational charts that highlight that the municipal structure is the same no matter what size the municipality is. This highlighted the need for my research to be Canada wide, as this issue applies to the broad system overall.

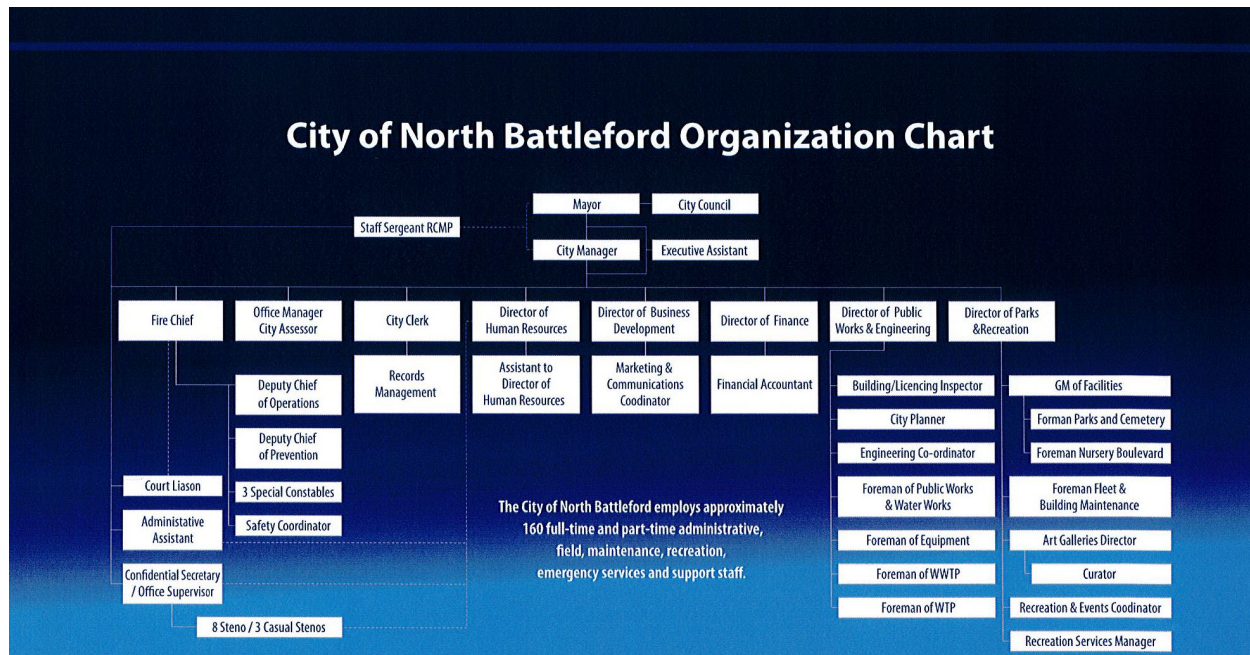


Figure 1: Traditional Municipal Organizational Chart (smaller municipality)

From a small municipality in Huron County in Ontario to one of Canada's mid-sized cities, the organizational charts do not change. Municipal councils are elected by the people, who are called citizens, residents, and stakeholders. Traditionally, politicians are viewed as the people's representatives. Generally, the structure is the same, the CAO or City Manager is the one employee of Council. This has been put in place to keep the separation and professionalism away from the politics.

We need to examine this complex issue in its entirety and that is where systems thinking comes in. To understand systems thinking we look to Stroh, "What does it mean to understand the whole system? First it means appreciating a system you want to change through a systematic rather than conventional lens" (2015, p. 14). Local government generally and the relationship with council and their one employee needs to be looked in the context of its larger system. Over the period of my career in this sector it has been evident to me that the nature of this relationship

is critical and very misunderstood by both those who work inside of this system and the stakeholders affected by it.

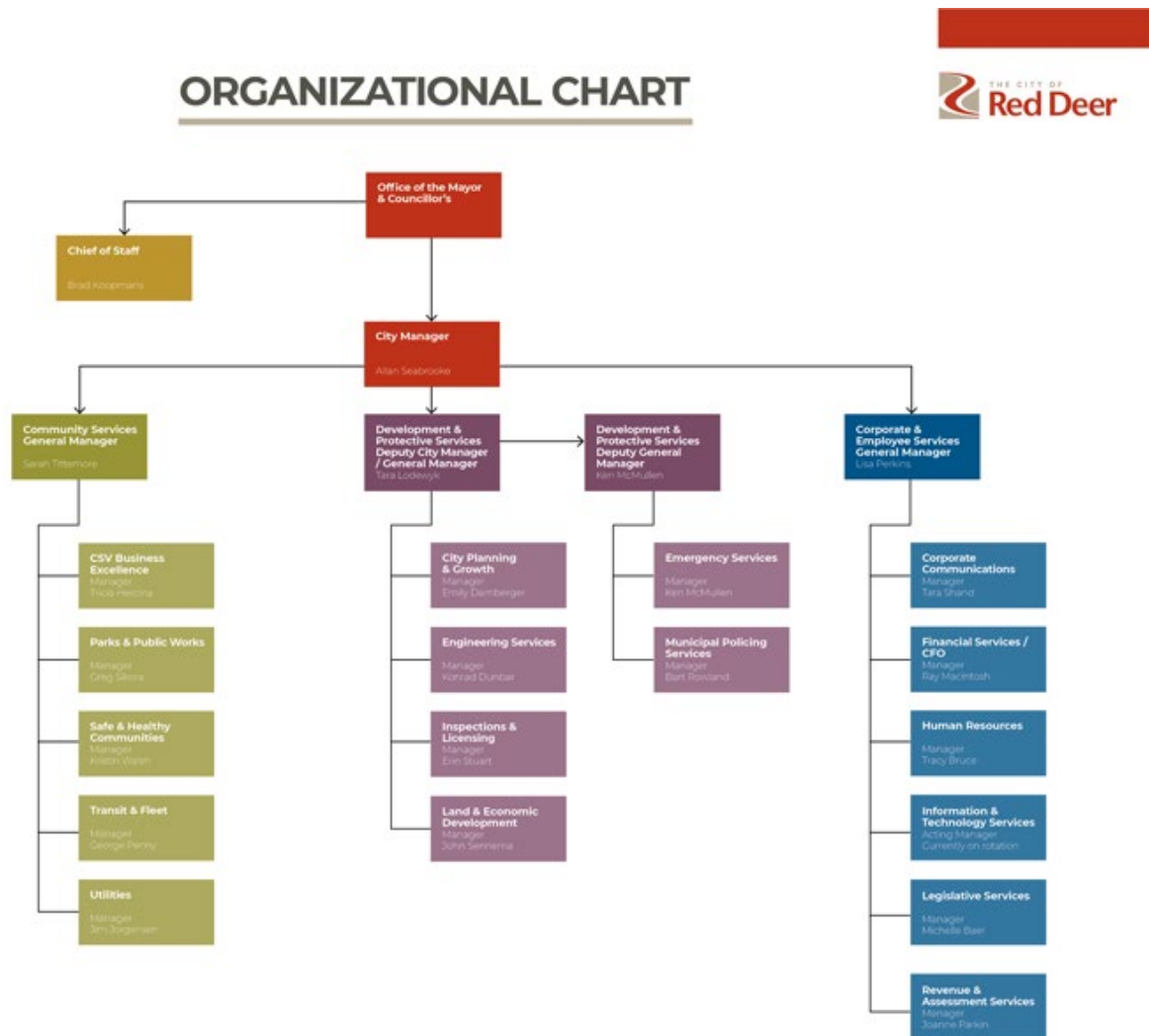


Figure 2: Traditional Organizational Chart (larger municipality)

Local government is a very complex system; add to that mix the administrative and political and we have a very intricate structure. My thesis question focuses on the relationship and interaction between the municipal council and the CAO or City Manager. We must study this inside the larger system of local government, which fits inside of a larger system of

provincial government as they are the creators of municipalities. Federal government also factors into this as well. See Figure 3 below:

Local Government In Canada

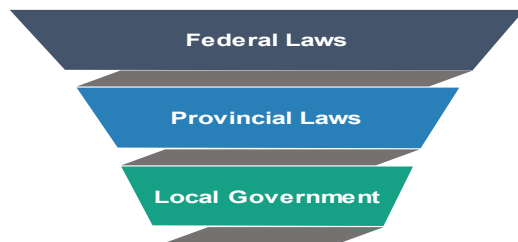


Figure 3: Local Government in Canada

Senge (2006) asserted, “Systems thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that has been developed over the past fifty years, to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively” (p. 7). The CAO/council relationship does not exist inside of a vacuum; rather, it exists inside of the complex world of a municipality. Furthermore, with the differing political and administrative perspectives it becomes clear that systems thinking is an advantageous approach to use if we are attempting to improve and change this structure. Both Senge (2006) and Stroh (2015) discussed the concept of mental models, ideas that we perceive or ideas that are entrenched into our thinking. “I think of it as a form of collective meditation: slowing down our thinking long enough to reflect on whether it serves us” (Stroh, 2015, p. 127). The concept of mental models underlines the need to review this issue in a holistic manner. As we are dealing with professional administrative staff and part time politicians, they will have very differing perspectives or mental models of the structure they are involved with. Change will only come if we can shift the mental models of not only the administrative and political but the other stakeholders as well. The anxieties about local government have been continual and there are various issues that could and should be

researched; however, I chose to focus on the CAO/council relationship as it seems to be a pivotal mechanism inside the local government system. I chose an extremely broad approach, Canada wide. As I have been involved in local government for over 26 years the issue of the staff/council relationship has always been at the forefront; this is not a localized issue, but rather it is a systemic issue. As stated above the structure of municipalities does not change from a municipality with a population of 10,000 to a city of over 100,000. Therefore, the need to have a broad research topic was essential. Tindal and Tindal (2019) asserted, “A well governed municipality focuses on the big picture” (p. 5). I would contend that until the issue of CAO/council relationship is more fully understood this will continue to elude our organizations. While explaining systems thinking, Senge (2006) confirmed, “For systems thinking shows that small, well-focused actions can sometimes produce significant enduring improvements, if they are in the right place” (p. 64). Senge continued with, “Systems thinkers refer to this principal as ‘leverage’” (p. 64). It is my contention that by using systems thinking to understand local government broadly and CAO/council interactions more specifically, a greater understanding of the challenges of this relationship will lead to insight which will eventually lead to change.

As Senge (2006) stated, “Living systems have integrity; the character depends on the whole” (p. 66). He further asserted, “The same is true for organizations; to understand the most challenging managerial issues requires seeing the whole system that generates the issues” (p. 66). Municipal organizations are similar to private sector organizations because they have a structure with leadership in place and they are producing some type of good or service. With local government we do not sell a specific product, we provide municipal services. This is a basic fact; however, what complicates the system we work in is that we are public sector employees, and the politicians are representatives of the public. This further complicates our structure.

How do we approach this complex problem that many have attempted to solve? Stroh (2015) contended, “Most people are more accustomed to advocating than inquiring, so it often helps to begin with inquiry – the art of asking others how they see the world and then listening to them deeply” (p. 87). As we have such a contradiction of perspectives from the administrative to the political to the public, discovering what people think and understanding their viewpoints is the first step to addressing the challenges within the local government structure.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

Although there is not a substantial amount of literature on the nature of the CAO/Council relationship, it has increased in the past five to 10 years. Svava (1985) has written extensively on this subject; however, he has concentrated on the role of the city manager in the United States, and a portion of his work is marginally dated since it does not address the growing complexity of the role. There has been increased writing here in Canada on the Chief Administrative Role and I will be reviewing the majority of the prevailing literature. Through this literature review, I will be presenting several major themes. As a CAO for the past 16 years, and someone who has worked in local government for over 26 years, these are the themes that I believe are the most critical to achieving organizational success through the CAO/Council relationship. These themes are supported in the work of Cuff (2002). I will touch on the fact that the role of the CAO in Canada is relatively new and one that is continually evolving, the CAO/Council relationship is critical for the overall success of a municipality, the CAO profession has a variety of types rather than a specific type of leadership in order to make it effective, the CAO profession is not treated as other professions, and finally that although legislation continues to be introduced to address the challenges and troubles facing local government, it has not been effective enough. Overall, the relationship of CAO and Council in the sources corresponded with the research results by clearly stating that this is a critical relationship that affects the entire organization, and further, the communities that these municipalities serve. The following quote serves to emphasize the importance of this CAO/Council relationship:

The position of CAO is an essential component in developing an accountable, efficient, fiscally sustainable, and policy-oriented system of municipal government.

The Council/CAO system works best when the distinction between disparate

responsibilities of the Mayor and the CAO is unambiguous and mutually respected. It allows the Mayor to provide leadership and strategic direction to Council and it allows the CAO to provide leadership and management direct to the municipal staff organization. (OMAA, 2015, p. 5)

This study by OMAA outlines the importance placed on the CAO/Council relationship and further, helps to understand and address the research question of “How can we enhance the trust and respect between the CAO and municipal Council in local government?” Understanding this critical relationship is key to improving trust and respect. Other themes that are prevalent in the literature highlight the unique nature of this role, a role that as its own profession has not been recognized and treated as such. Interestingly, although many promote the importance of the relationship between the CAO and the municipal council, the role of the CAO has not been treated as a legitimate profession and this contributes to the general misunderstanding and lack of respect for this position (Siegel, 2015). There is still general misunderstanding about the true nature of the CAO role and the importance it plays in local government, and further the unique way a CAO leads (McIntosh, 2009). The literature discusses the relatively early stages of the CAO role in local government in Canada and the continuing and evolving nature of this position. This dynamic certainly influences the relationship between the top administrator and the politicians and must be considered when we are discussing how to enhance this critical relationship.

The Role of CAO is Relatively New and is Continually Evolving

Introduced in the 1970s the CAO model in local government in Canada was established to address the challenges presented from the highly adopted committee-council system.

Two main changes have occurred due to the reform movement, and still govern the internal structure of local governments: (a) the establishment of some form of chief administrative officer to provide leadership and coordination at the staff level; (b) the introduction of some form of executive committee of council to provide political leadership and coordination at the political level. (Burnet, 2003, p. 13)

The challenge with the committee-council system occurred when a department head would work with members of committees made up of council members. This caused a variety of issues, one of which was a siloed effect, in that certain managers would have close relationships with members of the committee. It was generally decided that it would be beneficial to have a general manager or city manager to oversee the operations and be the conduit between the administration and the political arm of the local government. “Each individual department was generally managed well, but there was very weak accountability, and no mechanism for coordinating service delivery across departments” (Seigel, 2015b, p. 408). This ensured a more holistic view of the organization with a city manager in place who was not promoting an individual department, but rather understanding the entire municipality and its needs and limitations. In a 2005 study Sproule-Jones and Becker stated, “Various combinations of standing committees with and without committees of the whole are the dominant form of organization in the early 21st century in Ontario” (p. 387). Since the CAO model had been implemented broadly in the United States, it was adopted here in Canada. Interest in the council/CAO system started slowly, but through the 1980s and 1990s more and more municipalities adopted the system, until by the turn of this century virtually every municipality of any size had some variant of the council/CAO system. Very few municipalities that have adopted this system have moved away from it (OMAA, 2015, p. 4). Additionally, since the general adoption in 1970, the role of CAO has

transformed to be a very complex one and this has led to the need for the CAO to be a multifaceted type of leader, as mentioned by Siegel (2015a). “The contemporary municipal chief administrative officer must remain separate from electoral politics, but operationally oriented, politically sensitive, and definitely involved in the politics of governing society” (p. 51). This growing role continues to evolve over time and the expectations placed on the CAO both by council and the internal and external stakeholders increase as our worlds become more complex. Further, Plunkett (1994) asserted, “However, the office of the chief administrative officer is not some recent innovation but has evolved slowly in Canada over more than three-quarters of a century” (p. 8). No longer simply an administrative position or an unobtrusive policy maker, the contemporary CAO is expected to have extensive political acuity at all levels of government, to understand the multitude of legislation needed in the delivery of municipal services, and further, to keep up with the ongoing shifting legislation that other levels of government change quite frequently. As Griffin and Kavanagh (2004) contended, “As well as dealing with unexpected issues, local government encompasses many diverse and complex issues including housing, planning, waste, transport, water and economic development” (p. 12). This highlights the growing complexity of the CAO role, thus the need for the reciprocal relationship between CAO and council is more critical than ever.

CAO/Council Relationship is Critical to Organizational and Community Success

The literature clearly outlines the importance of this unique relationship. “The often hidden but very important relationship between the municipal council and the public service is a key determinant of the success of any municipality” (Fenn & Siegel, 2017, p. 1). As the authors have stated, this role is a key gauge of overall organizational health. Once the CAO model had been adopted it became the prevailing structure used in Canadian municipalities today.

However, the Council/CAO system really began to take hold in Ontario local governments in the 1970s in part because of the advocacy work of Paul Hickey, a former Assistant Deputy Minister in the Ontario Ministry of Treasury, Economics and Intergovernmental Affairs. (OMAA, 2015, p. 4)

Role clarity continues to be elusive, and we are still today explaining the mandate of administration and politicians in local government to both internal and external stakeholders. As Cuff (2002) stated, “Indeed, the single issue of role clarity has dominated all others as the greatest source of discontent between those elected to govern and those appointed to manage and/or deliver services” (p. 71). Role clarity continues to be the main deterrent to an effective CAO/council relationship.

For example, the following quote appeared quite recently in a local British Columbia newspaper:

The position of the CAO helps some councils, particularly in small municipalities like Rossland, to do away with the need for committees to administer specific functions of the municipality. Instead, the administrative duties are absorbed by the CAO, while the council acts as a "committee-of-the-whole" (COW) to receive reports from the CAO and other city officials and focus instead on policy debates. The COW makes recommendations for council—composed of the same people—to adopt as resolutions in separate, "regular" meetings. (Bennett, 2012)

While this is a high-level overview, Cuff (2019) went further to expand on the difference between the political and administrative roles:

Political leaders point the way; administrators design the course, employ the resources (within the scope of a budget approved by the council), outline the required steps and

check points, and ensure progress is made as directed by their mayor and councillors. (p. 95)

The balance between elected officials and appointed administrative staff is needed in local government. Cuff (2019) stated, “Only someone elected is vested with the authority and power to establish or revise policy; this is a public trust and not one that could be delegated to those who have not been elected to represent people” (p. 95). This highlights the importance of the staff/council dynamic, and more importantly the need for the separation between the two. Blakeney and Borins (1992) very accurately suggested that politicians are not government. Rather, politicians are the bridge between government and the people. While Blakeney and Borins were concentrating on the upper levels of government, this applies to local government as well.

However, there is some lingering use of the committee structure still in place in some organizations across the county; the majority of municipalities seem to be using a hybrid of the CAO model and the committee structure and as highlighted by Sproule-Jones and Becket (2005) “This suggests that although hybrid committee structures are developed by individual municipalities to meet their own unique needs, they often can create unanticipated problems not found in the traditional committee structure forms” (p. 387). This is counterintuitive to the deliberate separation of the administrative and political. “As a deliberative body, council is not structured to manage policy implementation. This is where the CAO comes in” (Fenn & Siegel, 2017, p. 7). As Fenn and Siegel advised, the CAO has the distinctive position of being the linchpin between the two very specific but necessary parts of local government. Further, Tindal and Tindal (2019) stated, “It is hard to imagine a well-governed municipality without council and staff, who understand, and agree upon, their respective roles and who operate in an

atmosphere of mutual trust and respect” (p. 101). Therefore, it follows that the CAO has a delicate balance to work in both the political and administrative, and as leader this must shift their style to meet each need. It is also important to mention the stakeholders. The CAO must deal often with participants that are not under their authority; however, they must have influence to get these bodies to help move forward council’s and the municipality’s agenda. In this situation the CAO needs to use their influence rather than their authority. As Cuff (2009) explained, “Of importance to the influence of a council is the ability of the CAO to develop relationships with others in the region, and indeed in key positions with the provincial and, to a lesser extent, federal governments” (p. 111). Cuff further expanded, “The CAO needs to be on a first-name basis with his or her colleagues, and thus able to help council open doors with respect to pending projects or provincial/federal announcements” (p. 111). This is how CAOs lead out by interacting with stakeholders that they have no authority over and in these instances, they must use their influence.

The critical need to Understand Expectations between council and CAO. Due to the fluid leadership nature of the CAO and the expectations put on that role by Council and stakeholders, it varies depending on the municipality. “The municipal CAO plays a key role in providing advice to council as well as implementing council’s decisions in an efficient effective manner. The CAO is the essential link in the accountability relationship between council and the public service” (Siegel, 2015b, p. 423). As Siegel explained, there is a need for the head of administration and Council to strike a bargain, and the council is led by the mayor as the political spokesperson for the organization. As the CAO must be apolitical it stands that these lines should never cross; however, in reality they often do. Some councils are comfortable for their CAOs to be a voice in the community. O’Neill and Nalbandian (2018) discussed the complexities facing

the modern-day city manager. They used the analogy of a bridge, and further explained that in today's very complex world, "We understand that without effective bridges between political and administrative arenas, little is accomplished, and trust in public servants – both political and professional – erodes and the value of government itself can be questioned" (p. 311). This metaphor of a bridge is a fitting one, as the city manager needs to be the conduit between council and staff, and often between stakeholders and council, as well as stakeholders and senior managers. Further, O'Neill and Nalbandian (2018) stated that "Most of our organizations are built around silos that isolate rather than connect". This further underpins the need for a bridge; a savvy CAO will understand when and how to move forward council's agenda, will understand the community pulse and how to address hot button items. Further, the CAO, as head administrator has the unenviable position of holding council members accountable.

Public administrators are tasked with upholding the public's interests and can thwart attempts by politicians to circumvent the checks and balances of democracy. Public administration leadership roles can be found throughout local government, ranging from city managers to police commissioners, and these key officials help to ensure that the social, economic, and educational needs of the public are properly met. (Norwich University Online, 2017)

This bolsters the trust of the public knowing that both the staff and the politicians are being held to account. "Since their roles inevitably overlap, avoiding conflict and ensuring effective collaboration is a major challenge" (Tindal & Tindal, 2019, p. 101).

The CAO Profession has a Variety Rather than a Specific Leadership Type

Leading in the public sector is much different than other levels of government and certainly distinctive from leading an organization in the private sector. "A better understanding

of the CAO leadership role is essential to maximize organizational effectiveness” (McIntosh, 2009). As McIntosh stated, understanding of the CAO leadership role, as well as the types of leadership, is critical to understanding the unique balance of the CAO/Council relationship. In his dissertation, Long (2019) focused on the relationship between the mayor and CAO rather than the CAO/council relationship; while this is essential, we must remember that the CAO reports to council as a whole and this cannot be discounted. “And municipal civil servants work for council as a whole, they do not work for the mayor, or committee chairs, or any individual councillor” (Fenn & Siegel, 2017, p. 3). As the authors claimed, municipal council make decisions as a whole. In Canada we do not have the strong mayor system; rather each councillor has one vote, and the decision of council needs to be taken in entirety. “This does not ignore the fact that the mayor has only one vote on all matters and is, in many respects, coequal with his or her colleagues on council” (Cuff, 2014, p. 121). In practice, the mayor as the political leader is often in contact with the CAO as administrative leader. The CAO must always remember that they work for council as a whole and further that they implement decisions made at the council table by resolution and bylaw. Long’s (2019) research, while beneficial to the literature as a whole, can be seen as somewhat tainted by emotion. As a career CAO he has likely been affected by the sometimes combative nature of the position. Long’s research addressed the notion of shapeshifting as a CAO; this addresses the concept that a CAO must change the manner in which they lead depending on whom or what they are dealing with.

In my definition I define and apply the term shapeshifting as the act of changing an attitude, perspective or point of view relatively quickly for strategic advantage so as to maintain or result in a functioning relationship without generating ongoing emotional angst. (Long, 2019, p. 117)

While Long used this terminology to address the CAO/mayor dyad, specifically that each of the individual's wills or thoughts must bend to make an effective relationship, I would contend that shapeshifting is something that both public sector employees and politicians take up without acknowledging that this is occurring. The term shapeshifting, when referring to leadership is often used in the context of shape-shifting the organization rather than the leader; however Daina Middleton stated, "Shape-shifting is now a staple to organizational success because it builds organizational resiliency" (2016, para. 2). We can take this a step further and say with confidence that as the administrative leader in local government, the CAO must be a shapeshifter to deal with the various levels of staff, council, and stakeholders. Additionally, the CAO must manage those relationships in a fluid manner. With the variety of interactions that take place at the local level, both the CAO and council must shift perspectives frequently depending on which stakeholder they are dealing with and further whether those individuals or groups are internal or external. Long's (2019) shapeshifting theory is very similar to McIntosh's (2009) theory that CAOs must use *situational leadership* to achieve success in their roles. In his findings, McIntosh claimed,

The appropriateness of the CAO's situational leadership approach is mediated by feedback from their employer – council. The study's situational leadership construct and methodology have utility to obtain and compare CAO perceptions with council views to examine CAO success in their leadership role. (McIntosh, p. 250)

While Long's concept of shapeshifting hinges on both the politician and head administrator bending, McIntosh's (2009) situational leadership applies more to the CAO; correctly as the employee of council as a whole, they need to lead in order to meet the needs of their employer. The relationship between CAO and council is further complicated by the fact that

the CAO is principal advisor to council. “One of the key roles of the CAO is to advise Council on its function” (McIntosh, 2009, p. 172). Cuff (2009) further expands on this: “Chief administrative officers are expected to be advisors to council and managers to staff” (p. 110). This highlights the complexity of the relationship. While this terminology is somewhat vague, it does often mean that the head administrator is leading their political masters, in that as principal advisor, you are giving them advice and somewhat leading them, while at the same time acting as a subordinate of the group. As explained by Burnett (2003), “This provides the City Manager with a second role: they are also drawn into policy making by recommending goals and programs to Council” (p. 17). This one point is a critical one and indicates some of the challenges between the two bodies. Siegel (2015b) discussed this delicate balance as striking a bargain between the two entities; he called this the public sector bargain. This approach is more effective since the relationship between the two changes depending on the circumstances in each organization. Siegel further discussed the concept of the reactive versus the proactive CAO and gave a spectrum in which he felt CAOs fit. This idea fits into the larger piece of expectations. At certain times in their history each organization or more specifically, each council will want a certain style of leadership from their CAO; this fits into Siegel’s proactive versus reactive concept as the council will need to hire the CAO that they need for that point in their organizational history. As Siegel contended,

That ideal location might change with regard to the issue at hand and it will almost certainly change over time. However, one certainty is that the CAO will have to adjust her or his position to suit the desires of council. (p. 413)

The concepts of situational leadership and shapeshifting both fit into Siegel’s idea that a CAO must bend their leadership style to meet council’s needs at that time. As Siegel so aptly stated,

Over the long run, the CAO can work with council to try to get council to adjust its views on the CAO's location on this continuum. However, in the final analysis, it is always the responsibility of the CAO to adjust to council's position; if the CAO is not able to do this, then the CAO will need to find a different work environment. (p. 414)

Cuff (2009) expanded on this: "The need for clarity of expectations and the value of quality training has never been more important" (p. 57).

Often the position of CAO is compared to an hourglass with the CAO as the neck, in that CAOs lead up to council, down to staff, and out to stakeholders. "The most effective CAOs lead "down, up and out" (Latimer, 2016, p. 1). While the author is citing the works of Siegel, he expressed how delicate and complex leading in three directions is. He further contends that leading up to council is the most challenging: "In this role, the CAO's power comes through influence. The CAO must act as a mediator and negotiator between Council and the administrative branch. In leading up, the CAO inspires confidence through expertise, objectivity, and professionalism" (Latimer, 2016, p.1). These complex relationships are further proof that the CAO needs to change their leadership style to address each distinctive situation. McIntosh's (2009) situational leadership is very applicable in this local government situation as is Long's (2019) theory of shapeshifting. Siegel (2015b) discussed the public sector bargain, and this highlights the need for deep understanding between the CAO and council. Clear expectations need to be laid out so that the CAO can understand what the organization needs of them. Additionally, the CAO needs to lay out to Council what their needs or expectations are. As Siegel (2015b) stated,

Some of this negotiation should occur before the CAO takes a new position. A council should have a sense of the role it wants the CAO to play, and the CAO should have a sense of where he or she prepares to fit on this continuum. (p. 415)

This balance is fluid and must be nurtured and revisited frequently. “While it may seem relatively insignificant at first blush, the fact that council and the CAO have very different styles of operating, may lead to terminal problems in their relationship” (Cuff, 2018, p. 72). As Cuff and Siegel both stated expectations should be laid out between both parties and revisited often. Siegel (2015b) further contended, “A part of the job interview should involve the two sides sizing up one another to determine if there is a good fit in these expectation” (p. 415).

The CAO Role is Unique and Unlike Any Other Type of Leadership

The literature highlights the fact that the position of CAO is one of delicate balance. The role is unlike other leadership positions that are in charge of organizations in both the public and private sector and although leadership theory can and does apply, because of the distinctive nature of the CAO position these leadership theories may need to be adjusted. Further, there is the misconception that local government is similar to provincial and federal levels of government. Siegel (2015a) stated,

First in parliamentary systems, senior officials deal with one minister who is a member of a government that speaks with one voice (at least for public consumption). This is very different from the balancing act required in dealing with a municipal council. (p. 107)

Further, McIntosh, in his 2009 dissertation did expansive work on CAO characteristics and what made a good CAO; he stated, “This indicates CAOs have a leadership profile that is somewhat different than other levels of managers in local government” (p. 190). While these two authors concentrate on leading in the public sector and more specifically in local government, we

should look at leadership more broadly to understand where traditional leadership is similar and where it differs from leadership in both the political and administrative arm of local government. Kouzes and Posner (2010), who have written extensively on leadership theory, stated, “It’s about the relationship between leaders and their constituents” (p. 63). If we look at this within the scope of local government, then we can apply this to both the CAO and council roles. Leadership is about relationships and in the public sector there are many layers of constituents, such as politicians, staff, citizens, other levels of government, and other members of council. For the CAO they need to lead staff but also council, and they need to influence a great many stakeholders in the community and across the county. Kouzes and Posner further stated, “Leadership is very much a two-way street” (p. 66). If we apply this to the critical nature of the CAO/council relationship we can then understand the importance of nurturing and honouring this critical bond.

CAO Profession Not Treated Like a Regular Profession

One of the recurring themes in the literature was that the CAO, according to those that understood the position, was an extremely important position, and was not treated as other professions. “Over time, the trappings of professionalism have begun to develop around the position of CAO, but the position does not fit all aspects of the classic model of a profession” (Siegel, 2015b, p. 409). This may stem from the fact that traditional professions, such as engineering, have a specific educational component. The CAO role has historically been one of rising to the position from a larger internal municipal department. “Most members of the OMAA became CAOs following a career in public administration in Ontario, typically with an accomplished professional background in fields such as finance, engineering, social services, land-use planning, law, human resources or economic development” (OMAA, 2015, p. 3). This

would explain why so little research has been done on this position. “While the managerial behaviouralists lament that we know relatively little about the work of the manager, we know even less about the work of the city manager” (Griffin & Kavanaugh, 2003, p. 3). This study by Griffin and Kavanaugh underscores the lack of understanding and knowledge of the city manager position and furthermore little about it as a profession.

Legislation has Been Trying to Address Areas of Concern but Unsuccessfully

Role clarity has continued to be an issue in this critical relationship. Often the reaction to misbehavior in local government is to enact more pieces of legislation. “In 2016 in a somewhat modest response to a series of high-profile incidents in both large and small municipalities, the Ontario Government introduced Bill 68/16 requiring that a council-staff relations policy be enacted in each of its 444 municipalities (Fenn & Siegel, 2017, p. 2). Although this is Ontario centric it is reflective of all provinces. Levine (2018) expanded by stating “The adoption of a code is something that should be done with seriousness and prudence” (p. 6). This outlines the need for careful thought before implementing a code of conduct. Several provinces have made it mandatory to have a council code of conduct. The expectation is that by enshrining this into the legislation it will remind the politicians to behave in a certain manner. This has not been effective mainly due to the fact that the legislation does not truly have any consequences. “It can be argued that, without specific authority in municipal legislation, it will be difficult to have codes that include sanction or offence provisions: and without this, their effect may be diminished” (Levine, 2018, pp. 8-9).

The province of Nova Scotia has recently announced that they will be amending the Municipal Government Act and the Halifax Regional Municipality Charter to provide greater accountability by requiring municipalities to have a code of conduct as well as appointing an

integrity commissioner to address these complaints, “We’ve heard loud and clear from our members that they want legislation with more teeth. The Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities supports legislative changes that provide clear measures for municipal councils to support elected officials in ethical and effective governing” (Municipal Info Net, March 25, 2021). Additionally, council as a whole has to vote on the sanctions, and they are reluctant to do this to their fellow councillors. “The Ontario government has announced it will consult with a range of stakeholders for possible changes to the municipal code of conduct for city councillors” (Provencher, 2021, para. 1). This trend in Ontario is a response to the ongoing challenge to the various provincial governments that the current codes of conduct are not effective. As Siegel (2015b) stated, there really is no way to ascertain the cost of this behavior on the CAO position, “It is impossible to measure firings of CAOs. Ceremonial public dismissals are relatively rare. In most cases, the CAO will recognize that a relationship is becoming untenable and will find other employment before the issue comes to a head” (p. 410). If there is a dysfunctional council member or council, normally the CAO will simply find a new position elsewhere. Tindal and Tindal (2019) further contended, “In addition, rules in the code of conduct have often focused on unacceptable behavior that is prohibited rather than emphasizing the kind of positive behavior that is desired” (p. 91). If we are indeed attempting to look at local government from an appreciative stance then perhaps the legislation needs to be slanted in the manner that Tindal and Tindal suggested.

Cuff (2019) stated, “In particular, it requires each councillor and mayor to understand that being an oversight body is far different than that of an operational entity” (p. 18). Further, the literature stresses the importance of the separation of the political and administrative; therefore, role clarity, and the importance of each individual understanding and accepting role

clarity, is a key to maintaining the subtle balance of the importance of the CAO/Council relationship. Taking all of this into consideration we need to look at local government in a holistic manner; this is where the concept of systems thinking comes in. There are so many different components that contribute to the relationship between the CAO and Council and the systems approach is a superb lens to view it through.

Further adding to role confusion is the fact that in Ontario under the 2000 changes to the *Municipal Act*, the legislation changed the title of Mayor to CEO, this has led to endless confusion and has further offset the role of CAO, as Fenn and Siegel (2017) stated, “This CEO position has contributed to the ambiguity of the role of head of council and appears to contradict the role of statutory description of the role of CAO” (p. 22). While this is specific to Ontario it underlines the need to form an overarching legislative framework that supports the unique roles.

Summary

The literature shows us that the role of CAO or city manager has evolved rapidly since its inception in Canada in the 1970s. Additionally, the authors and researchers agree that the relationship between the CAO and municipal council is indeed critical to the overall success of the municipality. Further, the literature suggests that the effects of this relationship could spill out into the public as well. Understanding the nature of the CAO it is evident that this role is unlike other positions that head organizations. Due to the distinctive nature of local government I would suggest that while the CAO reports to council as a whole, they are also principal advisor and so there is a very characteristic difference in this environment. This leads to the conclusion that the leadership style of the CAO is different from other leadership positions both in the private sector and at the provincial and federal government levels. Due to the unusual relationship of the CAO role, it has not been treated like other professions. This may originate

from the fact that many CAOs rise to their positions from other disciplines such as engineering or finance, and therefore we do not necessarily have a true CAO position. The literature shows us that we have had more provinces implementing mandatory codes of conducts for municipal council; however, the various pieces of legislation that have been put forward to address local government challenges have been lacking or more specifically not overly successful.

Chapter 3: Methodology

While there are some quantitative aspects to this study, it is more of an interpretivist research paper. Given the nature of this thesis research, using a qualitative methodology was the most appropriate approach. As Saldana and Omasta (2018) stated, “If human experiences are the primary focus for investigation, then the analysis of human actions and their meanings should be the primary focus of our research” (p. 4). The nature of local government is such that everyone perceives their world from their own viewpoint. Thus, qualitative research was a more suitable methodology to use. In choosing this approach, I considered ontological implications, “Researchers who focus primarily on the philosophical domains of inquiry attend to its ontological implications, such as how humans conceptualize their existence or their being in the world” (Saldana & Omasta, 2018, p. 141). Given that I was interpreting human experience, qualitative methodology was most appropriate.

Additionally, this was not a positivist study; rather it was an interpretive one. If we look at positivism, “Positivism depends on quantifiable observations that lead to statistical analysis” (Business Research Methodology, n.d., para. 2). This was not a suitable methodology for my research. Therefore, I chose to undertake interpretive research. “Interpretive research focuses on analytically disclosing those meaning-making practices, while showing how those practices configure to generate observable outcomes” (Institute of Public & International Affairs, 2009, para. 2).

For my thesis research I used an action-based approach to focus on the challenges in local government and specifically concentrating on the critical nature of the CAO/council relationship and how action might be taken to improve or enhance it. As Burke et al. (2009) contended, “The forces requiring changes in large systems today tend to originate outside the organization” (p.

689). For my research in local government, I looked beyond the small system of the immediate municipality, or specifically my organization, to the larger system of local government in Canada in general. It was critical to my research to undertake a Canada-wide study, as this issue is facing municipalities across the country. Understanding which pieces of legislation affect both the CAO and the political roles and how that legislation was applied was vital to understand how they were implemented and enforced. Understanding the entire spectrum of local government and how the participants interact was critical to my research. Therefore, understanding the entire system was critical.

Systems thinking formed an essential piece of my research. As Senge (2006) noted, “systemic structure is concerned with the key interrelationships that influence behaviour over time” (p. 44). The CAO/council relationship is the fulcrum of the municipal organization; therefore, the system of local government needs to be studied holistically. Stroh’s (2015) model of systems change has four distinct stages: build a foundation for change, clarify current reality, make an explicit choice, and bridge the gap. As there is considerable misunderstanding of local government in general and the considerations around my thesis question in particular, these four stages of systems thinking provide a logical application to the challenges facing the public sector. While Stroh’s (2015) work concentrated on systems thinking for social change, he did make the following statement:

One group that is frequently viewed with contempt is publicly elected officials. Their actions often seem to be solely motivated by their desire to get re-elected and they do that by appealing to the public’s fears and short-term interests rather than their constituents’ best interest. (p. 133)

In this section Stroh (2015) was discussing contempt for people in the position of power; this underscores the need for greater understanding of local government and the systems they operate in. This was an area which I explored in my research. Systems thinking is a natural tool for researching the public sector in Canada in a broad, holistic manner. One of the challenges with systems thinking is that it may be too comprehensive for the rather intimate nature of the CAO/Council relationship; however, in the larger system of local government in Canada it is effective. As researcher I remained open to this possibility. By using systems thinking and applying it to the unique relationship between the CAO and council I have developed a systems model that is applicable to local government in Canada.

For this capstone I used an appreciative stance methodology. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) when addressing their appreciative inquiry approach contended, “One of the most important things a change agent or practitioner does is to articulate questions” (p. 51). The main force that drove my research was my desire to effect change in local government. By using an appreciative inquiry stance as well as narrative inquiry, this proved to be an effective process. In this case, using an appreciative stance focused largely on what was working well for the two critical roles involved, and on improving the CAO/council relationship rather than focusing entirely on what was wrong. The first method of my research was a survey that was developed and broadly distributed across the country. Once the data was gathered and analyzed, I performed narrative interviews with ten individuals to further explore the themes. I created and conducted narrative inquiry interviews using the coded data from the survey. *Municipal World*, as Canada’s foremost municipal government publication assisted with the distribution of the survey and will further disseminate the results and recommendations of my study. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) further emphasized, “AI is a process for engaging the entire organization

and its stakeholders in a solution that works for everyone” (p. 14). Explaining further, they said, “Each AI process is homegrown, designed to meet the unique challenges of the organization and industry involved” (p. 15). For my research, the parameters of appreciative inquiry covered the various stakeholder interests. I used an action-based research focused on systems thinking and an appreciative inquiry stance which benefited my inquiry question. Due to the unique nature of local government, and the specific area that I studied, an appreciative inquiry approach was the most suitable as I when I looked at improving this pivotal relationship, focusing on how it could work seemed more productive than focusing on why it is not currently working as well as it might.

Through my partnership with *Municipal World*, I used action-based research to reach out to the stakeholders. This included both the political and the administrative, as well as those affected by the council/CAO relationship. Through this exploration I brought awareness to the issues surrounding politicians and staff, specifically where it concerned the interaction with the role of the CAO. As Hume (2015) asserted, “A strong, committed and empowered public service will be a critical partner in this emergence of local authority” (p. 131). The author has highlighted the importance of empowering the administrative arm of local government. I contend that this can only be successful through a strong CAO/council relationship. It further underscores the need for trust and collaboration. As Hume further contended, “Councillors and mayors will increasingly focus on the big, game-changing decisions, strategies and investments that will transform communities” (p. 131). It was important for my research to understand role clarity of council and CAO is a critical piece to building a strong collaborative relationship and that it further underpins the need for mutual respect between the two groups.

Data Collection Methods

For my first method I used a survey circulated broadly by *Municipal World*. This survey had 10 specific questions which were a variety of open-ended and multiple-choice questions, that generated sufficient data to inform the first phase of the project. “How much you should invest in a survey to accomplish these purposes depends on the value of the information derived from that survey” (Pulliam et al., 2013, p. 14). The survey was sent out across Canada to CAOs and members of municipal Council through *Municipal World* magazine. Once I had received the data from the survey, I worked codifying and theming the data. As Pulliam et al. stated: surveys are effective but to ensure my research was meaningful and had depth I chose two methods for my research. After I had collected and coded the emergent themes, I then conducted the narrative inquiry interviews. As stated by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) “We saw our research problem as trying to think of the continuity and wholeness of an individual’s life experience” (p. 17). By using narrative inquiry, it allowed me to understand that the perceptions and viewpoints of both politicians and administration working in the public sector’s experience had an impact on this vital relationship. As there was so much interest in this subject, I would like to carry on my research by exploring the minor theme of the growing gap of professionalism between politicians and administration. While this was more of a minor theme, I believe it is one worth exploring. It is clear through the robust response to the survey that many people in the local government sector are interested in addressing the gaps in local government, specifically the critical relationship between council and CAO.

The nature of my thesis question was very broad and particularly subjective to those involved in the municipal sector. I cautiously chose the two methods for my research to tailor my local government inquiry. By using the survey method initially, I was able to reach a broad

spectrum of participants, and once this data was collected and analyzed I used the narrative inquiry process to further explore the topic from the perspective of personal experience. Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008) asserted, “The aims and techniques of narrative analysis are diverse” (p. 4). This suited my purpose as I wanted my research to be as effective as possible; however, it needed to capture the various nuances that occur in local government between municipal council and the head administrator. I was drawn to the process of narrative inquiry since each of the 10 people I interviewed has a different role in time and place in local government. To be more specific, five were politicians and five were CAOs; however, some have been engaged in local government for many years while others were new to their roles. To ensure a broad cross section of responses, I used purposive sampling to ensure a, equitable cross-section was met. As Clandinin and Connelly (2002) stated, “We saw our research problem of trying to think of the continuity and wholeness of an individual’s life experience” (p. 17). This was extremely important as my research question focused on enhancing the respect and trust of the CAO/council relationship.

By using narrative inquiry as a method, the researcher must appreciate both the benefits and limitations. “As narrative inquirers and participants co-compose the interim and final research texts, we are acutely aware that with each telling there are shifts in the stories that are told” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 205). This is a cautionary note to me as the researcher: the stories are never completed. My inquiry was intended to be a starting point to encourage more discussion and examination of the challenges facing local government. The uniqueness of the CAO/council relationship hinges on those participating in the relationship; by using the narrative interviews I was able to allow those individuals an opportunity to tell their stories to gain a greater understanding of what they perceived the challenges to be.

Project Participants

As this was a Canada-wide study and in order to gain as much data as possible from municipalities across the country, the survey was put out by *Municipal World*, Canada's foremost magazine on local government. *Municipal World* is distributed broadly via print, digital, and social media so the survey reached a broad spectrum of municipal staff and elected officials. This gave the research an excellent cross section and a diverse data pool from which to draw the narrative interview subjects. Traditionally, surveys are not well responded to; however, due to the subject matter the response rate was high. I received 866 responses from the survey and approximately 400 of those respondents wanted to speak further on the subject of CAO/council relationship. In consultation with my thesis advisor, it was decided that for the narrative interview method I would select 10 participants. As I wanted to ensure balance between the political and administrative responses, I chose five politicians and five CAOs from local government. As this was a Canada-wide research project, and to gain as much diversity as possible, I chose my narrative interview subjects from various sizes of municipalities and from every region. For the narrative inquiry I chose 3 questions to explore during the interviews. Those three questions are as follows.

1. Tell me a story of a time when the relationship between the CAO and Council effected the entire organization?
2. Tell me a story of a time when you felt the current system of the CAO reporting to all of Council was effective or ineffective.
3. What are the fundamental governance issues that impact the CAO/Council relationship?

I carefully contemplated if I would send the questions to the interviewees ahead of time. After careful consideration I chose not to. It has been my experience that both politicians and administrators tend to prepare and potentially over-prepare for any topic; therefore, I wanted their responses to be more spontaneous. Once the survey data were correlated, and the themes were collected, I drafted the narrative interview questions. All narrative interviews took place over the phone and were recorded. The recordings were transcribed, and the transcriptions were reviewed, and themes pulled out.

Study Conduct

I completed an article that appeared online for *Municipal World* (Appendix A) prior to gathering data that outlined what my thesis research would be focusing on and advising the readers that a survey gathering data would be distributed in November of 2020. Local government was the overarching theme; however, I chose to concentrate on the more specific relationship between the municipal council and their one employee, the CAO. Following the publishing of this article, the survey was distributed through *Municipal World* magazine (see Survey Invitation at Appendix B). A total of 866 participants responded. *Municipal Word* is Canada's longest circulating monthly magazine serving local government since 1891. "Founded in 1891, the magazine is devoted to promoting effective municipal government" (Municipal World, n.d.). Survey questions appear in Appendix C. Once the responses came in and the survey had closed, I correlated the data. The thesis question focused on the relationship between the CAO and municipal council and the questions had been drafted by me as researcher and reviewed by my partner *Municipal World* and Gordon McIntosh who has completed his doctoral dissertation on CAOs in Canada: *Defining Situational Leadership for the Local Government Chief Administrative Officer* (2009). I took a few weeks to pull out both the major and minor

themes that emerged from the data. Once these had been reviewed with my thesis advisor, I used these major themes to draft my narrative inquiry questions. I conceptualized my research as a funnel, with the survey results bringing in the broader responses. Then, I focused on more of a direct focus through the narrative interview process (See Narrative Interview invitation and consent form at Appendix D). For my narrative interviews I wanted to ensure a balanced approach which would include both the political and administrative perspectives. I chose five municipal politicians and five CAOs across the county. For diversity I attempted to have an equitable number of males and females in both categories; additionally, I chose the narrative interviewees from various municipalities across the country and from various sizes of municipality. As my research is dealing with the challenges facing local government in Canada, I made sure that I had representation from all regions. The narrative interviewees were chosen from the survey data; at the end of the survey respondents were asked if they would like to speak further about this subject. Out of 866 survey respondents 404 replied that they would like to be contacted to discuss this issue further.

The narrative interviewees were invited to participate via email, and were requested to sign a consent form (Appendix D) before the interviews could commence. The interviews all took place over the phone and were recorded by the researcher. Narrative Interview questions can be found at Appendix E. Once all interviews were completed they were then transcribed by a confidential transcription service and the recordings were destroyed. I used the transcriptions to identify themes and this was reviewed by the researcher and thesis advisor.

Once the research and data collection from both the survey and narrative interviews had been completed, I reviewed my findings and recommendations with my partner, *Municipal World*. This led to the discussion for me to complete a series of two articles covering my

research. These will be published this summer in *Municipal World*. Additionally, I have prepared an executive summary as well as a PowerPoint presentation to be used as presentation for the various stakeholder organizations.

Data Analysis and Validity

Once I had received the responses of my survey that was distributed by *Municipal World*, I pulled all of the themes out of the data. This was completed by reviewing all responses to the twelve questions in the survey. Working with my thesis advisor we both reviewed the themes independently and compared notes on the overreaching themes of the data. Once this was completed, I moved on to the narrative interview portion of my research. “Triangulation in research is the use of more than one approach to researching a question” (Heale & Forbes, 2013, para. 1). The authors further stated, “The objective is to increase confidence in the findings through the confirmation of a proposition using two or more independent measures (Heale & Forbes, 2013, para. 1). By starting my research with a broad-based survey with 866 respondents and then selecting 10 proponents to perform narrative interviews, this increased the validity of the data.

Using the two methods, I treated my research data as a funnel. Using the broad-based survey put out across the country this allowed for a strong response. This gave me a starting point to review the themes and collate the data. Studying the survey data took time as there were 866 responses. Reviewing the data, I listed the major and minor themes. Once this was complete, I reviewed the raw data and my themes with my thesis adviser to ensure I was not missing anything. Saldana (2016) asserted, “Selecting coding methods that may catalogue and better reveal these ontologies include In Vivo, Process, Emotions, Values, Dramaturgical, and or Focused Coding plus Theming the Data” (p. 70). The sheer amount of data was at first daunting;

however, the pattern of responses quickly became clear after my third review. As Bernard and Ryan (2010) discussed, one effective method is pawing through the data. They described this process: “By living with the data, investigators can eventually perform the interocular percussion test—which is where you wait for patterns to hit you between the eyes” (Pawing, para. 1). Bernard and Ryan further contended, “This may not seem like a very scientific way to do things, but it is one of the best ways we know of to begin hunting for patterns in qualitative data” (Pawing, para. 2) Living with the data over a period of weeks, I pulled the themes out and reviewed several times; this was for the responses from the surveys. Once I had completed the narrative interviews, I had the audio transcribed and then lived with that data for a few weeks. I then compared and contrasted (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) to see the similarity in words and phrases.

As I researched an area that is very subjective and can have a political or bureaucratic bias, I was very conscious of that fact. “Analyzing life, in part, sometimes consists of symbolizing or condensing what people say about their perceptions and experiences into essence” (Saldana & Omasta, 2018, p. 6). This was applicable as I was studying those who participate in the municipal sector.

Ethical Implications

For my capstone project I followed the ethical guidelines set out through the Tri-Council Policy statement (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2014) on research ethics, specifically: respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice through informed consent. I worked with my partner *Municipal World* to ensure that all participants in both the survey portion as well as the narrative inquiry section of my research

were treated with respect and empathy. As stated in IDEO, Design Research Ethics (2015) “Because we are often guests in our participants’ world – a privilege easily revoked – we want them to feel empowered, appreciated and respected at all times” (p. 25). Since I did not perform research inside my own organization there was no concern of power-over; however, the dynamics between politicians and administration are such that there could be an idea of a perceived power imbalance. I worked with my partner *Municipal World* to ensure that participants were confident in the knowledge that we were going to hold their identities confidential and would be concentrating on the themes that emerged from the research. As the survey was blanketed through *Municipal World*, participants were assured that their identity would be held in confidence. With the narrative interviews, all data were held in confidence and recordings were deleted once transcribed. While meeting the ethical guidelines of the university, it was important to keep in mind that situations evolved and changed throughout the research process. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated, “Ethical matters shift and change as we move through an inquiry. They are never far from the heart of our inquiries no matter where we are in the inquiry process” (p. 170). This highlights the need as researchers to be open and receptive to all situations that will arise through our process.

Proposed Outputs

The main output associated with this research project is this thesis. It was my contention that this was the best format as I wanted to build on this research by bringing understanding to my sector and to the stakeholders. Now that I have completed my thesis research, my plan is to continue in my studies and complete my doctorate. Through that research I will build on my master’s study conclusions. I consider this thesis as a white paper on local government, “White papers are a way the government can present policy preferences before it introduces legislation.

Publishing a white paper tests public opinion on controversial policy issues and helps the government gauge its probable impact” (White Paper, 2021, para. 6). My thesis research has added to the current body of knowledge and enhanced the gap that exists. As my research focused on the nature of the CAO and council relationship specifically, I believe this will enhance the current literature and give rise to future studies.

As an action-oriented research project the ideal result was to bring change to the local government sector. While I am optimistic that my research may affect lasting change, at least through this paper it may also bring awareness to gaps in the current research. I have planned to share my recommendations with *Municipal World* who will share with the local government sector. Further, with the assistance of *Municipal World* the results will be available and circulated through two upcoming articles I will author. The first will focus on what the results of my research were and the second will focus on what recommendations came out of the research. Additionally, I will share the results with CAMA (Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators). CAMA has completed much work in the area of CAO performance appraisals and CAO and council relationships, and I believe my research will be beneficial to the board and their members.

Contributions and Applications

Local government affects all of society in one way or another. This research highlighted the critical nature of the CAO/council relationship and the contributing factors that enhanced or deteriorated this relationship. By bringing awareness and recommendations for change, my research allows for a greater understanding for everyone who interacts with this sector. Additionally, it is my expectation that this research may encourage more young people to consider local government administration as a profession. While there has been some research

completed on the staff/council relationship, my area of study has enhanced and supported earlier work. I see my research as a companion piece that I and others can build upon or use as supporting documentation. Recommendations that have come out of the research will be distributed and as with any type of action-oriented research hopefully implemented.

Chapter 4: Inquiry Project Findings and Conclusions

Through the process of data generation and data analysis, various clear and strong themes emerged. Using the two methods, starting with the survey and then narrowing the scope through the narrative interview process, gave me the opportunity to explore the research in a more holistic manner. The survey responses showed clearly that the relationship between the CAO and Council was one of the major issues facing the local government structure today. Having 866 responses to a survey in *Municipal World*, with approximately 400 stating that they would like to speak further about this subject was a strong indicator that more research is needed in this area. From the respondents I selected five CAOs and five politicians for the narrative interview portion of my data collection. To guarantee diversity as much as possible and to ensure that I was covering municipalities across the country I chose from various sizes and locations. Additionally, I attempted to make sure that I had a diverse cross section of gender. This was somewhat challenging as female CAOs and politicians, while on the rise, are still underrepresented with numbers still low in both the political and administrative categories. I did not send the narrative interview questions to the respondents ahead of time. This decision was carefully considered. As I have been in the local government field for over 26 years it has been my experience that when speaking with both senior managers and politicians they tend to be excessively prepared for most subjects. As I wanted the narrative interviews to be spontaneous, I chose not to send the questions ahead of time.

The two strongest themes that emerged from the data were the status of the CAO/Council relationship and the subject of role clarity. Although these themes are distinctly separate, if role clarity or the lack of understanding or purposeful misunderstanding of each other's role is evident then this contributes to the breakdown in the CAO/Council relationship. These two

themes are interconnected; specifically if respect for role clarity is not present it affects the state of the CAO/Council relationship. The research showed a clear system dynamic at work. There were several minor themes that appeared through the data that contributed to the decline in the CAO/Council relationship. One of these themes was the growing gap of professionalism between administration and politicians. This disparity varied from municipality to municipality and appeared to be affected by the size of the municipality. The concept of trust was an important contributor to the enhancement of the CAO/Council relationship and this theme emerged frequently, and had a great impact, both positively and negatively on the CAO/Council relationship. Communication, a minor theme, predominately factored into the larger theme of CAO/Council relationship; primarily if the communication was flowing and the CAO was keeping Council apprised of ongoing situations it greatly enhanced the relationship and specifically increased the trust level between CAO and Council. Additionally, communication or the flow of it to Council could be an issue. A few respondents felt that the CAO was filtering too much the information to Council. The role of CAO has evolved since its inception and today's CAO has a wide range of duties and is expected to take on more of a leadership role. Council's expectations of the CAO also affected the relationship. In today's global environment, the CAO is expected to have a very wide range of capabilities. Historically, CAOs have risen to their positions from different disciplines which often are not necessarily conducive to a leadership mindset as generally, they tend to focus on specific training or profession, and this can often narrow the focus of people advancing on that path. The younger generation of CAOs are trending towards a degree in Public Administration and this is more effective as it covers a wide range of topics that the CAO must address; further the political acuity aspect is addressed in greater detail. Gender of the CAO was a very minimal theme; however, it was mentioned by a few respondents

who felt that it factored into how the CAO was treated by Council. The size of the municipality also had some impact on the CAO/Council relationship through several factors: smaller municipalities did not have the resources to hire a qualified CAO and often the CAO was more of an administrator/clerk position rather than the broader scoped CAO position; additionally some of the respondents commented on the power shift from CAO to the Mayor when the size of the municipality increased to a larger or midsized city. This is a particularly interesting dynamic as the main theme of the critical nature of the CAO/Council relationship is very much affected by the next major theme of role clarity as well as the minor themes of communication, governance, leadership, and gender. The two larger themes of CAO/Council relationship and role clarity are intersecting systems. I have developed a systems diagram that will outline this issue further in the study conclusions section.

The following paragraphs explore each of the major and minor themes mentioned above in greater detail. Quotes in the following paragraphs were drawn from across all of the narrative inquiry interviews and the most representative surveys. Quotes will be attributed to narrative inquiry participants (NI data) or survey data.

Council/CAO Relationship is Critical to the Success of the Organization

The most pronounced theme that emerged from the research was that the relationship between the CAO and Council was a critical one, and one that affected the entire organization. “It is critical to the success of a municipality - but also rare” (survey data). As this quote outlines, a large percentage of the respondents clearly indicated that the CAO/Council relationship was critical to the success of a municipal corporation. There was significant importance placed on trust and respect between the CAO and Council. If trust was lacking a vacuum occurred which led to issues that affected this relationship and filtered down throughout the organization.

Further, this relationship has a profound impact on the community and the stakeholders that it serves. “And if it’s a bad relationship between council and the CAO it spills out into the community and it spills out to all the other staff” (NI data). The assertion was that if there was respect and trust between the two entities then the relationship was more likely to be effective. “Good strong trusting respectful, relationships between CAO and Council impact the organization positively, everything runs smoother, focus remains on the decisions made for the good of all, no one person has a personal agenda” (survey data). Therefore, if local government is the government closest to the people, and very impactful in people’s lives, it would follow that this relationship is key to not only organizational achievement, but to successful communities as well. The two most prominent themes that appeared in the data through the qualitative analysis of data from both surveys and interviews, were the importance of the relationship between CAO and Council, and the issue of role clarity specifically that elected officials do not always understand that their role is one of governance, and not overseeing the operations. Role clarity, while it is a standalone theme, does contribute to the success or failure of the relationship, so while it is a separate topic it is the main contributor to the downfall of the CAO/Council relationship. These two themes are clearly systems with interdependencies.

When Council and CAO fully comprehend their specific roles as well as the nuances between the political and non-political aspects of local government, the data show that the CAO/Council relationship is deeper since it usually follows that trust and respect are present. A minor theme that contributes to role clarity is the lack of understanding by the public of what Council has the authority to undertake. “There’s a great lack of understanding of municipal government in every aspect from councillors to CAO and all the people in between, truly” (NI data). Most citizens are under the misapprehension that a Mayor or Council will be elected and

fix every issue, which includes operational concerns. The theme of role clarity was extremely strong and further, the data suggested that it is more often the politicians misunderstanding their role, purposefully or unintentionally than the CAO. “Clarification of roles is essential for the relationship to be effective and efficient. Respect can be challenging when dealing with those who do not know how or are unwilling to treat others with respect” (survey data). The data demonstrated the interconnecting themes of trust and respect frequently. Both characteristics are connected to how the relationship develops and is maintained between the CAO and Council and role clarity is the strongest contributor to the downfall of this relationship. “I think that need to maintain a majority of support among council members means that the CAO has to invest a significant amount of time in relationship-building with all of the individuals on council” (NI data). As this excerpt clearly indicates, the relationship between the two groups is the key factor to success. Many of the smaller themes are vital to the maintenance of this critical bond. “Sets the tone for the organization—if council openly distrusts the CAO, other managers and staff lose respect for the CAO as well, it should be one of mutual respect” (survey data).

Understanding Role Clarity is Critical to a Successful CAO/Council Relationship

The issue of role clarity was the other strongest theme and mainly it was that the politicians started their council terms not understanding that their role was one of governance and vision setting. “The relationship between the CAO and Council is based on how Council sees its role” (survey data). This quote clearly underscores that the politicians can interpret their role in a manner that is not conducive to a cohesive relationship. “And I think the number one issue with municipal government is mayors who think they’re CAOs and CAOs who think they’re mayors” (NI data). While this was the pattern, a few respondents noted that the CAO can misunderstand their role as well. The clear separation of the administration from the political

leaves a grey area that the CAO needs to traverse carefully. Additionally, the politician can deviate into the operational side of the organization, and they often do. This confusion, between the operational and the political, leads to the misunderstanding of role clarity which affects the trust and respect of the CAO/Council dynamics. While the CAO is the administrative head of the municipality, often as the principal advisor to Council they need to have a profound knowledge of the political aspects that affect the organization, these range from local, provincial, and federal to global. The CAO is often drawn into the political side and must balance this aspect of the role carefully. While the CAO needs to understand the political, they must remain apolitical; the data revealed that this is indeed a very difficult aspect of the job. “Role clarity, reciprocal respect goes a long way. Some CAOs use their knowledge to impress decisions on Council that are political in nature. CAOs should always be apolitical” (survey data). This quote underlines the unique balance facing the CAO. There is a constant misunderstanding from elected officials that they would somehow be involved in the operational side of the municipality. “CAO role clarification would greatly enhance the relationship between CAO's and Council's. It would be beneficial for both to have set parameters so CAO's would not overstep their authority and Council's would not undermine CAO's” (survey data). As this quote emphasizes, the issue of role clarity is extremely critical to a fruitful and successful relationship; however, the intersection of responsibilities that both CAO and politicians must traverse are challenging. Through the research there emerged several sub themes that affected role clarity, one of which is the code of conduct in place for municipal politicians.

Code of Conduct Affects the Issue of Role Clarity

A contributing theme to that of role clarity, specifically regarding politicians, was one of codes of conduct for municipal elected officials. “Repeated Code of Conduct violations and

workplace harassment complaints and findings against councillors which do not result in any change to behaviours” (survey data). This quote identifies the concern with the current legislation on code of conduct for elected officials. When role clarity is not understood, or more importantly purposefully ignored by the elected official, there is not a satisfactory retribution for those politicians who abuse their position. Currently there are only six provinces that have a legislative mandatory requirement for municipalities to enact a code of conduct for municipal council (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Prince Edward Island). The province of Nova Scotia has at this time announced that it will implement mandatory legislation. (CBC News, 2020). It is not only that the politicians misunderstand their role, but there is also an expectation from the stakeholders in general that the politicians are involved in the operational side of the municipality. Survey and narrative inquiry participants generally identified council training/orientation as being key to addressing the issue of role clarity.

Council Orientation Affects Role Clarity and the CAO/Council Relationship

Council orientation was a common sub theme of role clarity. The responses show that many of the elected officials entered local government with minimal knowledge of the scope or mandate of their position. This gap is so widespread that some provinces have put out training and literature to prepare those considering running for Council. “Encourage governance training for newly elected Councils” (survey data). As the data show, Council generally does not understand that as an elected official, their role is one of governance and vision setting. The challenge of implementing policies and procedures to steer the municipality in a strategic direction does not, for most politicians, allow them to feel as if they are accomplishing anything. Governance training is critical to addressing this shortfall; however, the concept of governance and vision setting should be one that politicians understand is their role before they even

consider running for office. The data show that fortunately, there seems to be a shift in the material being presented from various consultants and local government associations to better prepare individuals considering running for a local government position. Generally, the misconception is even embraced by various local government stakeholders.

The theme of role clarity factored significantly throughout the research. The data show that trust and respect can thrive in this critical relationship; however, the largest factor that contributes to its downfall is the issue of role clarity. “CAO can continue to try and explain the CAO role and the Council role, but if Council is not willing to understand or try, then nothing will help” (survey data). This occurs in both large and small municipalities. Council orientation both before and after the municipal election and how it is presented and received then becomes a very significant piece in the success of the organization. “Sometimes people get elected and they are unequipped to do the job and to engage in those systems the way the systems were designed to be engaged in” (survey data). Interestingly, the data indicated that it is not always that politicians do not understand their role; rather they choose not to understand their role. A minimal theme that factors into role clarity can be summed up by the following quote: “Role of Council and CAO must be clear. Council develop strategy and oversee, CAO to implement with management team. This improves relationship and respect” (survey data). As can be seen from these responses, evidently, role clarity impacts the CAO/Council relationship. This further underscores the fact that while role clarity is a separate theme from the importance of CAO/Council relationship, it has the greatest impact. Many respondents talked about ongoing training. They felt that politicians should have continual training: “Access to regular workshops—workshops with Mayor and CAO together, CAO and Council together—so each really understands the other’s roles. Examples of real-life conflicts and how they could have

been avoided” (survey data). A minor response was that the CAO and Council should undergo this training together.

Some of the respondents expressed concern about the title of the CEO under Ontario’s Municipal Act and felt this contributed to the lack of role clarity. In Ontario, under the legislation, the Mayor is called the Chief Executive Officer. This led to confusion by some Mayors as well as the public. “Remove the Mayor being described as the CEO” (survey data). This further enhanced the challenges with role clarity as some respondents felt that by addressing the head of council as the CEO this led to the perception that the Mayor was running the organization similar to a CEO of a corporation. A few responses in the survey highlighted this as a challenge; it contributed to the misunderstanding of the role between CAO and council, specifically by the Mayor or head of council.

The following quote underlines how role clarity can come about; it also highlights the growing gap between administration and politicians.

The way I see them is that they’re just your regular people from around the community, various types of backgrounds between work and everything, and what they understand is they understand the low-level operations. They understand snow clearing, they understand, you know, because they’re residents of the community. It’s the governance, the policy and the legislation and those things that as a layman you don’t really understand so they want to, you know, they want to talk about the stuff that they can understand better my guess is. (NI data)

This comment highlights the growing challenges in local government and further, the growing gap between the CAO and the politicians.

There is a Growing Professional Gap between Administration and Politicians

While this was only mentioned minimally it is important to note that some respondents felt there was a growing educational divide between the senior managers of local government and the politicians. “That we are hiring people with master’s degrees and PhDs and highly sophisticated technological using tools of display to council they are unfamiliar with is really growing dramatically and the sophistication of the people running for council is going in the opposite direction” (NI data). This addresses the issue of administration being full time professional employees and members of council filling volunteer positions. This is not an area that was addressed in this research; however with the growing divide it should be studied further. The data suggested that as local government continues to become more complex, the need to look at more qualified or different qualifications of politicians should be examined. Additionally, it would be beneficial if more research were done on changing the qualifications of local government officials to have specific professional qualifications that would help them address the complex matters facing local government today. This would be similar to some current requirements for sitting on various boards. The data also suggested that another challenge facing this critical relationship is the general lack of understanding of local government from the citizens that are represented.

A Lack of Understanding from Stakeholders affects the CAO/Council Relationship

The data revealed an overarching theme that the public does not understand the roles of mayor and council and CAO in local government. This leads to voter disengagement, as most citizens voting for politicians have certain expectations of who they voted for and more importantly what issues they expect their local representative to address. Public engagement and a greater understanding will assist role clarity; however, the subject of public engagement by

local government is challenging and has not always been successful. Further, both the provincial entities that are responsible for municipalities and the municipalities themselves need to do a better job preparing local government officials before they step into the role as well as educating the public. Once elected, administration of the municipalities and the internal orientation (often this is facilitated by a consultant) must lay the groundwork for a successful transition. “Providing 'big picture' information and orientation to Council is key, not just when they take office, but also when presenting an initiative or issue to Council for decision” (survey data). Orientation, both before politicians run for local office and once they have been successful seem to be the key to enhance Council/CAO relationships and specifically to help them understand what their role is in the local government system.

Fair and Equitable Communication is Essential to the CAO/Council Relationship

The data show that the flow of information between CAO and Council was critical to the success or failure of that relationship. Giving or withholding of information led to weakened trust between the two entities. “Being open and transparent. Giving council fulsome information to allow them to make good governance decisions” (survey data). There was a minimal theme of CAO filtering information that comes to Council also factored into the relationship. “My council has a good understanding of the line between them and administration. It is very rare that the line is crossed. I believe that clear and thorough communication is key in this success” (survey data). Communication leads back to the trust and respect that greatly factor into the larger theme of the CAO/Council relationship. All respondents that had successful CAO/council relationships mentioned effective two-way communications as a key factor to that success.

I sometimes feel the CAO presents filtered or skewed information to get council to make the decision he thinks is best. He does not trust council to get there on their own. He feels he knows best and has a paternalistic attitude. (Survey data)

As can be seen from this quote, the communication clearly affects the relationship and can be a contributing factor to the breakdown in trust between council and CAO. The communication can be a cause of the relationship breakdown or a result of the relationship breakdown. Two-way communication between the CAO and council is imperative and shows true leadership from both parties.

Leadership on Council and in the CAO Role is Becoming Increasingly Important

Leadership has become more important as we see the shift from a traditional CAO, who had been viewed mainly as an administrator to the expectations placed on a CAO in today's multifaceted and complex world of local government. "And I think we underestimate the impact of a leader in a city manager as to how you can really be the major driver as to how a city functions well and not so well" (NI data). The role has grown substantially and with it comes more expectations of the CAO in the ever increasing scope of the work, to be a true leader and show leadership abilities. Some respondents stated that they wished their CAOs would show more leadership and be more proactive rather than reactive. "Our new CAO is in a position where – and I am only speaking personally here – I'd like to see more of a leadership role from him since we have five new members of council". This speaks to the expectations between council and the CAO, and each organization will be slightly different in this regard.

Additionally, the respondents discussed the need of the CAO to have a leadership style that is fluid: "A wise CAO with the right leadership skills and capabilities may be able to adjust to the changed context of council if they're adaptable enough in terms of their leadership approach"

(NI data). This underlines the need for the CAO to continue balancing personalities and situations as they are one individual who is reporting to council as a whole. Council is made of various individuals all with different personalities and agendas. “But it took some effort and energy in that relationship with council, including the one-one-one to decipher what they truly wanted under city management” (NI data). Further, another respondent stated, “Highly successful leaders I think have the ability to adjust their leadership style depending on context” (N. I. data).

“Beyond legislation and professional designation, the CAO must have leadership qualities, demonstrate integrity, respect and empowerment. Above all build trust at all levels” (survey data). Experience in local government was another theme that came up in the response data.

CAO Experience in Local Government is more critical than a Specific Designation

Generally, the data show that the emotional intelligence and local government experience of the CAO was more important than having a specific city manager designation. “I don't think a professional designation equates to a good CAO” (NI data). The majority of CAOs come through the ranks from other disciplines so there is not a specific direct trajectory to the city manager position. Responses were somewhat mixed on the need for a particular designation of the CAO.

One participant stated,

I have four years’ experience as an elected official. As the mayor of a Town (6,500/\$13M budget) my interaction with the CAO is on a daily basis. For the first three years I was fortunate to have a very competent, highly motivated and lifelong learner as my CAO. When they left for a new position, the CAO hired although had 20 years’ experience in Municipal government, did not have the necessary skill set to “keep all the

balls in the air". CAO should be a specific designation with requisite education. (Survey data)

Although this was more of a minor theme, the research showed that having an understanding and experience working in local government benefited the CAO. "Respect and relationship really are independent of designation. Some of the best CAO/leaders I have encountered are not 'papered' in the field but rely on a wealth of experience/knowledge gained elsewhere and interpersonal acumen" (Survey data). While a few respondents stated that they felt having the CAO enshrined in legislation was some protection for the position, most replied that legislation was not a deterrent for how the relationship prospered or deteriorated. An underlying theme is present in the following quote:

The relationship between Council and the CAO is a precarious one. There needs to be trust and respect, and just having the need for a CAO mandated in legislation is not enough. A professional designation should garner the respect of Council, but not enough emphasis is placed on leadership vs knowledge. It is the leadership aspect to the CAO that will allow for a respectful and trustful relationship. (Survey data).

While some of the respondents stated that a formal designation would be beneficial, the majority declared that the greater emphasis should be placed on the CAO's ability to lead and effectively run an organization. "We need to move more away from technical expertise and knowing legal by-laws and knowing the MGA etc. We need to get into relationships, we need to get into emotional intelligence rather than IQ" (NI data). This respondent was alluding to the fact that traditionally CAOs rise to their positions from specific disciplines including finance, engineering, planning, etc. This would mean they would fall back to what they know; the danger of this is as a CAO you need to have the ability to be a strategic thinker and some of the

disciplines mentioned tend to have a narrower, more detailed technical focus. The only method for a CAO to understand their role is to have a proper education on the workings of municipal government. “You cannot just ‘throw’ someone into the position of CAO and expect to have a good working environment or a productive Municipality and Council” (Survey data). This theme also factored into the size of the municipality and how they can draw and retain talent.

The Size of Municipality has an Impact on the CAO/Council Relationship

Generally, the issues facing the CAO and Council did not vary depending on the size of the municipality. One minor theme emerged that smaller municipalities did not have the resources to hire a qualified, well rounded CAO, and one with experience.

Gov't must always take into consideration that small rural communities do not have the budget to hire the highly qualified personnel as per legislation ... totally wrong... need to develop different levels and permit councillors to take on a more management role .. it's so wrong to have an administrator running the small rural village... not effective!”

(Survey data)

This quote lays out the challenges facing smaller municipalities: if they cannot attract a qualified CAO then their organization and in turn their community suffers. Often, these small municipalities do not have the funds to hire a professional recruiter, so they do the hiring themselves. The data showed that this is often detrimental as members of council may have self-serving agendas and may not hire the CAO that is best for the organization, but rather may hire the CAO that is going to further their political agenda. Additionally, in a smaller municipality the CAO is not leading or directing; rather they are performing necessary work. The depth of staff is not there, and the CAO is the majority of the workforce. “The administrator is not working as a CAO which I am starting to see could work better than the system we have” (Survey data).

Larger municipalities with more resources at their disposal conventionally would employ recruiting firms to hire their CAOs as opposed to doing the hiring themselves. “I feel the relationship is only as strong as the professionalism of its members. In smaller communities I think it is difficult to fulfill the roles with strong, professional representation” (Survey data). Conversely, the following quote tells a different story: “A large municipality does not necessarily mean a higher quality CAO” (NI data). Additionally, a minor theme that emerged was that in a larger municipality the power shifted from the CAO to the Mayor.

I found the power dynamic, between mayors and CAOs it changes in relation to the size of the community in that in smaller communities CAOs tend to have more power and in larger communities mayors tend to have more power, and the break point is about 200,000 or 250,000 and the power starts to go more in the direction of the mayor. (NI data)

Interestingly, this quote factors into the general misunderstanding that the public has of who does what. Similar to the differences in large versus small municipalities, the gender of the CAO was a minimal theme; however, it was mentioned briefly.

Gender Factors Minimally into the CAO/Council Relationship

While gender was a minimal theme, the following topic appeared in a few responses. “Male CAO's generally obtain more respect and pay than female CAO's” (Survey data). Furthermore, some of the respondents felt that smaller municipalities were more likely to have female CAOs who were treated more as a clerk/administrator than a more professional CAO role as their male counterparts. Conversely, the following quote from the survey data shows that sometimes the female CAOs were more effective in certain situations. “The SAO (Senior Administrative Officer) is open minded and decisive. She's also a woman, maybe this makes a

difference” (Survey data). Although a minimal theme, gender was mentioned by a few of the respondents. Additionally, it was felt that occasionally having a woman in the role could more positively affect the relationship between CAO and council.

How Council Manages Expectations Affect the CAO/Council Relationship

The research showed that understanding of expectations contributed to greater trust and respect between the CAO and council. These expectations should be laid out as early as the hiring process and should continue throughout the relationship and be updated frequently. Clear expectations between the two led to greater trust, understanding and respect. This also leads to a stronger organizational structure. “But it took some effort and energy in that relationship with council, including the one-on-one to decipher what they truly wanted under city management” (NI data). The relationship between council and CAO is the example that the rest of the organization patterns themselves after. Often it is referred to as tone at the top. “So I think the best cities that are run are ones where there’s confidence in the CAO, the city manager, and that person’s role with council is a solid one” (NI data).

The Current Governance Structure is the Only Way it could Work

Overall, the research found that many responders felt like this was the only type of governance system that would be effective. There were some limitations to the legislation; for example, “But as you know, we can’t get together for a sort of shirtsleeve session that’s a BS kind of session and have a quorum of councillors without it being a public meeting” (NI data). This quote refers to the legislative restrictions that if a quorum of Council is together, it is considered a public meeting. Effectively, this does not give the opportunity like workshops and strategic retreats to discuss strategic initiatives and to set vision in an informal manner. Most council meetings are recorded and live streamed. This shows accountability and transparency as

it is imperative that the public see council wrestling with the difficult decisions; however, this does not give opportunity for council and senior management to have strategic discussions. The legislation varies from province to province but has gradually become stricter over the past 10 to 15 years, in part to ensure accountability in local government. Further, giving council and the CAO the opportunity to brainstorm in a more relaxed setting allows for bonding, which creates a more open and trusting relationship. The current legislation hampers this. Some of the responses emphasized the importance of the relationship between the mayor and the CAO; this is often highlighted as the two constantly interact more so than other members of Council. As the political leader and the administrative leader there are many occasions when the two positions work closely together. The data mentioned that if this relationship is too insular then it affects the organization.

I do like the fact that the city manager governance is reporting directly to Council as a whole and not as simply the mayor because I think that's problematic as well if you had a real heavy, heavy relation or the heavy part of it to be just to the mayor not really being employee of all of the Council I think is problematic. (NI data)

This quote lays out what can go wrong with the dynamics if the CAO and mayor relationship is over familiar. This links back to communication: if members of Council feel that they are not receiving the same information as the mayor, this can start to erode the trust which we have seen through the data is a critical piece of the CAO Council relationship. There are some smaller municipalities that have had issues with CAOs that have decided to move forward without a CAO; in effect the Mayor is effectively acting in that role.

No CAO Position is a Small but Growing Trend

A minimal theme through the data showed a few municipalities choosing to operate their municipalities without a CAO or city manager. These were a few of the smaller municipalities who had unpleasant experiences with CAOs or could not find the right fit of CAO for their municipality. Their plan was to have the mayor act as the senior administrator. This would effectively blur the lines of political and administration and certainly role clarity in this situation would definitely be an issue.

We are in process of recruiting a new CAO. The hiring committee (of Council) asked senior management if we need a CAO, since nearby municipalities have chosen not to have one. I can't believe the question was entertained at all. They do not have a strong Deputy Clerk and no Clerk. (Survey data)

As only a few provinces have the CAO enshrined in legislation it is not mandated for municipalities to have a CAO under legislation.

Study Conclusions

The CAO/Council relationship is critical to the success of the organization. The research results and the literature clearly support the major theme of the importance of the CAO/council relationship, and further that this unique affiliation is critical to the ongoing success of the organization. This was the strongest response in the both the survey and narrative interviews. Moreover, the literature supports the distinctiveness of the relationship as well as the importance of this association in the larger scheme of local government. When discussing the unique role of the CAO, Siegel (2015a) contended, “It is clear that the Mayor and Councillors are in a supervisor position with regard to the CAO” (p. 43), and he further expanded, “How does one go about leading a group to whom one should be accountable?” (p. 43). Herein lies the

crux of the problem. If the CAO is the principal advisor to council and yet they are in a subordinate position, the relationship between these two bodies is critical and can be fraught with challenges. Here, both the literature and the data show the uniformity of this concept.

Role clarity plays an integral role in the success of the CAO/Council relationship.

Throughout this research I viewed the data through a systems lens and developed a local government systems model (Figure 4). This model shows the interesting manner in which role clarity, a contributing factor to the deterioration of the CAO/council relationship, has its own underlying sub contributors. Cuff (2019) stated:

Administrators represent their profession whether it be finance, general management engineering, community/leisure services, information technology, human resources, legislative services. These are professional callings and come with designations that certify the person holding the position has been duly recognized by their profession.

Political leaders come from all walks of life and their election does not rest on any particular occupation or profession; some have significant education, while others may not have finished high school; some are already well-known for considerable success in their profession or business life; whereas others are over 18 and on their way (to some occupation or profession). (p. 95)

What Cuff does here is lay bare the necessity for the separation of political and administrative roles.

As a researcher this discovery was pivotal and moving forward it will help enhance local government studies and further help expand the theory surrounding local government. Both the survey and narrative inquiry responses clearly stated that role clarity was critical to building the

trust and respect between these two entities. My systems model (Figure 4) clearly shows how these themes interact.

Leadership is becoming increasingly important in local government. While leadership is important in every aspect of life and specifically has been touted in organizations, local government was not quick to take this up until recently.

Council needs a lot of leadership and direction. Most members do not realize it is their role to steer the direction of the municipality, to debate and create vision, and to create a plan and pathway to get there. Most feel like it is up to the CAO to do this. Admin is not the leader. Admin can assist and manage plans. Admin can suggest ideas, but it is Council that decides it. (Survey data)

Also, if leadership was mentioned, it was done so with respect more to the administrators rather than the politicians. This needs to be corrected; for strong local government organizations to thrive, leadership needs to be present on both political and administrative fronts. As the literature stated, both McIntosh (2009) and Long (2019) discussed the need for the ability of the CAO to change. McIntosh discussed situational leadership, while Long used the terminology of shapeshifting. In both instances they were discussing the CAO. It is assumed through both the data and the literature that leadership applies to the CAO; however, the leadership capacities of the politicians need to be addressed. As Cuff (2019) alluded, “An effective leader is an accountable leader. They have no problem speaking to the public about the choices that need to be made and their consequences” (p. 76). While this study was addressing how to increase the trust and respect of the CAO/council relationship, leadership is critical from both the political and administrative sides.

Summary

The various themes that run through the data as well as the literature are in close alignment. They clearly emphasize the need for more significant research of the CAO/Council relationship in the public sector. “I think cities just have to be very careful about who they’re hiring into these roles” (NI data). Local government has been reviewed extensively; however, the specific relationship between the municipal council and their only employee has not been thoroughly researched. The data show very specific strong themes that underline the critical nature of this partnership. By using a systems thinking approach I have developed the following model to address both the findings and the conclusions:

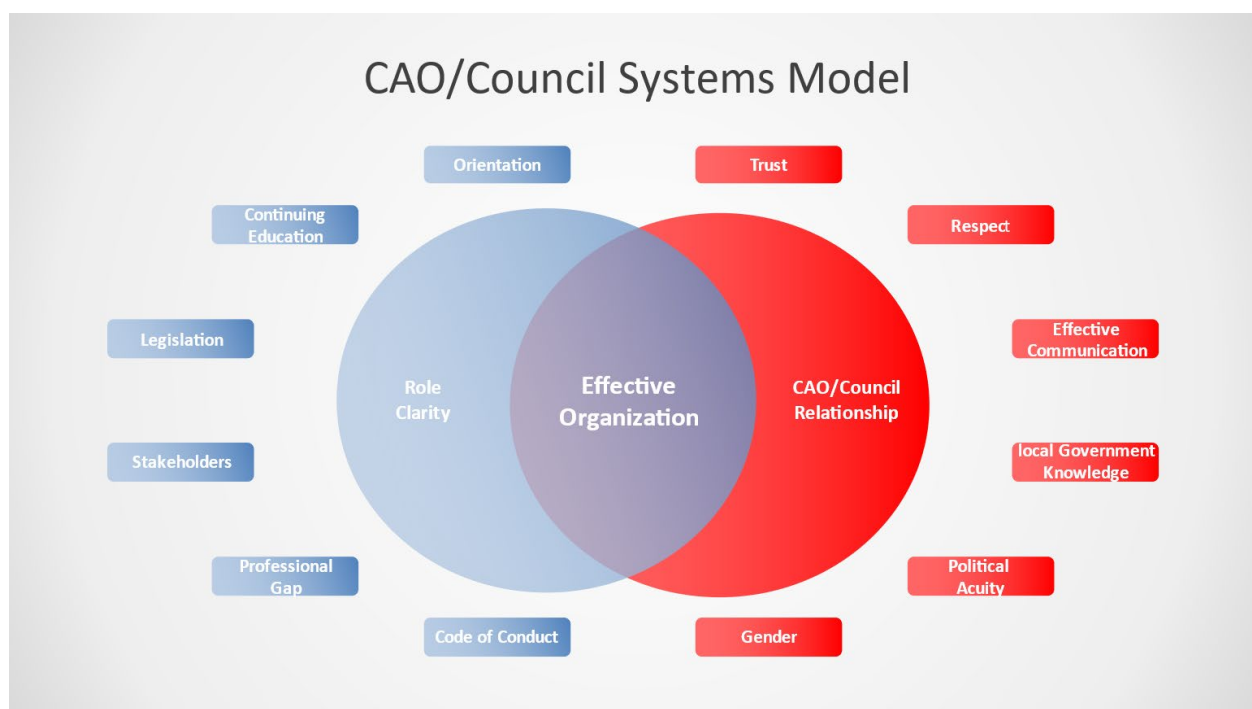


Figure 4: CAO/Council Systems Diagram

This relationship between the CAO and their municipal council is one of complexity. By applying systems thinking and using the data responses I developed the above model. The model lays out the unique composition of the data. There are many factors that affect the CAO/council

relationship; however, role clarity is the greatest contributor to the downfall of this pivotal relationship. Furthermore, role clarity has underlying contributors that cause it to disintegrate. One of the critical findings of this research is the importance of recognizing the intersections of these two contributing factors.

While many respondents understood that role clarity was a contributor to the downfall of the CAO/council relationship, I believe this study and this systems model emphasize how these two systems interact.

Scope and Limitation of the Study

Overall, the research response was more robust than I had expected. While I understand that this relationship between the CAO and municipal council is a critical one in local government studies, I was still astonished at the interest. As I wanted this to be a Canada-wide study, having *Municipal World* as my partner was an essential piece of the success of my project as I was able to reach so many respondents. All provinces in the country, as well as two of the territories were represented. Approximately 60% of the respondents were administrative, 27% politicians, and the remaining were “other” suggesting interested citizens, observers, or consultants. Having the survey distributed broadly across the country led to a diverse group to select for my narrative inquiry interviews. My current plan is to continue interviewing those who would like to further discuss this subject for my own interests once this thesis has been completed and defended. As the scope of my study on local government was very focused on enhancing the trust and respect of the CAO/council relationship, other areas of study arose.

One area of interest was that the narrative inquiry was extremely helpful in understanding the need for personal interviews. While the survey was beneficial as it allowed me to reach a broad range of participants, the narrative interviews helped to focus the responses.

Understanding the critical nature of the CAO/council relationship hinges very much on the personalities involved. Narrative inquiry gave the individual respondents the opportunity to tell their stories. This assisted me to a greater understanding of the topics and variations these respondents felt were contributing to the breakdown in the relationship. While I expected different viewpoints from the administration versus the politicians the responses were informative and gave me the opportunity to view the situation from a political lens. A benefit to this research is that it gave me a greater understanding of the various perspectives. I am confident that by undertaking this area of study it will contribute to the overall literature. As a by-product of this project I am confident that the greater comprehension I have gained will enhance my capabilities in the role of CAO.

Chapter 5: Inquiry Implications

Study Recommendations

As my thesis questions concentrated on the CAO/council relationship and the question specifically was, “How do we enhance the trust and respect of the CAO/council relationship?” I chose a very broad-based research topic. This is not an area specific issue, but rather a larger issue facing local government organizations across the country. Therefore, it needed to be studied in an extensive manner. The issue of role clarity between administration and politicians is the largest challenge facing the municipal sector and there is not an area of any province that has not been affected, primarily negatively, by this issue. The following are my recommendations to enhance this critical relationship which will lead to better organizations, thus stronger communities, healthier provinces, and an enhanced county.

The following specific recommendations will be explored in the following paragraphs.

- CAO Position Legislated
- Standard CAO Designation
- Mandatory Code of Conduct for all Elected Officials
- Governance Training for Elected Officials
- Clarify the Legislation on Both the CAO and the Councils Role

Have the CAO Role Enacted into Legislation in All of the Provinces

As both the literature and the results of the data show how important the CAO/council relationship is to the organization then it is imperative that all provinces have a legislative requirement for the position of the Chief Administrative Officer. This will also address a few areas that this research has uncovered. Firstly, the small but growing trend of some municipalities moving forward without a CAO position is becoming a concern as the following

statement from the survey data shows: “We are in process of recruiting a new CAO. The hiring committee (of Council) asked senior management if we need a CAO, since nearby municipalities have chosen not to have one” (Survey data). If municipalities are continuing to have a city manager structure in place, then it should be consistent. Secondly, having the CAO role enshrined in legislation would bring more credence to the position; it would be treated as a true profession. “The position is still unknown for those who are not in the realm of municipal affairs. The general public doesn’t know what the responsibilities of a municipal administer are, compared to other positions inside the municipality or in other sectors” (Lang, 2021, p. 6). As the author has alluded to in his very recent article, the scope and depth of the position of CAO is not understood by the public. By having a designation in place this would further solidify the position of CAO or City Manager as legitimate. Additionally, it may possibly garner more respect from the politicians, which could alleviate some of the issues of role clarity.

There will be challenges facing the implementation of this recommendation in that each province passes its own legislation. Municipalities are a responsibility of the province; therefore, it will be difficult to have all provinces in alignment. It will further depend on who is in power in each province and what their mandate is. I would point out however, that the amount of time, resources, and anguish this issue has caused, putting this into legislation is a necessity. As Lang (2021) stated,

The role and responsibilities of the CAO have forced the administrator to become very versatile in how they work. The expectations of the population regarding service delivery has increased and this puts pressure on the administration to perform more, often with fewer resources (i.e., human and financial). (p. 6)

Some provinces have the position of clerk, the position of treasurer, and the position of chief building official in the legislation. It seems therefore to be more important to have one bureaucrat who is leading the operation as a necessity. This research could be undertaken through a possible research grant and coordinated with a cross country municipal organization such as CAMA (Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators) or their political counterpart FCM (Federation of Canadian Municipalities). To start, the researcher would need to study the provinces that do have this legislation in place to ascertain its validity and effectiveness.

Standard CAO Designation

While one or two comments appeared in the data requiring that a CAO designation would be appropriate, some respondents felt that this would not benefit local government. My proposal is that a standard CAO designation should be implemented across the country. There are several reasons for this: the CAO profession is not considered a true profession; CAOs are not recognized or appreciated as true specialists in their field.

Concerns from the research identified that the public does not understand the role of the CAO, and neither do the politicians. The concept of role clarity factored greatly in the research and was the largest contributor to the breakdown in the relationship. CAOs have a unique role and if a specific designation were put in place, it could address these shortfalls. As Siegel (2015a) asserted, “The contemporary municipal chief administrative officer must remain separate from electoral politics, but operationally oriented, politically sensitive, and definitely involved in the politics of governing society” (p. 51). Siegel has highlighted the need for a CAO designation; leading an organization a CAO will need all the traditional management and leadership skills; however, they will have to understand local government and such nuances

resembling political acuity. To work in such a complex environment the CAO must understand the balance needed to thrive in this environment.

While the current trend of administrators in local government is that they are receiving degrees in public administration, I would go one step further and state that they should finish a standard CAO designation in addition. Further, the CAO designation must have some practical aspects to it; before becoming a CAO, the participant should have some local government experience. Ontario's AMCTO (Association of Municipal, Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario) implemented the CMO (Certified Municipal Officer) in which eight areas of experience need to be proven. While somewhat effective, the organization left it open to any local government employee, so it became a watered-down version of a CAO designation. Anyone who had three years in a municipal setting could apply and pass. This led to administrators being hired as CAOs from municipalities that believed they had the qualifications through the CMO designation but were lacking. Further, by making a CAO designation standard it will ensure that no matter the size of the municipality all CAOs will be equally qualified. This is important as the municipal structure is the same no matter the size of the organization. Moreover, having a specific designation would assist those individuals rising to the position from other disciplines such as engineering or finance. It was felt that too often these professionals tend to fall back on the area that they have been trained in. By standardizing a CAO designation if one came from a different discipline, they would learn the fine distinction of becoming a CAO and the need for broad strategic thinking, political acuity, and other CAO traits that are necessary to make the transition.

Further study is needed in this area to test current City Manager designations, such as the IMCA (International City/County Managers Association) which is based in the United States but

has professional development systems in place that may be worthwhile to review. Additionally, the province of Saskatchewan has a certification for rural administrators. These and other templates can be used to research the value of a specific CAO designation.

Mandatory Code of Conduct for all Provinces

Code of conduct legislation in its current form does not seem to be effective. “The amendments and regulations came as a result of advocacy by the Association of Manitoba Municipalities, seeking more comprehensive and effective processes to address harassment and bullying at the council level” (Stefaniuk, 2020, para. 2). This quote is referring to the implementation of legislation in Manitoba that requires every municipality to implement a code of conduct. This was based on recommendations from the Association of Manitoba Municipalities to address bullying and harassment of staff from members of council. The province of Manitoba went one step further and required mandatory training on respectful conduct.

Anecdotally, there are many instances where a CAO was forced out of their position due to lack of code of conduct or an ineffective code of conduct. McIntosh (2009) explored the complex issue of attrition among CAOs as they often tend to leave their employment opportunities not through firing, but usually when a situation is too unbearable. We must remember that the code of conduct for municipal officials, like other pieces of legislation, needs to be tested to improve. Currently, in Ontario, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) is conducting a review of the municipal councillor code of conduct. “AMO recognizes that enforcing behavioural standards for council members can be a challenging matter for many members to find consensus on. However, stronger standards and compliance are in the public interest” (AMO, 2021, para. 2). This explains the challenge; having members of council sanction

each other can lead to a fractured relationship or worse, a situation where code of conduct complaints are not addressed or worse, only marginally addressed. This leaves the staff members affected feeling discouraged and disrespected. If it happens to be the CAO who is putting forward the complaint, then the tenuous relationship between council and CAO becomes further strained. We know from the research how important this relationship is to the organization and the community; if there is not an avenue for lodging complaints it erodes the overall municipal structure. Further, the ability under most of the current code of conduct legislation for council members to sanction each other should be addressed. A third party or integrity commissioner (this is currently outlined in Ontario legislation) could be tasked with this. However, if we look at the Ontario system, the integrity commissioner investigates and gives his/her recommendations to the municipal council. The municipal council still must sanction one of their colleagues on council. Often, they are very reluctant to sanction one of their own. When this does happen it further overwhelms the delicate balance at the council table.

This area will need to be addressed in each province and those provinces that have had mandatory codes of conduct in place should be reviewed to determine validity. Further research will be needed and it should be extensive as each province has a slightly different version of the legislation. Again, coordinating this through a Canada wide organization may be beneficial.

Governance Training for Elected Officials

Current council orientation is not mandated, and each jurisdiction does their own iteration. Most provinces have some type of council orientation; however, given the nature and complexity of governing a municipality, governance training should be included.

While this study only covered the nature of the CAO/council relationship, there is a need to further study both the terms of council (how long they can consecutively run for office;

currently there is no limit and long service awards are embraced) and changing the requirements of those running for office. As Hume (2016) contended,

The belief that politics should not be a career was surprisingly widespread across the interviews for the book. That was an important leadership lesson – get in, work hard, make your contribution, leave your community better off than when you started, then get out. (p. 164)

There are currently no requirements for politicians to run for council. This is extremely concerning when you consider that they oversee the governing of a multimillion-dollar corporation. A board member of a large corporation would not be allowed to sit on a board without credentials. This speaks to reviewing the current requirements needed to run for municipal council. They should be expanded; however, that is for a further analysis. The City of Guelph, for example, has recently started to investigate reducing the number of council members and making them permanent members rather than part-time. It is felt that the increasing complexity of local government is contributing to a heavier workload for elected officials.

Clarify the Legislation on Both the Council and CAO Roles

The legislation surrounding both the CAO's and council's roles need to be clarified. For example, in Alberta's Municipal Government Act it refers to the Mayor or Reeve as the Chief Elected Official, whereas in Ontario, the Mayor or Reeve is referred to as the Chief Executive Officer, this has caused many issues in Ontario as it plays into role clarity. The Mayor, as well as other stakeholders, think they are like a CEO of a company. This legislation needs to be clarified. This warrants a separate study to compare and contrast the various legislative pieces across the country to see what is working effectively and what could be improved.

These misinterpretations could be addressed by more robust elected official training before, during, and after elections. The need for stakeholders' understanding of local government and specifically role clarity is needed to be further understood and studied as well.

Organizational Implications

By using a systems thinking approach I was able to develop my own model from the research (Figure 4). This model shows the complexity of the local government and the cause and effect of role clarity on the CAO/council relationship. As Stroh (2015) stated, "The other potential obstacle to moving forward is people's underlying intentions" (p. 134). This links back to Senge's (2006) "mental models". To move forward we must look at the entire local government system. "Systems thinking is equally important to working with mental models effectively. Contemporary research shows that most of our mental models are very often systematically flawed" (Senge, 2006, p. 189). Cuff (2014), who has written and consulted extensively on local government asserted, "The key flaw in how municipal councils function, in my opinion, lays quite clearly in the method of governance" (p. 1). Leadership is critical in both the political and administrative arenas. If we are to ensure that our local governments are sustainable, forward thinking organizations we need leadership. This was a clear theory that came through from the data and literature. As Kouzes and Posner (2010) contended, "Leaders are custodians of the future" (p. 46). By working together as joint leaders, the political and administrative arms of municipalities can prepare our local government organizations for the future. As Long (2019) asserted in his dissertation,

Democracy at the local level is at stake given that the efficient and effective delivery of collective local services is a pillar to the operation of communities throughout North

America, if not the world. Understanding what causes these relationships to fail or prosper will help tremendously to right the ship of local state. (p. 52)

As Long has highlighted, gaining a greater understanding of these relationships and what causes them to thrive, or fail will be imperative. The next step will be advising the local government community of my research results.

Since this research is very broadly based, I will work with *Municipal World* and CAMA to share my recommendations. Each province has many iterations of municipal associations, traditionally separated into administrative and political. Most provinces further separate the political associations into urban and rural. This, I believe creates a further divide between rural and urban municipalities. However, that is for a later study. I will work with the larger Canadian wide organization of CAMA to push out to their members the recommendations that have come out of my research. By broadly publicizing this in my partner organization *Municipal World*, these results will become well known. I will have to work with the various organizations to push forward the recommendations. Once these recommendations have been introduced to the various associations, it is through their processes that we can forward the recommendations to the province, and as changes will be needed in legislation, these associations have the mechanisms to move forward the agenda.

For the next steps I have broken it down as follows:

- CAO position legislated
 - Work with both political and administrative associations in each province that does not currently have this in place. OMAA (Ontario Municipal Administrators Association) has completed quite a bit of groundwork on this already.

- Associations will have to forward this to the province to enact – this will be time consuming but worthwhile.
- Standard CAO designation
 - Work with administrative associations across the country. First, approach CAMA as it is a Canada-wide administrative organization, then reach out to the provincial entities. Use the CMO (Certified Municipal Officer) template as it was somewhat effective to build off.
- Mandatory code of conduct for all elected officials
 - Follow the model of Manitoba. The Association of Municipal Administrators put forward a very comprehensive study and it was enacted into legislation. The Manitoba example also includes mandatory training which is key to success.
 - Do a comprehensive review of the provinces that have mandatory codes of conduct in legislation.
- Governance training for Elected officials
 - Many of the political associations have set training courses for newly elected and returning council members. We would have to help them see the benefit of governance training. Additionally, there are quite a few well know municipal consultants who have already taken up this mantle.
- Clarify the legislation on both the CAO's and the council's roles
 - This is a companion piece to having the CAO position legislated. This will take considerable time, more so in some provinces than others. In the meantime, clarification of the legislation could simply mean working with the provincial

ministries that handle municipal affairs and putting out briefings that explain the legislation.

Across the country many of the provincial associations, both political and administrative, have done much work in the area of staff/council relationships and we would be unwise not to build upon that work. I will have to build and implement a plan to coordinate all these studies and surveys into categories so that we are not duplicating work. There is so much to be done to enhance local government that we need to use previous studies to move ourselves forward.

Finally, I was very thankful for the 10 participants that took time to engage in the narrative interview process. They took time out of their busy schedules and were open and engaging in their responses. It was encouraging for me to see once again how invested these individuals are about their sector, both administrative and political. I will personally follow up with an executive summary of my results and recommendations.

Implications for Future Inquiry

Throughout this study it was clear that those working in the local government sector, whether politicians or administrators are generally very passionate about serving the public. This is not an easy role for either as we work in an environment that must always be accountable and transparent. With the increased scrutiny of social media, it has become more challenging to find qualified staff and politicians that are brave enough to enter this realm. As Hume (2016) stated, “Perhaps even more alarming, many good women and men will never expose themselves to this type of public flogging and decline to ever run for office” (p. 8). In this quote Hume is alluding to the fact that social media and our 24-hour news cycle have made individuals reluctant to run for office. This is also true for municipal staff. As Lang (2021) stated, “Unfortunately, the future

is looking bleak for some municipalities that are searching for people to fill positions such as the CAO” (p. 5).

The overwhelming response to the survey on the CAO/council relationship made it clear that there is a great desire for clarity and understanding of this, I would say most pressing issue, in local government. This research project clearly indicated the need for more study on local government. I believe that training of members of council before they consider running in a local election would be extremely beneficial. Many local government politicians are surprised at the scope and depth they are asked to oversee and make decisions on. Moreover, many elected officials are surprised at the amount of time they need to invest in their role.

Working with my partner *Municipal World* I will publishing two upcoming articles on my findings and recommendations. *Municipal World* has a very broad reach and has transitioned into the world of digital online news and podcasts to keep up with the changing times. I was extremely fortunate to have such a partner, as my research was a very broad, Canada-wide study. This is the area that *Municipal World* serves. One of the main topics covered by this publication extensively has been the one of staff/council interactions. As stated on their website, “A highly sought after and trusted vehicle for gaining critical exposure for brands, products, and services in the municipal marketplace, Municipal World connects you with our national audience across print, digital, and social media every day” (*Municipal World*, 2021, para. 1). Early on in my research, I reached out to CAMA (Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators), which is in essence the national, professional affiliation for CAOs or City Managers. However, they had some challenges partnering due to prior engagements. My intent is to share my results with the CAMA board in the form of an executive summary once my defense has been completed.

While there has been extensive literature on municipal council and municipal governance as well as the CAO or City Manager role individually, the literature on the interaction and effectiveness between the two has not been studied extensively. Lang (2021) did his dissertation on the CAO/Mayor dyad; however, this study has its limits as the CAO, under the current legislation works for council as a whole. As Siegel (2015a) asserted, “It is an important principle of municipal government that all public servants work for council as a whole; they do not work for the mayor; they do not work for committee chairs; they do not work for individual councillors” (p. 19). I am hopeful that this thesis will add to the literature and encourage more research on this critical area.

Currently I am contemplating further research in the area of local government. I would need to discover which areas would benefit the most from further study. One of my areas of interest is role clarity, specifically having municipal councils understand the governance nature of their roles. Additionally, I would like to explore the area of part-time versus full-time council as well as reviewing the terms of council including how many terms an individual can run. Regarding the part-time versus full time council, this would address the challenges that came up in the data regarding the growing gap of professionalism between municipal council and their administrative staff.

Thesis Summary

“There are approximately 4,000 local governments across Canada. Not all function at the level they should” (Cuff, 2014, p. 27). I wanted this quote to be the final thought on my research as it sums up the critical nature of this issue. Understanding that the CAO/council dynamic is one made up of individuals means that we need to tailor each situation. McIntosh (2009) discussed situational leadership for the CAO position. I would expand that to say that members of council

need to apply this method as well. By understanding this and further understanding that the entire aspect of local government is a system that needs to be viewed as whole will create greater understanding. Understanding will lead to change. I had certain expectations when undertaking this thesis on local government; however, I was astonished by the vigorous response to my survey and the very passionate narrative inquiry interviews. Over 400 respondents to the survey indicated that they want to engage further in dialogue about this matter.

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Appendix A

Understanding the CAO-Council relationship: Is this the key to a healthy, sustainable organization?

by Ann Mitchell
in Governance, Leadership



There have been some recent articles and research on the Mayor-Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) relationship and how that dynamic affects the success or failure of the municipal organization. Serving in the public sector at the local government level gives insight into the unique nature of this relationship and possible areas to be further researched and examined.

Foundation for New Research Project

Undertaking a Masters in Leadership through Royal Roads University provided a greater understanding of the importance of local government. Initially my thesis question was, “How can we fix local government so that we do not continually lose good people?” This, of course, is too broad of a subject. Through background interviews with politicians and senior managers in local government it reinforced the concept that relationships are the foundation of successful organizations no matter which sector you work in. In the municipal context more specifically, it is the unique relationship between a municipal council and their one employee – the CAO – that is the issue.

So, while the nature of political versus administrative roles has been extensively researched, the focus of this project will be to examine the crux of the CAO-Council relationship. Specifically, the goal of this research is to answer the question: “How can we enhance the trust and collaboration between politicians and administrators in local government?” The focus will be on the CAO-Council dynamic – what sustains and what breaks down that relationship.

Unique Role of the Municipal CAO

If we compare a CAO in the municipal public sector to a CEO in a private company, it is quite a different kettle of fish. A CEO has very clear direction from their board. A CAO must interpret what council is directing and also not directing. As observed by David Siegel in *Leaders in the shadows: The leadership qualities of chief administrative officers*, “The CAO must work for a diverse group of people who sometimes have strong public disagreements with one another. Yet the CAO must take direction from this fractured group and pass that on to municipal staff.”

The CAO must have the ability to speak to Council – a skill that becomes honed with years of working with various councils, committees, and boards. In order to effectively work with a multitude of stakeholders, a CAO must have extensive political acuity, tact, and diplomacy. And although the CAO is considered a bureaucrat or administrator, the position often morphs in and out of the political realm.

Many studies contend that CAOs in the public sector are shapeshifters who have the ability, under the theory of situational leadership, to adapt and pivot quite often. As is frequently stated, CAOs lead up to council as their principal advisor, down to staff, and out to the community. There are many occasions when these administrators work with stakeholder groups – such as police boards – that they have no direct authority over, but where influence must be used. For this to be successful, they need to be trusted and productive public servants. This takes time and patience.

Council-CAO Relationship: The Great Balancing Act

Patterns of behaviour do tend to emerge between council and their one employee. Often, councils can be seen controlling their CAOs or, alternatively, CAOs dictating to their councils. The relationship only works well, however, when there is a delicate balance and trust from both parties. As council’s principal advisor, the CAO should be holding council accountable to their policies and procedures, and bringing forward well-balanced, unbiased information that allows the politicians to make informed decisions.

Council, through the CAO, needs to hold the operations accountable through the budgeting process. This balance is very difficult to achieve and even harder to maintain. However, when it is successful the rewards are immense. Trust is such a key factor to this or any successful relationship; however, each party interprets trust and respect differently. Further, role clarity plays a very important piece of this puzzle.

Council/staff roles are often discussed and researched; and the issue of role clarity comes up often in this work. This area is extremely important. Nevertheless, many members of council and staff continue to misunderstand (purposely or not) what their role truly is.

Legislation plays a different role into this dynamic. Each province has a different governing legislation; some have enshrined the role of CAO right into their municipal act, and some have not. If the role of CAO were a professional designation, would this enhance the professional respect for the position? There are many areas that contribute to the success of this relationship.

Research Methodology

The research will concentrate on the specific nature of the CAO-Council relationship and the effect that has on municipal organizations. Municipal World will be a partner on this research. Watch your inbox for a survey in the fall. Once this piece of the research is completed and data collected, themes will be determined and then a series of focused narrative inquiry interviews, half with politicians and half with CAOs.

Local government is the government closest to the people and it is here that we can make such a difference. I hope you'll participate.

David Siegel, 2015. *Leaders in the shadows: The leadership qualities of chief administrative officers*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

★ Municipal World Insider and Executive Members: You might also be interested in Robert Long's article: [Why so many mayor-CAO relationships fail](#). Note that you can now access the [complete collection of past articles](#) (and more) from your [membership dashboard](#).

Ann Mitchell offers over 26 years' experience in the municipal sector, including 15 years in the role as CAO in various municipalities. A Certified Professional Coach, as well as a Certified Workplace Investigator, Ann is extremely passionate about the public sector and works on various boards and organizations to further improve this area.

Appendix B

Sample Email Survey Invitation

Dear local government representative.

I would like to invite you to be part of a research project that I am conducting. This thesis project is part of the requirement for my master's degree in Leadership, at Royal Roads University. This project has been approved by CAMA (Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators) and supported by Municipal World, and I have been given permission to contact potential participants for this purpose.

The purpose of the research is to understand how we can enhance the collaboration and trust between Council and the CAO in local government. This relationship is a cornerstone to advance municipal agendas. Although many researchers have covered the staff/Council relationship there is a gap in the research for the specific relationship between municipal Council and their one employee.

Your name was chosen as a prospective participant because of the depth of your experience and knowledge in local government.

This phase of my research project will consist of a survey and is estimated to last approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

The attached document contains further information about the study conduct and will enable you to make a fully informed decision on whether or not you wish to participate. Please review this information before responding.

You are not required to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw [date to be specified] without prejudice.

As the survey is anonymous, I will not be able to ascertain who has participate or who has not participated, and who has withdrawn.

I realize that due to our collegial relationship, you may feel compelled to participate in this research project. Please be aware that you are not required to participate and, should you choose to participate, your participation would be entirely voluntary. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw before the survey has been conducted without prejudice. If you do not wish to participate, simply do not reply to this request. Your decision to not participate will also be maintained in confidence. Your choice will not affect our relationship or your standing.

Please feel free to contact me at any time should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes.

Your completion of this survey will constitute your informed consent.

Appendix C

Survey Draft

Premise of my concern with local government is that I believe the relationship between Council and CAO is critical to the health and sustainability of the organization. Given the unique nature of this relationship my research will focus on how to enhance and improve the collaboration between these two entities.

Survey Questions – Municipal World

For my Masters in Leadership through Royal Roads University, I am undertaking a thesis on local government in Canada. Specifically, I will focus on the Council/Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) dynamic, what sustains and what breaks down that relationship. While the area of staff/council roles has been studied extensively I have identified a potential gap in the research where a study could identify how the ability or inability to maintain a collaborative and trusting partnership between these two groups would impact the overall success of the organization. As the CAO is the only employee of the municipal Council this relationship affects the entire organization and I believe, the success or failure of that establishment. How the Council and CAO interact is the benchmark for the corporate culture which filters down throughout the organization as well as outside to all other stakeholders.

My thesis question is “How can we enhance the trust and collaboration between politicians and administrators in local government?”

For my method I will initially use a survey circulated broadly by Municipal World. This survey will be short and will have specific questions that will assist me with data analysis. Once I receive the data from the survey, I will work with my inquiry team to codify emergent themes. Surveys are effective but to ensure my research is meaningful and has depth I will perform two methods for my research. After collecting and coding the emergent themes, I will begin conducting narrative inquiry interviews. By using narrative inquiry, it will allow me to understand how the perceptions of both politicians and administration working in the public sectors have an impact on this key relationship.

Survey Questions for Municipal World

- 1. What is it that makes the relationship between CAO (City Manager) and Municipal Council crucial to the overall organization’s success?**
- 2. Role clarity between CAO (City Manager) and Council causes challenges in local government.**
 - a. Strongly Disagree**
 - b. Disagree**

- c. Neutral or Undecided
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

Further comments:

- 3. Having the CAO role ingrained into legislation strengthens the relationship (or respect) between CAO and Council.**

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neutral or Undecided
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

- 4. Having a professional designation for CAOs improves the relationship (respect) between Council and CAO.**

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neutral or Undecided
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

- 5. How effective are Municipal Codes of Conduct for Municipal Council?**

- a. Not at all effective
- b. Somewhat effective
- c. Neutral
- d. Effective
- e. Very Effective

Further comments:

- 6. Most Mayors and Councils have a good understanding of their roles as elected officials.**

- a. Strongly Disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neutral or Undecided
- d. Agree

- e. Strongly Agree**
- 7. Most CAOs have a good understanding of their role in the administration of the organization**
 - a. Strongly Disagree**
 - b. Disagree**
 - c. Neutral or Undecided**
 - d. Agree**
 - e. Strongly Agree**
- 8. Most Councils have a good working relationship with their municipal CAO**
 - a. Strongly Disagree**
 - b. Disagree**
 - c. Neutral or Undecided**
 - d. Agree**
 - e. Strongly Agree**
- 9. It is the role of the CAO to (check all that apply)**
 - a. Oversee the operations of the municipality**
 - b. Supports the development and implementation of strategic objectives and policies**
 - c. Acts as the Principal Advisor to Council**
 - d. Works with internal and external stakeholders**
- 10. It is the role of the Mayor to (check all that apply)**
 - a. Provides leadership to Council**
 - b. Presides at Council meetings**
 - c. To represent the municipality at official functions**
 - d. To carry out the duties under legislation**
- 11. It is the role of Council Members to (check all that apply)**
 - a. Provide good governance**
 - b. To provide services that in the opinion of council are necessary or desirable for all or part of the municipality**
 - c. Develop and evaluate the policies and programs of the municipality**
 - d. Responsible for ensuring that the municipality acts within its enabling legislation**

Would you be interested in participating in a follow-up interview to explore some of these concepts in greater detail?

Appendix D

Narrative Interview Email Invitation and Consent Form

Good Afternoon,

I am currently undertaking my thesis for my Masters in Leadership through Royal Roads University. You have indicated that you would like to have further conversations on the subject of CAO/Council relationships. This was through the survey you responded to in Municipal World.

As I have been in local government for 26 years, the last 15 as a CAO, this is a subject that I have discovered needs research to improve what I feel is a critical relationship.

I believe this is a Canada wide issue and as such I have chosen 5 politicians and 5 CAOs to further delve into the themes that have come up in the survey. To ensure diversity from all sizes of municipalities and also geographical variety all of the interviewees are located from across the county and from various sizes of municipalities.

Please review the following and if acceptable sign and return or send a return email advising that you have agreed to the terms.

Research Consent Form

By signing this form, you agree that you are over the age of 19 and have read the information letter for this study. Your signature states that you are giving your voluntary and informed consent to participate in this project and have data I contribute used in the final report and any other knowledge outputs (articles, conference presentations, newsletters, etc.).

- ☐ I consent to the audio recording of the narrative inquiry interview
- ☐ I consent to quotations and excerpts expressed by me through the survey data to be included in this study, provided that my identity is not disclosed
- ☐ I commit to respect the confidential nature of the narrative inquiry by not sharing identifying information about the other participants that I have suggested for interviews

Name: (Please Print): _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Name: **Ann Mitchell**

Email: amitchell@lethcounty.ca

Telephone: **587-370-1782**

Appendix E

Narrative Inquiry Questions

1. Please outline your experience in the local government sector and specifically with the role of CAO/Council?
2. How do you envision enhancing this relationship so that the overall organization and stakeholders can benefit?
3. What has been your personal experience in this matter and how does that change your perception of the roles and the interaction between the two?