

The leadership ripple

Small stones, big waves

Leadership in townships rarely comes with fanfare. There are no headlines for late-night calls returned to residents, no awards for board meetings that stretch toward midnight, and no public recognition for the countless decisions made each and every day.

Yet in this quiet world of local government, leadership is less about titles, position or authority, and more about presence, consistency and care. When practiced with intention, even the smallest acts can ripple outward, shaping communities in ways far greater than their size.

Leadership is a practice—not a title

Many people think of leadership as a position, something one holds because of an election or appointment. However, in truth, leadership is a practice. It's demonstrated in the way one shows up, listens, decides and treats others when nobody is watching. Township leadership, in particular, offers a daily proving ground for this kind of intentional

This continuing education article and accompanying self-assessment (see page 29) are worth 2 elective credits in MTA's Township Governance Academy.



OBJECTIVES

- To share the importance of intentional leadership actions to inspire greater cultural cohesion, trust and transparency among township colleagues and the broader community
- To underscore the importance—and impact—that small actions can have in every community
- To inspire efforts to communicate effectively, listen attentively and work collaboratively to achieve desired outcomes

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In local government, big decisions like budgets, strategic plans and infrastructure projects naturally draw attention. But it is often the small, consistent acts of leadership that send the most significant ripples through a community.

practice. Resources are limited, challenges are frequent, and expectations run high. In such environments, the way a leader conducts themselves, often quietly, matters more than any ceremonial gesture or public recognition.

Leadership is about being present. It's about building trust through transparency, honesty and consistency. It's about acknowledging that you do not have all the answers, and that admitting uncertainty can be a profound act of courage. Saying "I don't know, but I'll find out" is not a weakness; it is a powerful tool for fostering trust, demonstrating accountability, and modeling the curiosity and diligence we hope to see in others.

A longtime township supervisor says it like this: *"I don't have to make a splash to make a difference. It's the small, thoughtful decisions every day—the phone call to a worried resident, the quick check-in with a staff member—that ripple through the community in ways you don't always see."*

The leadership ripple

Imagine a simple image: a still pond. Now drop a small stone into it. The ripples spread far and wide—much farther than the stone's size would suggest. Leadership works in the same way. In local government, big decisions like budgets, strategic plans and infrastructure projects naturally draw attention. But it is often the small, consistent acts of leadership that send the most significant ripples through a community.

These "stones" can take many forms: a positive interaction with a resident, a small policy adjustment or a listening

session with a community group. While each act may feel minor at the moment, its effects reverberate outward, influencing morale, trust, engagement and, ultimately, the wellbeing of the entire community.

As one township manager noted: *"It's easy to get caught up in meetings and reports, but one resident interaction can change the tone of an entire neighborhood. That's the ripple effect in action."*

Why small acts matter

The proximity of municipal leaders to their communities makes their actions highly visible. Unlike federal or state governments, township officials are often the first point of contact in crises or moments of change. Their words and decisions carry weight not only in official capacity but also in how people feel about the community they live in. A resident whose concern is acknowledged feels seen; a street safely repaired fosters confidence in leadership; a transparent decision-making process creates trust. These may seem like small moments, but collectively they form the foundation of resilient, thriving communities.

The impact of leadership at the local level is exponential. A township leader who regularly walks neighborhoods to connect with residents may not immediately change policy, but the personal connections create trust. Staff morale improves because employees see leadership in action, not just in memos or in empty words. Other community members begin to participate, inspired by the example. The ripple extends beyond the initial stone. Small gestures have large consequences.

Real-life ripples

Examples of small leadership actions that create lasting impact:

- **A supervisor's weekly walks:** One township supervisor takes a simple approach: walking through neighborhoods weekly to meet and listen to residents. It's not about being seen, he says. It's about hearing their stories and their concerns, and celebrating what's going well. These walks have increased trust, strengthened relationships between residents and staff, and boosted morale.
- **Weekly lunches.** Another official, living in a culturally diverse area, invites a township colleague to join her for lunch at a different restaurant, weekly. Understanding the diversity in her community, she selects a restaurant that represents her residents and intentionally schedules lunches to include all ethnicities. After 52 weeks, she's met and listened to a lot of business owners and staff members! Can't do this weekly? How about once or twice a month? At that rate, you will have connected with and gathered information from dozens of little communities within your community, gathering a deeper understanding of their needs. According to the official, in addition, lunching with a different official or staff member weekly

or monthly builds stronger connections, trust and a deeper understanding of who they are.

- **Welcoming language policy:** A township clerk implemented a policy ensuring all township signage and communication are accessible and multilingual. It wasn't a huge policy change, just attention to detail, she explained. But it made people feel included. Residents now feel the township is for everyone. Engagement and participation in community meetings rose noticeably after this initiative.
- **Public recognition in public works:** A public works department supervisor began highlighting team achievements on social media and during township board meetings. It costs nothing to say "thank you," he noted—but it means everything to the staff. Employee morale improved, turnover decreased and other departments adopted similar practices, multiplying the ripple effect.
- **Senior assistance program:** A township deputy clerk started a weekly check-in program for seniors living alone. Just a phone call or quick visit, she says. It helps them feel seen and cared for. The ripple extended to families, neighbors and volunteers who now feel more connected to their township community.
- **Youth leadership engagement:** A board member began inviting high school students in her township to attend certain board meetings and to participate in advisory sessions. It's amazing to see the enthusiasm and new ideas they bring. These young voices help shape policies today and cultivate future leaders for tomorrow.

These examples demonstrate that leadership does not always need grand gestures or dramatic interventions. Often, it is the steady, thoughtful and consistent acts—those small stones—that generate waves of positive change.

The exponential power of ripples

The ripple effect of small acts is not linear; it is exponential. One thoughtful action can influence multiple areas:

- It strengthens staff culture by modeling respect, empathy and integrity.
- It builds citizen trust, as residents see their concerns acknowledged and addressed.
- It encourages collaboration across departments, creating a more cohesive and innovative organization.
- It models behavior for the next generation of leaders, inspiring others to follow suit.

Yet the opposite is also true. Neglect or inconsistency can send negative ripples, eroding morale, creating mistrust and stalling innovation. Underestimating the importance of small actions, whether intentional or unintentional, can have consequences just as far-reaching as the positive ripples we seek to create.

Begin with five stones

Leadership in townships begins with small, intentional acts. Here are five stones every municipal leader can drop to create meaningful ripples:

10 more small stones and their ripple effects

Leadership doesn't always require big initiatives. Sometimes, the smallest acts create the biggest waves. Here are 10 examples from township and other municipal leaders across the country:



1. **Morning coffee with staff**
Stone: A township manager spends 10 minutes each morning chatting with employees over coffee.
Ripple: Staff feel valued and heard; cross-department collaboration improves.
2. **Follow-up notes to residents**
Stone: Sending a brief email or note to a resident after a concern is raised.
Ripple: Builds trust and shows accountability, creating a reputation for responsiveness.
3. **Neighborhood clean-up support**
Stone: Attending a local volunteer clean-up event.
Ripple: Boosts civic engagement, encourages volunteerism and strengthens community pride.
4. **Staff mentorship program**
Stone: A senior staff member mentors a junior employee weekly.
Ripple: Skills develop faster, retention improves and a culture of learning emerges.
5. **Acknowledging cultural holidays**
Stone: Recognizing local cultural or religious holidays in newsletters or social media.
Ripple: Residents feel respected and included; community cohesion strengthens.
6. **Promptly fixing a streetlight**
Stone: Addressing a minor infrastructure issue within a day or two.
Ripple: Residents notice attention to detail, increasing confidence in municipal operations.
7. **Hosting youth councils**
Stone: Inviting students to participate in planning sessions.
Ripple: Inspires civic involvement in young people and brings fresh perspectives to leadership.
8. **Personalized thank-you calls**
Stone: Calling volunteers, first responders or staff after a major community event.
Ripple: Morale skyrockets; people are more willing to contribute in the future.
9. **Transparent budget prep meetings**
Stone: Making complex budget details accessible and understandable.
Ripple: Builds trust and reduces skepticism; residents feel informed and empowered.
10. **Celebrating small wins publicly**
Stone: Highlighting small successes, like a safely completed project or efficient service delivery.
Ripple: Encourages a culture of recognition and continuous improvement, motivating both staff and residents.

Each of these stones is small in isolation, yet collectively they create waves of trust, engagement and resilience that shape the community over time. Township leadership thrives on these ripples. They are quiet, consistent and transformative.

cover story

1. **Be present:** Show up physically and mentally. People feel the difference when a leader is truly listening.
2. **Recognize others publicly:** Catch people doing good work and name it. Public recognition validates effort and fosters morale.
3. **Communicate transparently:** Especially when it is difficult. Honest communication builds trust, even in uncertainty.
4. **Ask questions before giving answers:** Leaders do not need to speak first. Listening often uncovers insights and solutions that might otherwise be missed.
5. **Align small actions with big values:** Values like integrity, equity, inclusivity and service must be reflected in daily decisions, not just strategic plans.

The quiet courage of local leadership

In an era when trust in government is fragile, township officials have a unique opportunity to rebuild it, one act at a time. Leadership is tangible and immediate. It is felt when a senior receives the help they need, when a sidewalk is safely repaired, or when a resident feels heard. These are not headline-making achievements, but they are the victories that sustain communities.

Every decision, meeting and conversation contributes to the ripples that shape the community's future. Leaders may not always see the effects of their actions immediately, but the influence is there, spreading quietly and powerfully. The ripple does not require recognition; it requires presence, intention and care.

So, remember . . .

If you ever wonder whether your leadership matters, let this be your reminder: it matters beyond words. Every decision you make, every time you listen with empathy, and every small act of courage lays a stone that sends waves across your community. Leadership in townships is not defined by grand gestures or headlines; it is defined by steady hands, clear vision and quiet courage.

As one official says: *"Even the smallest stone can create waves. It's the quiet acts, done consistently, that change the shoreline of our communities for the better."*

Lead with integrity. Lead with heart. Lead with intention. Trust that your ripples are building something lasting. Because they are. And while you may never fully see how far your influence reaches, know this: the shoreline of your community is being shaped, one small stone at a time.



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Learn more at successstudio.com or email marilynn@thesuccessstudio.com

See page 29 for a continuing education self-assessment, worth 2 elective credits in MTA's Township Governance Academy.



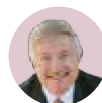
MTA's **Township Governance Academy (TGA)** was developed to help you to be a stronger leader in your community.

TGA goes beyond board meetings and budgets, enhancing your leadership skills and motivating you to take on the challenges and opportunities unique to those serving as an elected local official. The Academy offers an in-depth understanding of the governance process, the role of the township and how to lead for success.

Stronger leaders make stronger townships.

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Continuing Education Self-Assessment

Those enrolled in the Township Governance Academy (TGA), MTA's credentialing program, may obtain 2 elective credits for successful completion of this quiz. To obtain credit, participants must answer the following questions and receive a minimum passing score of 70%. The questions are based on content from the article, "The Leadership Ripple: Small stones, big waves," beginning on page 25. There is no charge for MTA members to take the quiz or to obtain TGA credit.

Completed quizzes should be emailed to tga@michigantownships.org, faxed to (517) 321-8908 or mailed to MTA, PO Box 80078, Lansing, MI 48908-0078. MTA will notify you of your results within two weeks after receiving your quiz. **IMPORTANT:** Please keep a copy of your completed quiz in your TGA binder. Interested in learning more about TGA? Call (517) 321-6467, ext. 234, email tga@michigantownships.org, or visit michigantownships.org/learning/tga.

TGA Continuing Education—August 2026 The Leadership Ripple: Small stones, big waves

NAME: _____ TOWNSHIP & COUNTY: _____

EMAIL ADDRESS: _____

1. **According to the article, leadership is:**
 - a. The title one possesses
 - b. The position one holds
 - c. The presence, consistency and care for your community
 - d. The authority aligned with an elected position
2. **Which of the following is not a "stone" municipal leaders should drop to create meaningful ripples:**
 - a. Ask questions before giving answers
 - b. Ensure you are always prepared and have all the answers
 - c. Communicate transparently
 - d. Be present, physically and mentally
3. **Which of the following best describes the impact of why small acts matter when it comes to the words and behaviors of local leaders:**
 - a. Creates a culture that permeates through the community
 - b. Sets the tone for how people feel about the community
 - c. Transparent decision-making creates trust
 - d. All of the above
4. **The ripple effect of small acts is not linear; it is exponential. Which of the following might result from one non-productive, inconsistent action?**
 - a. Stronger staff culture
 - b. Mistrust and eroding morale
 - c. Enhanced resident trust
 - d. Collaboration and innovation
5. **What behavior might weaken community confidence and trust?**
 - a. Publicly expressing disagreements with fellow leaders
 - b. Intentionally working to collaborate and understand diverse opinions
 - c. Policy changes resulting from public input
 - d. Listening sessions with community groups
6. **List two small "stones" you've experienced in your community that began a ripple:**
 1. _____

 2. _____

7. **List three small "stones" you could toss to create a positive ripple in your community:**
 1. _____

 2. _____

 3. _____
