

CTM: Master Class – Adapting Language, Preserving Values

January 22, 2026 | Case Study Facilitator Guide

#1: New Leadership, Social Media, and Public Information Office

Purpose

This breakout discussion is designed to help participants:

- Navigate challenging public discourse related to DEI
- Examine how language choices reflect organizational values
- Practice values-aligned responses under public scrutiny
- Identify practical takeaways for their own organizations

Facilitator Notes

- Encourage reflection, not debate or judgement
- Keep the conversation respectful and grounded in practice
- Capture 1-2 key insights to share with the larger group

Case Study #1: New Leadership, Social Media, and Public Information Office

An African-American leader has been appointed to serve as the new Director of Parks and Recreation for a municipality. As part of the city's "Get to Know Our Staff" series, short introductory videos are posted to the city's social media and website.

Shortly after joining the agency, the city's public information office posts the introductory video for the new Director on its social media. The video is approximately 3-minutes long and highlights the new Director's professional experience and their excitement about upcoming projects in the city.

As expected, there is public viewing of the video and engagement with the post on social media. The first comment posted is, "Were they selected because they are the best person for the job or was it because of DEI?"

The city's public information office immediately responds to the comment reiterating the new director's qualifications for the position and expressing excitement that they are serving in the role. However, the next day, the public comment and the city's response are deleted/removed from the city's social media page.

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Discussion Questions:

(Select questions based on time , you do not need to ask all of them.)

1. Initial Reaction

- What was your immediate reaction to the public comment?
- Who might be impacted by this comment, and how?

2. Language & Assumptions

- What underlying assumptions or beliefs about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are embedded in this case study, whether stated explicitly or implied?
- Why is DEI so often framed as being *in opposition* to merit, excellence, or qualifications?

3. Organizational Response

- What did the city do well in its initial response?
- What message is sent by deleting both the comment and the response?

4. Values in Action

- What organizational values are being tested in this moment?
- What does it look like to preserve values under public pressure?

5. Leadership & Application

- What support should leaders provide in situations like this?
- What is one takeaway you can apply in your role or organization

What does this case teach us about adapting language without abandoning our values?

Closing Reflection from Breakout Discussion Summary

Case Focus:

Responding to negative social media posts following the hiring of a new director or leader.

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Key Themes & Insights from the Discussion:

Participants emphasized the importance of responding thoughtfully and strategically to negative online commentary, recognizing that social media is a form of organizational language that reflects values, leadership, and public trust.

Key takeaways included:

- Group 1 advised against deleting critical posts to avoid “adding fuel to the fire.”
- Consider limiting visibility for others while allowing the original poster to see it; avoid back-and-forth arguments.
- Encourage community advocates, especially those who know the hire, to comment positively.
- Leadership (city manager/mayor) should proactively support the new director to counter self-doubt.
- Prepare consistent, pre-approved response templates for similar situations.
- Option to reach out privately via direct message to invite a respectful conversation or meet-and-greet.

Overall Conclusion:

Participants favored transparent, minimal-engagement responses; support the hire; use templates and private outreach when appropriate.

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#2: Engaging Residents, Negativity, and Collaboration

Purpose

This breakout discussion is designed to help participants:

- Navigate challenging public discourse related to DEI
- Examine how language choices reflect organizational values
- Practice values-aligned responses under public scrutiny
- Identify practical takeaways for their own organizations

Facilitator Notes

- Encourage reflection, not debate or judgement
- Remind participants that social media conflict often escalates quickly and emotionally
- Keep the conversation respectful and grounded in practice
- Capture 1-2 key insights to share with the larger group

Case Study #2: Engaging Residents, Negativity, and Collaboration

A parks and recreation agency posts an Experience Guide cover photo contest on Facebook. A resident immediately posts the following comment reacting to what was meant to be a lighthearted and fun activity: "How about some diversity?? Why so white 😠?" The resident's comment sparks a controversial debate in the comments section, with other community members defending the contest and agency while spreading extreme negativity and hatred.

The agency recognizes the delicate nature of the situation and provides comments to recognize intent, concern, and maintain positivity. After the agency's initial response, comments begin to spiral.

The agency considers pulling down the entire post but decides to implement a 24-hour rule before responding again or removing the post. The next day, the agency issues a statement expressing disappointment with the reaction received, calling for community togetherness rather than division, and asking people to end the commentary.

The agency then sends a direct message to the originator of the comment, inviting the individual to meet and discuss the situation. The ensuing conversation is enlightening and leads to positive change, including greater intentionality with public imagery and a renewed focus on inclusivity.

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Discussion Questions:

(Select questions based on time , you do not need to ask all of them.)

1. Initial Reaction

- What was your immediate reaction to the original comment?
- How might different audiences (staff, residents, leadership, marginalized communities) experience or interpret this comment?

2. Language & Assumptions

- What underlying assumptions or beliefs about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are embedded in this case study, whether stated explicitly or implied?
- How does tone, punctuation, or emoji use, influence how intent is interpreted online?

3. Escalation & Social Media Dynamics

- Why do social media comment sections often escalate so quickly?
- What role do bystander comments play in either amplifying harm or redirecting conversation?

4. Organizational Response

- What did the agency do well in its initial response?
- What are the potential risks and benefits of the 24-hour pause before taking further action?
- How does the decision not to immediately remove the post reflect organizational values?

5. Values in Action

- What organizational values are being tested throughout this situation?
- What does it look like to remain value-aligned while still setting boundaries around harmful discourse?

6. Leadership & Application

- What guidance or support should leaders provide to staff managing these situations in real time?
- What is one takeaway you can apply to your own organization's social media or public communication practices?

What does this case teach us about adapting language, managing public dialogue, and preserving organizational values in highly visible spaces?

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Closing Reflection from Breakout Discussion Summary

Case Focus:

Assessing diversity in social media content and the timeliness of organizational responses.

Key Themes & Insights from the Discussion:

Participants examined how social media content and response timing function as organizational language; shaping public perception of inclusion, representation, and credibility. The discussion emphasized that both what is shared *and* how quickly an organization responds communicate values and priorities.

Key takeaways included:

- Group 2 noted missing context may include post imagery lacking diversity, prompting the complaint.
- Suggested an internal content audit and an external review for diversity (race, family types, age).
- Recommended responding faster than 24 hours to prevent rumors and mass sharing.
- Smaller agencies may lack control if city marketing departments own social channels.
- Use direct email to reach the database when social media control is limited.

Overall Conclusion:

Participants concluded that agencies should audit and diversify content; respond promptly; use alternative channels if social media is centralized.

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#3: Program Descriptions, Community Pushback, and “Neutral Language”

This breakout discussion is designed to help participants:

- Explore how language choices signal organizational values
- Examine community pushback related to inclusion and “neutrality”
- Practice navigating internal and external tension around DEI
- Identify practical ways to stay values-aligned under pressure

Facilitator Notes

- Encourage reflection, not debate or defensiveness
- Remind participants that language changes often trigger emotional reactions tied to identity and belonging
- Keep the discussion grounded in professional practice, not personal ideology
- Capture 1–2 key insights to share with the larger group

Case Study #3: Program Descriptions, Community Pushback, and “Neutral Language”

A park district is in the process of updating program descriptions on its website, registration platform, and seasonal brochure to reflect more inclusive and welcoming language. As part of this update, staff revise several youth program descriptions to remove gendered language and add brief statements about welcoming participants of all abilities and backgrounds.

Shortly after the updated materials are released, a long-time community member emails the Executive Director and several board members expressing concern. The email states that the park district is becoming “too political” and questions why “basic recreation programs need to include social messaging.” The individual urges the district to “stick to recreation, not social agendas,” and asks that the language be changed back to how it was before.

During the next leadership team meeting, staff express mixed reactions. Some worry about alienating long-standing residents and donors, while others feel strongly that the revised language reflects the district’s mission and values. A supervisor suggests using “neutral language” going forward to avoid controversy.

The Executive Director must determine how to respond both to the community members and internally while maintaining trust, supporting staff, and staying aligned with the agency’s stated values.



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Discussion Questions:

(Select questions based on time , you do not need to ask all of them.)

1. Initial Reaction

- What was your immediate reaction to the community member's email?
- How might different stakeholders (families, staff, donors, marginalized communities, board members) experience this situation differently?

2. Language & Assumptions

- What underlying assumptions or beliefs about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are embedded in the email and the request to use "neutral language"?
- What does "neutral" mean in this context, and who gets to define it?

3. Community & Organizational Dynamics

- Why do small changes in language sometimes generate strong reactions from the public?
- How does this situation reflect broader tensions in society about inclusion and belonging?

4. Organizational Response

- What are the risks of reverting the language to avoid controversy?
- What are the risks of standing firm on the revised language?
- How should the Executive Director balance external pressure with internal staff morale and organizational values?

5. Values in Action

- What organizational values are being tested in this situation?
- How can language be both inclusive and aligned with the agency's core mission of recreation?

6. Leadership & Application

- What guidance should leaders provide staff when their work becomes publicly challenged?
- What is one takeaway you can apply to how your organization communicates with the community about inclusion?

What does this case teach us about how language, public perception, and organizational values intersect and how leaders can adapt language while preserving what matters most?

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Closing Reflection from Breakout Discussion Summary

Case Focus:

Inclusive language in youth programs and managing public push back.

Key Themes & Insights from the Discussion:

Participants discussed how program names, public responses, and meeting facilitation serve as organizational language, particularly when agencies face questions or resistance around inclusion in youth programming.

Key takeaways included:

- Group 3 highlighted renaming programs (e.g., “Daddy-Daughter Dance” to “Family Dance”) to promote inclusivity.
- Some departments are preparing through internal advisory groups but are delaying action until a situation requires it.
- Participants noted the importance of acknowledging recurring vocal community members (who are politically plugged in (“Bobby Sue”)) during meetings and through social media, while using neutral, inclusive language.
- Aligning responses with the agency’s mission and values was emphasized when addressing public challenges.
- Monitoring State High School Activity Associations for policies and language on participation (e.g., trans athletes) was identified as a helpful reference point and resource.

Overall Conclusion:

Participants concluded that agencies should lead with inclusive, neutral language and anchor decisions in clearly stated mission and values when navigating public push back.

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#4: Staff Training, Evolving Terminology, and Fear of “Getting It Wrong”

This breakout discussion is designed to help participants:

- Explore how fear and uncertainty affect learning and behavior
- Examine resistance to evolving language in the workplace
- Identify ways to support staff while maintaining organizational values
- Practice leading through discomfort and change

Facilitator Notes

- Encourage honesty without blame
- Normalize fear and uncertainty while keeping the conversation values-centered
- Avoid framing this as “right vs. wrong”
- Capture 1–2 key insights to share with the larger group

Case Study #4: Staff Training, Evolving Terminology, and Fear of “Getting It Wrong”

A municipal parks and recreation department is preparing for its annual staff training for full-time and seasonal employees. This year, leadership has proposed adding a short training segment on inclusive customer service and respectful communication with patrons of all backgrounds.

When the draft agenda is shared, several supervisors raise concerns. One supervisor says they are worried staff will feel “policed” about language and afraid to speak naturally with the public. Another shares that they personally feel overwhelmed by changing terminology and fears saying the wrong thing. A third supervisor suggests removing the session altogether; focusing only on customer service basics.

Meanwhile, frontline staff have privately shared that they want clearer guidance on how to interact respectfully with patrons, especially when situations involve disability accommodations, gender identity, or cultural differences.

The leadership team must decide whether, and how, to move forward with the training in a way that supports learning, reduces fear, and reinforces the department’s core values without positioning inclusion as a compliance exercise.

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Discussion Questions:

(Select questions based on time , you do not need to ask all of them.)

1. Initial Reaction

- What was your immediate reaction to the supervisors' concerns?
- What emotions or experiences might be driving their reactions?

2. Language & Assumptions

- What assumptions about inclusion, language, or professionalism are reflected in the phrase “feeling policed”?
- How do fears about “getting it wrong” shape behavior in the workplace?

3. Staff Perspectives

- Why might frontline staff be asking for more guidance rather than less?
- How do these two perspectives (supervisors and frontline staff) reflect different experiences of the same issue?

4. Organizational Response

- What are the risks of removing the training segment?
- What are the risks of moving forward without addressing staff fear?

5. Values in Action

- What organizational values are being tested in this situation?
- How can learning environments be both supportive and accountable?

6. Leadership & Application

- How should leaders frame conversations about evolving language and inclusion?
- What is one action your organization could take to reduce fear while strengthening inclusive practice?

What does this case teach us about creating learning spaces where people feel supported, challenged, and aligned with shared values?

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Closing Reflection from Breakout Discussion Summary

Case Focus:

Training staff for difficult conversations and internal communication.

Key Themes & Insights from the Discussion:

Participants focused on how staff training and internal communication systems function as organizational language shaping consistency, professionalism, and trust during challenging interactions.

Key takeaways included:

- Group 4 emphasized role-playing to build consistency and composure during challenging interactions.
- Include mentoring, observation, feedback, and coaching in trainings.
- Remind staff they may be recorded; practice to ensure accuracy and professionalism.
- Foster authentic engagement by setting aside personal feelings and listening to understand.
- Bridge gaps between supervisors and front-line staff by over-communicating decisions and the “why,” tied to values.

Overall Conclusion:

Participants concluded that agencies should institutionalize practice-based training and values-based communication across all levels of the organization.

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#5: Board Governance, Public Narrative, and Organizational Change

This breakout discussion is designed to help participants:

- Explore how governance decisions shape organizational values
- Examine the relationship between public language and public trust
- Practice navigating political, financial, and ethical pressures
- Identify leadership strategies for value-aligned decision-making

Facilitator Notes

- Encourage thoughtful dialogue rather than debate
- Keep the focus on governance, leadership, and values
- Avoid framing this as partisan or political
- Capture 1–2 key insights to share with the larger group

Case Study #5: Board Governance, Public Narrative, and Organizational Change

A park district has long stated its commitment to inclusion, access, and community belonging in its strategic plan. Following a national conversation that has heightened public scrutiny around DEI-related language, several board members express concern about how the district's values are being communicated externally.

During a board meeting, one commissioner suggests removing certain words, such as equity, belonging, and inclusive, from public-facing documents to "avoid unnecessary attention." Another board member agrees, stating that while they personally support the values, they believe the language has become "too charged" and could put future funding at risk. Two other board members disagree and want the language to remain. The Executive Director is asked to return with revised language options for the next meeting.

Senior leadership is divided. Some believe adapting language is a pragmatic move that preserves the work itself. Others worry that removing explicit language undermines transparency and erodes trust.



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Discussion Questions:

(Select questions based on time , you do not need to ask all of them.)

1. Initial Reaction

- What was your immediate reaction to the board members' comments?
- Which perspectives felt most familiar or realistic to you?

2. Language & Assumptions

- What assumptions are reflected in the belief that words like equity, belonging, and inclusion create risk?
- How does language shape public understanding of organizational values?

3. Policy & Practice

- How can standardized policies unintentionally create barriers?
- What does this case reveal about the difference between treating everyone the same and meeting people where they are?

4. Governance & Power

- What role should a board play in shaping or limiting public-facing language?
- How does power show up in this situation between the board and the Executive Director?

5. Organizational Response

- What are the potential consequences of removing the words from public documents?
- What are the potential consequences of keeping them?

6. Values in Action

- What values are being tested in this situation?
- How does this scenario reflect the tension between public perception and internal integrity?

7. Leadership & Application

- How should an Executive Director approach the request to revise the language?
- What is one way leaders can preserve trust while navigating board pressure?

What does this case teach us about organizational courage, public narrative, and the role of leadership when values are challenged?



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Closing Reflection from Breakout Discussion Summary

Case Focus:

Reconciling board and staff views on equity, belonging, and inclusion language.

Key Themes & Insights from the Discussion:

Participants examined how governance decisions and public-facing language reflect organizational values, authority, and alignment, particularly when boards and staff define key terms differently.

Key takeaways included:

- Group 5 discussed board members seeking to remove terms (equity, belonging, inclusiveness) from public-facing documents.
- Staff and board define these terms differently; the executive director must research board, staff, and community perspectives.
- The executive director needs to present alternative wording and revised language at the next board meeting.
- Clarify board authority in relation to the strategic plan; expect substantial dialogue among stakeholders.

Overall Conclusion:

Participants concluded that agencies should conduct stakeholder research, propose revised and aligned language, and clarify governance scope to navigate differing perspectives effectively.



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#6: Fairness, Inclusion, Accountability, and Leadership Integrity

This breakout discussion is designed to help participants:

- Examine how policies and systems communicate messages about fairness and belonging
- Explore how “neutral” rules can create unequal access
- Practice value-aligned leadership when efficiency and equity collide
- Identify ways to preserve accountability while expanding inclusion

Facilitator Notes

- Reinforce that language includes how policies are explained, enforced, and experienced
- Encourage participants to focus on impact, not just intent
- Avoid positioning this as “good people vs. bad people”
- Capture 1–2 key insights to share with the larger group

Case Study #6: Fairness, Inclusion, Accountability, and Leadership Integrity

A parks and recreation agency implements a new Online-Only Program Registration and Payment Policy intended to standardize how services are delivered to the public. Leadership describes the policy as “fair” because all residents are required to use the same digital system, follow the same steps, and submit payment through the same online portal.

Shortly after the rollout, frontline staff begin to notice unintended impacts. Individuals from historically marginalized communities encounter more barriers when trying to access services, particularly residents with language differences, disabilities, limited access to technology, or no credit or debit cards. Some families struggle to navigate the system, miss deadlines, or are unable to complete registrations, while others are turned away for not meeting the newly standardized requirements.

When staff raise these concerns with leadership, the response emphasizes consistency and neutrality. Leaders express discomfort with allowing in-person registrations, phone assistance, or alternative payment options, noting that the policy was designed to ensure fairness and avoid preferential treatment.

Within the agency, tensions grow. Some staff feel the policy prioritizes efficiency over equity and undermines the organization’s commitment to inclusion. Others worry that changing the policy or offering accommodations could be perceived by the public as favoritism or a lack of accountability.

Leadership must determine how to uphold fairness, inclusion, and accountability while ensuring that the way services are delivered does not unintentionally exclude the very communities the agency is meant to serve.



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Discussion Questions:

(Select questions based on time , you do not need to ask all of them.)

1. Initial Reaction

- What was your immediate reaction to the online-only policy and its impact?
- Who do you think is most affected by the way this policy is implemented?

2. Language, Systems & Assumptions

- What assumptions about fairness and responsibility are reflected in leadership's response?
- What does the online-only system communicate about who the agency expects its customers to be?

3. Policy & Practice

- How can a standardized system unintentionally create barriers?
- What does this case reveal about the difference between treating everyone the same and ensuring everyone can participate?

4. Organizational Response

- What messages does maintaining the online-only policy as written send to different communities?
- What messages might flexibility, assistance, or alternative options communicate instead?

5. Values in Action

- What organizational values are being tested in this situation?
- How do policies and procedures signal what an organization truly prioritizes?

6. Leadership & Application

- How should leaders respond when frontline staff identify unintended barriers?
- What is one way your organization could change how it delivers services to promote both accountability and access?

What does this case teach us about how policies, systems, and explanations function as language and how leaders can use them to preserve fairness, inclusion, and accountability at the same time?



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Closing Reflection from Breakout Discussion Summary

Case Focus:

Policy vs. People and addressing unintended consequences.

Key Themes & Insights from the Discussion:

Participants discussed how policies can unintentionally create harm when applied rigidly, emphasizing the importance of balancing process with purpose and people-centered decision-making.

Key takeaways included:

- A group highlighted payment policy issues creating unintended harm.
- Core guidance: Don't be overly bound by policy; prioritize people and purpose over rigid process.

Overall Conclusion:

Participants concluded that agencies should reassess policies through a people-and-purpose lens. Use policy as a tool—not a barrier.



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January 22, 2026 | Action Planning Worksheet

#7: Cultural Representation, Design Responsibility, and Leadership Courage

This breakout discussion is designed to help participants:

- Explore how images, symbols, and design function as language
- Examine how representation communicates values and belonging
- Practice responding when concerns emerge after work is already completed
- Identify leadership approaches that center justice, equity, and inclusion

Facilitator Notes

- Remind participants that language is not only verbal or written; it also includes visuals, symbols, and representation
- Encourage curiosity rather than defensiveness
- Keep the focus on leadership response and organizational values
- Capture 1–2 key insights to share with the larger group

Case Study #7: Cultural Representation, Design Responsibility, and Leadership Courage

A parks and recreation agency is collaborating with an external company to design a highly visible element intended to represent and serve the community. The design will be prominently featured and is expected to reflect the agency's values and the diversity of the people it serves.

During a virtual presentation of the proposed design, a senior leader begins to feel concerned that certain aspects of the concept may be culturally insensitive and potentially offensive to members of the community and to some staff. Unsure whether this reaction reflects a personal perspective or a broader concern, the leader discreetly reaches out to several staff members during the meeting for their input.

The staff, who bring a range of cultural identities and lived experiences, confirm that the design reinforces harmful stereotypes and would likely alienate parts of the community. These concerns surface in real time, while the contractor is still presenting the work and expressing confidence and pride in the design.

At the same time, it is clear that the external company has invested significant time, creativity, and effort into the project. Staff observing the meeting are paying close attention to how leadership responds when cultural sensitivity concerns emerge.

The leader must decide how to address the situation in a way that centers justice, equity, and inclusion, while navigating power dynamics, preserving professional relationships, and determining how to respond when concerns emerge after substantial work has already been completed.

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January 22, 2026 | Action Planning Worksheet

Discussion Questions:

(Select questions based on time , you do not need to ask all of them.)

1. Initial Reaction

- What was your immediate reaction to the design situation?
- What might the leader be feeling in this moment?

2. Language & Assumptions

- How does this case demonstrate that language includes more than words?
- What messages do images, symbols, and design send about who belongs?

3. Lived Experience & Perspective

- Why is it significant that staff with diverse lived experiences raised concerns?
- How might the design be experienced differently by different community members?

4. Organizational Response

- What are the risks of addressing the concerns in the moment?
- What are the risks of not addressing them?

5. Values in Action

- What organizational values are being tested in this situation?
- How do justice, equity, and inclusion show up in design and representation?

6. Leadership & Application

- How should leaders respond when they learn something is harmful after work is already done?
- What is one way your organization could ensure inclusive representation in future projects?

What does this case teach us about how visuals, symbols, and representation communicate values and how leadership courage is required when that communication needs to change?

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Closing Reflection from Breakout Discussion Summary

Case Focus:

Aligning designs with intended representation.

Key Themes & Insights from the Discussion:

Participants explored how design decisions communicate organizational values and intent, particularly when representation does not align with stated goals or community expectations.

Key takeaways included:

- Group 7 addressed a design that did not reflect intended representation.
- Identified a gap in understanding between staff and contractor; recommended pausing to gather staff feedback mid-meeting.
- Maintain the contractor relationship while realigning on goals; ensure alignment among community, agency, and contractor.
- Emphasized professional integrity for staff and agency throughout.

Overall Conclusion:

Participants concluded that agencies should pause, realign objectives, maintain relationships, and uphold professional standards.