



Policy Meets People: Making HR Compliance Work for Workplace Culture

For the TMHRA Annual Conference

Presented by: Dr. Thomas W.
Faulkner, SPHR, CMHR-PIP, LSSBB



Welcome & Objectives

- Understand key compliance requirements for Texas municipalities
- Identify cultural opportunities within policy implementation
- Apply practical strategies for aligning policy and people
- Explore real case studies from Texas municipalities



Compliance or Culture?



What Are We Balancing?

Defining the Landscape

HR Compliance in Municipal Settings

► Definition

Adherence to federal, state, and local laws, policies, and regulations governing employment.

Ensures fairness, legal protection, and operational consistency in government workplaces.

► Obligations

Includes federal anti-discrimination laws, wage and hour standards, FMLA, safety mandates, and ethics statutes.

Requires accurate documentation, consistent enforcement, and up-to-date policy alignment.

Workplace Culture in Government

► Definition

The shared values, beliefs, and behavioral norms that define how employees interact and operate.

Culture influences morale, performance, and how services are delivered to the public.

► Key Characteristics

Often mission-driven, emphasizing public service, fairness, and stewardship. Strong cultures reflect transparency, teamwork, accountability, and ethical behavior.



Compliance

U.S. Labor Laws: The Big Picture

Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)

Establishes minimum wage, overtime pay, recordkeeping, and child labor standards for most full-time and part-time workers in private and public sectors.

Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)

Grants eligible employees up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave per year for specified family and medical reasons, such as childbirth, adoption, or serious health conditions.

Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSH Act)

Requires employers to provide a workplace free from recognized hazards, enforced by OSHA through safety standards and inspections.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

Prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, covering hiring, firing, promotions, and more.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Bans discrimination against individuals with disabilities and mandates reasonable accommodations in the workplace.

U.S. Labor Laws: The Big Picture

Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA)

Protects workers aged 40 and older from discrimination in hiring, promotion, and termination based on age.

Equal Pay Act (EPA)

Requires equal pay for men and women performing substantially equal work in the same establishment.

Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act (WARN)

Mandates employers with 100+ employees to provide 60 days' advance notice of plant closings or mass layoffs, aiding workers in transitioning.

Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act (MSPA)

Ensures fair wages, safe working conditions, and proper housing for migrant and seasonal farmworkers.

Texas Employment Laws (Municipalities)

Texas Whistleblower Act

- Protects public employees, including municipal workers, from retaliation for reporting violations of law by their employer to an appropriate authority.

Texas Right-to-Work Laws

- Prohibits mandatory union membership or dues as a condition of employment. Applies to municipal employees in Texas, a right-to-work state.

Local Government Code Chapter 143: Civil Service

- Establishes hiring, promotion, and disciplinary procedures for firefighters and police in municipalities that adopt this chapter

Local Government Code Chapter 146: Meet and Confer

- Allows certain municipalities with 1.5 million+ population to negotiate employment terms with employee associations

Texas Unemployment Compensation Act

- Provides unemployment benefits to eligible municipal employees laid off through no fault of their own. Municipalities contribute to the state unemployment fund.

Open Government, Ethics & Accountability

Texas Open Meetings Act

- Requires municipal governing bodies (e.g., city councils) to hold meetings open to the public, with proper notice, unless an exception (e.g., executive session) applies.

Texas Public Information Act

- Grants public access to municipal records, including employee salaries, contracts, and audit reports, unless exempted

Texas Government Code Chapter 571

- Establishes the Texas Ethics Commission to oversee ethical conduct, including administering laws on gifts, financial disclosure, and conflicts of interest for municipal officials

Abuse of Official Capacity: **Tex. Pen. Code § 39.02**

- Holds municipal employees criminally liable, reinforcing responsible use of public power.

Nepotism Laws

- Prohibits municipal officials from hiring or promoting close relatives, preventing favoritism in public employment.



ADA Retrofit

Safety Manuals

**Budgetary
Constraints**

**Transportation
Compliance**

**Regulatory and
Certifying Bodies**

Retention Periods

**Health code
posters**

Risk Management

**Compliance
Reporting**

**Workplace Safety
Regulations**

Tax Forms

Union Contracts

**Insurance
Mandates**

**Driver logs and drug
tests**

**Emergency
Management
Protocols**

**Intergovernmental
Grant Conditions**

**Injury Logs/Worker's
Comp**

TMRS Reporting

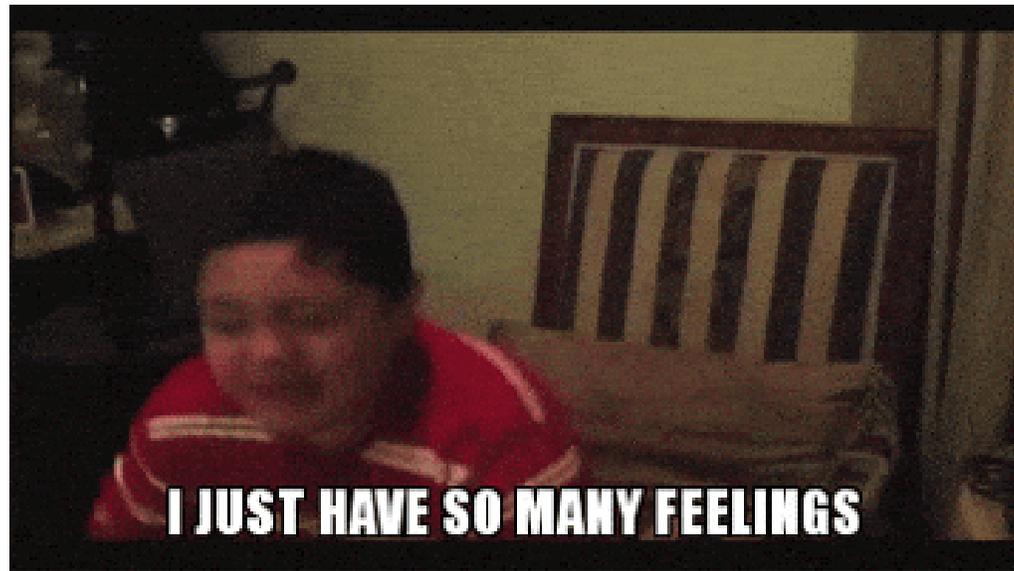
**Collective
Bargaining
Agreements**

**EEO complaint
files**





Now I know what you're probably thinking...



I JUST HAVE SO MANY FEELINGS

I can't, I can't, I can't.

 **KINDRED**



Culture

What Is Workplace Culture?

Foundational Definition

Workplace culture is the **shared values, norms, behaviors, and assumptions** that shape how work is done and how people interact.

It's the **“unwritten rules”** that guide actions when no one is looking.

Tangible & Intangible Elements

Tangible: Policies, communication styles, decision-making processes.

Intangible: Trust levels, morale, emotional climate, sense of purpose.

Culture Exists, Whether Intentional or Not

Even if not actively managed, every workplace *has* a culture — it can be productive or toxic, inclusive or exclusive, compliant or careless.

Culture isn't a poster on the wall — it's what people say, believe, and do every day.

What Sets Municipal Culture Apart from the Broader Public Sector



Direct Proximity to Community Impact

Municipal employees **see the results** of their work daily — potholes filled, water restored, parks maintained.

Creates a culture of **tangible accountability** and localized pride not always present in state or federal agencies.



Elected Official Influence

Unlike other public sector roles, municipal staff often work closely with **elected council members or mayors**, adding **political dynamics** to workplace culture.

Leadership shifts every election cycle can deeply influence tone, morale, and priorities.



Resource Constraints Fuel Innovation (or Burnout)

Small cities often operate with **leaner staffing and tighter budgets**, leading to a culture of “do more with less.”

This fosters ingenuity— but can also normalize overwork if not intentionally managed.



Informal Interpersonal Norms

Smaller municipalities tend to have **close-knit teams** where relationships and personality dynamics play a larger role than policy manuals.

Culture is shaped just as much by “who you know” as by “what’s written.”



Hyper-Local Traditions & Legacy Practices

Municipal culture often includes **longstanding local customs**, from holiday parades to how utilities handle customer complaints.

“We’ve always done it this way” carries more weight when institutional memory runs deep.



Immediate Public Visibility & Trust

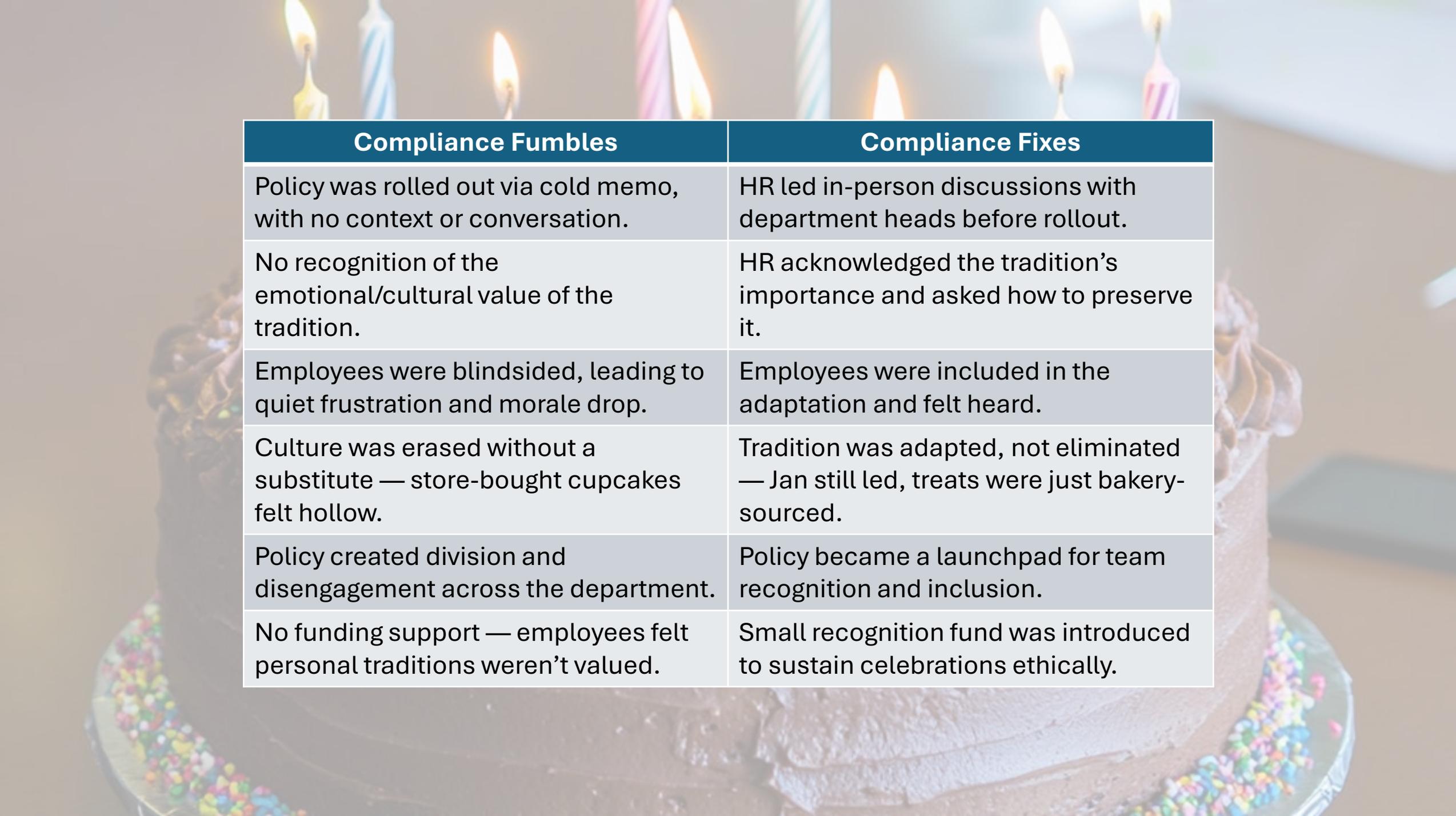
Residents know city employees by name, face, and family. Mistakes are **highly visible**, and goodwill is hard-earned.

Creates a culture of **hyper-accountability** and sometimes **conservative change adoption**.

What's one unwritten rule in your city or department that *everyone* knows, but isn't written in any policy?







Compliance Fumbles	Compliance Fixes
Policy was rolled out via cold memo, with no context or conversation.	HR led in-person discussions with department heads before rollout.
No recognition of the emotional/cultural value of the tradition.	HR acknowledged the tradition's importance and asked how to preserve it.
Employees were blindsided, leading to quiet frustration and morale drop.	Employees were included in the adaptation and felt heard.
Culture was erased without a substitute — store-bought cupcakes felt hollow.	Tradition was adapted, not eliminated — Jan still led, treats were just bakery-sourced.
Policy created division and disengagement across the department.	Policy became a launchpad for team recognition and inclusion.
No funding support — employees felt personal traditions weren't valued.	Small recognition fund was introduced to sustain celebrations ethically.

Policy vs. People – The Real Challenge

Bureaucracy vs. Agility

- Formal processes ensure fairness and control,
- but rigid systems can slow down progress and frustrate problem-solvers.

Uniformity vs. Inclusion

- Standardized policies promote consistency,
- but one-size-fits-all can overlook individual and cultural needs.

Accountability vs. Empowerment

- Clear rules and discipline protect organizational integrity,
- but overly punitive systems can erode trust and initiative.

Compliance Mandates vs. Human Experience

- Legal adherence reduces liability and risk,
- but culture is shaped by everyday relationships, recognition, and belonging.



Case Study

The **City of McAllen's Human Resources Department** launched the **Leadership Development Program** to support managers and supervisors with less than five years of experience in their roles.

The capstone video presentations served as a powerful reflection of the cultural shift taking place within the City. Though rooted in leadership principles, many participants organically aligned their learnings with **compliance-centered values**:

- **Trust-building, accountability, and delegation** supported regulatory integrity and team ownership.
- **DISC-informed communication** helped align team behavior with expectations—reducing errors and enhancing workplace harmony.
- Participants emphasized **ethical decision-making, transparency, and open dialogue**, which directly contributed to a more compliant and integrity-driven environment.
- Several shared experiences of **admitting mistakes, embracing feedback, and modeling humility**—behaviors that normalize compliance and ethical culture at all levels.





When Culture Clashes With Compliance

Challenging Dilemmas

The Culture of “Don’t Write It Down”

A long-standing leadership culture encourages informal problem-solving and verbal counseling — to avoid creating documentation trails that might “come back on the city.”

New HR staff are pushing for consistent documentation and accountability.

- *Do you push for policy compliance and documentation at the cost of disrupting culture and legacy leadership? Or preserve the comfort of the current system?*

The Department MVP with the Toxic Tone

An employee is employed in a highly specialized and technical position, consistently delivers excellent work, and is beloved by the community. Internally, however, they belittle colleagues, dominate meetings, and dismiss feedback. Leadership hesitates to act, fearing public backlash or losing a key performer.

- *Do you prioritize performance and legacy, or intervene in defense of culture — even if policy doesn’t clearly define interpersonal conduct?*



THIS TICKET
SOLVES ALL YOUR
PROBLEMS



I wish it was
that easy...

unfortunately



How to Align Policy With People



Lead with “Why”



Clarify & simplify
policies



Train and empower
managers



Perform “culture
checks” on policies



Model behavior at
the top



Recognize
compliance +
cultural champions

Lead with “Why” — Don’t Just Enforce, Explain

Rules followed out of fear fade fast. But when employees understand *why* a policy exists — they’re more likely to support it, not just comply with it.

Real Talk for Municipal Workplaces:

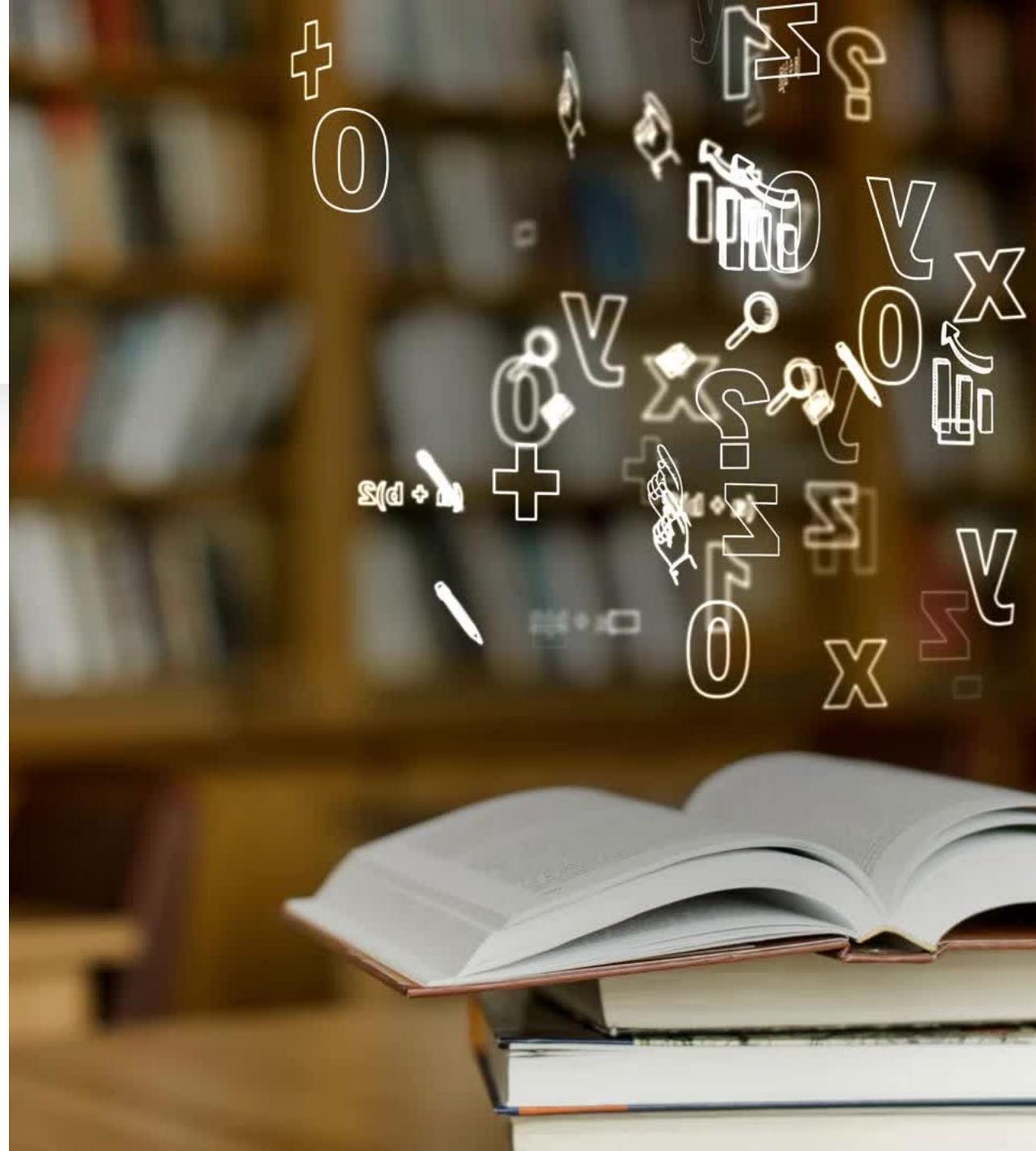
- “*Because the handbook says so*” is not a compelling reason.
- Employees are adults — they deserve context, especially when policies affect morale, money, or autonomy.
- Most resistance comes from confusion, not defiance.

Instead of:

“Personal use of city vehicles is prohibited.”

Try:

“We restrict vehicle use to protect city liability and maintain public trust. Even small misuses can impact our insurance and reputation.”



Clarify & Simplify Policies — Confusion is the Enemy of Compliance

Overwritten, legalistic, or outdated policies create more violations — not less.

Why It Fails in Practice:

- Municipal policies often grow like vines: years of edits, exceptions, and attorney language.
- The result? Managers can't explain them, and employees stop trying to read them.

Fix It:

- Use plain language.
- Provide scenario-based guidance.
- Add one-pagers or visuals to complex procedures.





Train and Empower Managers — Frontline Culture Starts with Clarity

Why This Matters in Cities:

- Your crew leads, sergeants, and mid-managers are the *interpreters* of policy.
- If they don't understand it, believe in it, or know how to enforce it — culture collapses.

The Risk:

- One poorly trained manager can create unintentional discrimination, labor violations, or morale drain — all without bad intent.

Build Confidence, Not Just Competence:

- Train in conflict de-escalation, documentation, consistent feedback, FMLA basics, ADA accommodations, and progressive discipline.
- Make sure they know when to ask HR — and that asking is encouraged, not penalized.

Perform Culture Checks on Policy — Are We Drafting for Reality or Idealism?

What to Ask Before Implementing a Policy:

- Will this change conflict with long-standing cultural norms?
- Are we unintentionally punishing the way people connect or show care (e.g., potlucks, birthday celebrations)?
- Is this enforceable without backtracking?
- Will enforcement look different in City Hall than in Streets, PD, or Utilities?

Why It Matters:

Policy that contradicts culture creates resentment. Policy that *acknowledges* culture builds buy-in.

Mini-Audit Question:

“How will this feel to the employees it impacts the most?”





Model Behavior at the Top — Culture Follows What Leadership Tolerates

No Exceptions at the Top:

- If senior staff “opt out” of timekeeping, ethics training, or showing respect to HR processes — it invalidates the entire system.

What Employees Notice:

- Who comes in late without consequence?
- Who skips required training?
- Who talks down to frontline staff and still gets praised?

Municipal Twist:

In smaller cities, visibility is even higher. The public, your staff, *and* elected officials are all watching. Culture isn’t crafted — it’s witnessed.

“Your policies walk into every room before you do — and they wear your leaders’ faces.”

Recognize Cultural and Compliance Champions — Not Just High Performers

Recognition Shapes Behavior:

If you only recognize productivity, employees will cut corners to get there. If you also spotlight **integrity, accountability, and respectful enforcement**, those behaviors multiply.

Who Gets Overlooked?

- The employee who always double-checks ADA accommodations
- The clerk who won't bend records rules, even under pressure
- The crew lead who de-escalates instead of disciplines

Try This:

- Monthly shoutouts in internal emails or council meetings
- “Quiet Leadership” recognition for employees who uphold policy *with empathy*



Tools & Resources for Cities

- **Texas Municipal Human Resources Association (TMHRA):** Regional training, HR case law updates, and peer-driven HR solutions for Texas cities.
- **Texas Municipal League (TML):** Policy templates, legal interpretations, and sample ordinances aligned with Texas law.
- **Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM):** Federal law interpretations, toolkits, sample policies, and compliance alerts.



Policy Review Checklist

Standardize your internal audits with a recurring review tool.

Questions might include:

- Is this policy current with federal and state law?
 - Does this policy reinforce our desired culture?
 - Is it written in clear, inclusive, and enforceable language?
 - Have we trained managers on its application?
-
- ✘ Ask: “Do our policies match what actually happens on the ground?”



Key Takeaways

- **HR compliance sets the boundaries; culture sets the direction.**
One without the other leaves your organization exposed or aimless.
- **Municipal workplaces can be high-trust, high-compliance, and high-engagement.**
It's not either/or — it's both/and, by design.
- **Shared leadership is non-negotiable.**
HR cannot uphold culture alone. Frontline supervisors, department heads, and elected officials are your partners in practice.
- **Small shifts make lasting impact.**
A clearer policy. A softer tone. A public “thank you.” These moments compound.

