

# Moving beyond "squeaky wheel" leadership



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You may have heard the saying, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." Apparently, American writer Josh Billings popularized this saying over 100 years ago in his poem "The Kicker":

*I hate to be a kicker,  
I always long for peace,  
But the wheel that squeaks the loudest,  
Is the one that gets the grease.*

## The Problem with Squeaky Wheel Leadership

Let's be clear about one thing: the squeaky wheel, in and of itself, is not bad. In a functioning democracy, every taxpaying citizen should enjoy the right to raise their voice. The issue is when the prevailing leadership approach to decision making is simply to appease those squeaking the loudest. It is time to get beyond Squeaky Wheel Leadership (SWL) and replace it with strategic, composed leadership.

So, what's the big deal? SWL can be boiled down to three issues:

**1. Favours radicalism** – SWL provides an incentive for the Squeaky Wheels to bully local government leaders into doing things they might not otherwise do. Social media provides the perfect platform for radical Squeaky Wheels to raise their "voices" above the more reasonable opinions of the average taxpayer.

**2. Inconsistent leadership** – SWL ensures that local leaders meander from one "crisis" to another, choosing to simply react rather than embarking on a more composed and fact-based leadership approach. Over the course of a three to four year term of council, this type of reactive leadership results in getting little accomplished in terms of

strategically important actions. Many positive community projects have been hijacked because their councils and staff are fixated on crisis management.

**3. Pushes good people out** – The majority of citizens do not prefer to engage in, or be associated with, aggressive Squeaky Wheels. SWL is an incentive for the Squeaky Wheels and a major disincentive for the rest of us. Whether it is at traditional council meetings, town halls, or Facebook discussions, leadership that caters to the Squeaky Wheels tends to drive good people out of public debate – often forever. As local governments, we cannot afford to lose our community's best and brightest.

## SWL as the Default Setting

It is easy for municipal governments to adopt the SWL leadership style. If leadership styles had a "default setting," it would likely be SWL. Elected councils are often fixated on how the Squeaky Wheels are going to react to their decisions. Every community has small groups of residents who work tirelessly to bend their local government to their way of thinking. It doesn't matter if the issue is heritage, environment, urban growth, social housing, parks and recreation, or business development – councils everywhere have a built-in incentive to grease the squeaky wheel.

Locally elected officials are obviously concerned about what people think and say about them. In most cases, they want to be re-elected. So, by default, the democratic process favours the short-term perspective of satisfying those citizens who have the potential to make the loudest noise. However, understanding why SWL happens does not mean it is an effective leadership style.

## Moving Beyond SWL

The best municipal councils find ways of getting beyond SWL. Good local leaders employ innovative techniques to engage their whole community – not just the Squeaky Wheels. Here are three steps to effectively neutralize the pressure to default to SWL:

**Step 1: Establish a strategic plan** – I am not talking about a glossy motherhood and apple pie public relations piece! This needs to be a real strategic plan that identifies the priority actions that a council will accomplish in its upcoming term. A good strategic plan must have a citizen engagement/survey component; it must be a comprehensive list of actions/projects; it needs to be aligned to the asset management plan; and it must be used by council and the senior management team to drive the budget process. A good strategic plan is the first step to breaking away from the SWL default setting.

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1 An example of a 24/7 online portal can be found at [www.connectcw.ca](http://www.connectcw.ca).

**Step 2: Connect with your community** – Citizens these days smell fake politicians a mile away! The best councils and the leaders find authentic ways of connecting with their community. Leaders should mix and match a variety of old and new communications methods. Strategies might include weekly radio shows, monthly newspaper updates, social media posts, seasonal town hall sessions, informal community Q&A coffee talks with service clubs, church groups, neighbourhood groups, or a 24/7 online portal.<sup>1</sup> The principle is simple: make it as easy as possible for as many as possible to connect to their local government. Engaging the many isolates the Squeaky Wheel outliers, thus giving local leaders the intelligence needed to align their priorities to the community's priorities.

**Step 3: Stay the course** – The leadership characteristic needed most these days is courage. After establishing your strategic priorities and engaging your community, now your job as a leader really begins. It is up to you to stay the course and get things done. I have seen good leaders crack under the constant

pressure of highly-motivated Squeaky Wheels who continue to push their personal agendas day in and day out. Politicians need to understand that not everyone is going to like them, and councils' decisions will never be universally accepted. The best leaders figure out that sometimes you just need to say "no" – regardless of whether you are going to lose votes in the upcoming election. Composed, fact-based, and consistent leadership requires courage to stay the course. There are no shortcuts. Good leaders need to resist the urge to default to SWL.

## Leadership that Unlocks Potential

SWL is not good leadership. It results in inconsistent, reactive decision making that frustrates and disengages most people. It is time for municipal leaders across Canada to establish clear priorities, connect with their citizens, and demonstrate the courage needed to get things done. It is this kind of leadership that will enable your community to unlock its potential. **MW**

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