

# Ethics Inquiries

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## The Silent Treatment?

### Scenario:

The city manager is fed up with the local reporters as a result of their poor coverage of city business. Because of chronic problems with their reporting, he has decided to stop speaking to them. When he mentioned this plan to the assistant city manager, the assistant raised a concern that the manager's silent treatment could run afoul of the ICMA Code of Ethics. The manager asked for guidance.

### Response:

The city manager has an obligation to keep residents informed about city business, and one of the key ways to do this is through the print and broadcast media. Tenet 9 of the ICMA Code of Ethics articulates the basic principle:

*Keep the community informed on local government affairs; encourage communication between the citizens and all local government officers; emphasize friendly and courteous service to the public; and seek to improve the quality and image of public service.*

If an ICMA member freezes out a media source merely because he or she has been critical of government operations or of the manager in particular, the member is not meeting the ethical imperative to share information openly.

Some managers who become discouraged with poor-quality print journalists turn their attention to the broadcast media. It may be easier to communicate a message directly and with less distortion through a microphone.

In many cases, managers could benefit from professional development to improve their skills with the media. ICMA's training manual *Media Relations for Local Governments*, published in 1996, is a good source of assistance. Here is an excerpt from the chapter on "Handling Interviews":

**Respond to statements** as well as questions. Address each point raised by the interviewer, regardless of whether you agree. The interviewer or audience may assume that you agree with statements that you do not address, or they may assume that you are avoiding the issue. Make sure that questions don't contain misstatements or misassumptions. If they do, respond to these before answering. If the reporter introduces facts or data that are unfamiliar, explain that you are unable to comment until you have had a chance to familiarize yourself with the information, and offer to get back to the interviewer.

**Bridge to issues you want to raise.** Use techniques to “bridge” from the questions the reporter asks to the issues you want to raise (“But just as important is . . .,” “Another question I’m asked is . . .,” “A similar concern that citizens often have is . . .,” or “We might be overlooking . . .”).

**Don’t let a reporter put words into your mouth.** If the reporter summarizes your comments by saying, “Do you mean . . .?” or “So you are saying . . .,” don’t respond by saying “yes.” It is preferable to repeat your main ideas. (“What I am saying is . . .”) If a question contains offensive language, don’t repeat it. Reporters may quote you out of context.

*Media Relations for Local Governments* reminds managers that they have some flexibility in how they deal with the media, like in deciding whether or not to grant an interview. If a manager agrees to an interview but the session becomes hostile, the manager may terminate it. And a manager can choose not to respond to a particular question.

Because some communities lack good media outlets, they rely on alternative ways to reach citizens, including community newsletters, cable access, and telephone-access messages.

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Ethics advice is a popular service provided to ICMA members. The inquiries and advice are reviewed by the Committee on Professional Conduct, the ethics committee of the ICMA Executive Board. Some of the inquiries are revised and published as a regular feature in *PM*, to give guidance to members in the big and little ethical decisions they make daily. If you have a question about your obligations under the ICMA Code of Ethics, call Elizabeth Kellar at 202/962-3611 or Martha Perego at 202/962-3668.