

Dysfunctional vs. Tough Politics

All local governing boards operate in a political environment. How “political” the participants are, and how they choose to conduct themselves in their roles depends on a variety of factors, ranging from size of community to the power of local political parties to the organization’s beliefs about effective governance.

It can be difficult to discern the difference between “tough” political tactics and truly dysfunctional behavior—particularly if the group engages in one or both over a sustained period of time.

Tough and dysfunctional politics are different, however. The following summary compares and contrasts the characteristics of each.

Tough Politics

- Characterized by rules—explicit or implicit, but understood by all
- Relies on political process—you win by “having the votes”
- Can be emotional—but not personal—respect remains intact
- Playing to win- exclusive agendas, freezing out the other side
- Maximizes political advantage—programs, personal profile, reelection
- Depending upon form of government—can involve senior staff
- Predictability, consistency, reliability
- Things get done

Dysfunctional Politics

- Not accomplishing critical tasks
- Not making decisions efficiently—or at all
- Not setting or following goals/priorities
- Council/Board don’t trust each other and disrespectful to each other
- Council/Board not respectful to and distrustful of staff
- Manager attacked/not trusted by Council/Board faction
- Manager attacked by community faction
- Community factions continually creating roadblocks/discontent, attacking Council/staff

Dysfunctional vs. Tough Politics	
Tough	Dysfunctional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect/trust • Political Process • Rules • Reliable • Accomplishments • Play to Win 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disrespect/distrust • Disruption/attacks • Chaos • Unpredictable • No decisions • Play to harm

***Excerpted from “Leading in Difficult Environments” by Craig Rapp