

# Mayor Curtatone's Culture of Curiosity

## *Building Data Capabilities at Somerville City Hall*

### *Educator Guide*

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## Overview

This Educator Guide is designed to assist instructors in teaching this case to students and practitioners. It is based on [case pedagogy](#), which invites participants to put themselves in the shoes of the case protagonist(s) and imagine how they would respond to the circumstances. (See Appendix 1.) Participants should read the teaching case in advance and identify key issues as a preliminary step toward meeting the learning objectives. Instructors may then use the time in the classroom to guide participants in exploring the issues and examining the challenges in the case; to introduce key concepts, tools, and frameworks; and to assist participants in applying their learning to their own environments and challenges.

This guide includes learning objectives, a synopsis, key questions, a roadmap for discussion, suggested reading, and appendices with additional pedagogical information and theoretical applications. The roadmap and appendices are offered to initiate meaningful conversation but are by no means the only way to teach the case. Each educator or facilitator should feel free to design their own teaching plans; both the structure and the time allotted for each component are suggestions.

## Learning Objectives

This case study is part of a portfolio of cases that are designed to help city leaders build data-analytic capabilities in city government. The overarching learning objectives of the portfolio are to help participants explore and understand 1) why to use data; 2) how to use data; and 3) what to do to become—and remain—a more informed city hall.

This case explores each of the learning objectives in more detail:

1. How data can make a city better
  - a. How can using data make a city more effective, efficient, equitable, accountable, and collaborative?
2. How to use data as a leader
  - a. How can you ask for and interpret relevant data, probe assumptions and beliefs, and manage performance?

- b. How do you identify opportunities to use data to improve all aspects of government functions across the board?
3. What to do to become or remain a city hall that uses data
  - a. How do you lead organizational change and combat resistance to data use?
  - b. How do you generate, understand, and maintain data that is as complete, accurate, timely, and as accessible as possible across the city?
  - c. How do you instill, across city hall, leadership that builds and maintains a data-informed city?
  - d. How do you create the necessary conditions for a data-informed organization?
  - e. How do you build a learning organization?

## Case Synopsis

For sixteen years, longer than any mayor in the city's history, Mayor Joseph Curtatone has led his hometown of Somerville, Massachusetts. The case begins in January 2020 when the mayor is looking ahead at his recently-won, two-year term—and to the city's future without him at the helm. Although he would never feel his work was done, he wondered whether it was time to pass the baton, and if not now, when?

Curtatone, with his intense curiosity for how things work and how they can be improved, brought data and evidence-based decision making to Somerville—a city with a checkered past of corruption and controversy—when he was inaugurated in 2004. He and his team quickly stood up a performance-management system called SomerStat—a constituent services 311 call line under the tagline “one call to city hall”; revamped the city's budget to be more transparent and tied to strategic goals; and championed an evidence-based, systems-thinking approach to reducing obesity among the city's schoolchildren and other residents. By 2006, Somerville was hailed a “Model City” by the *Boston Globe*.

The case details how Mayor Curtatone's culture of curiosity permeated city hall and led to numerous positive outcomes and innovations. One former chief of staff said that the city “runs on Joe Power,” but Curtatone felt that he empowered others to own their ideas. “I've tried to . . . ensure that the change is not going to be driven by me. I'll be out front. I'll take the hits, I'll fight for it, so I hope, at least, people feel, ‘The mayor—he's got our back.’”<sup>1</sup>

Still, Curtatone knew that “bad leadership can bring down any organization in a city real fast. And it takes years to recover.” He wondered when the right time would be to go and what would remain of the data-informed, decision-making capabilities that he had helped build. What could he do to ensure that even after he was out of office, his nearly two-decade investment would continue to pay dividends to the people of Somerville?

## Key Questions

1. What did Curtatone do to make city hall more data-informed?
2. When Curtatone leaves office, what do you predict would remain of the data capabilities he built over the past eighteen years? What would fall away if a new mayor does not sufficiently pay attention to it?

3. If you were Curtatone, what would you have done to set the city up for success after you had gone?
4. If you were the incoming mayor after Curtatone, what would you keep, stop, and start doing?

## Roadmap for Discussion

**Introduction** (5 minutes): Briefly state the goal of the session in reference to the case, cite specific major conflicts facing the protagonist, and foreshadow broader learning objectives.

**Exploration** (30–35 minutes): Use class discussion, “buzz groups,” and board work to examine the issues and options confronting the protagonists.

**Diagnosis** (30–40 minutes): Introduce key concepts, frameworks, and tools to help participants pinpoint possible solutions to major conflicts in the case.

**Application** (10–15 minutes, optional): Ask participants to relate the concepts and frameworks to their own organizations’ challenges.

**Wrap-Up and Takeaways** (5–10 minutes): Review the learning objectives and discuss insights most relevant to the participants’ organizations’ challenges.

### Introduction (5 minutes)

Briefly review the case, perhaps starting with a young, curious, ambitious mayor who takes the helm of a “static” and bureaucratic city hall, quickly starts several important initiatives for using data to make decisions, and goes on to serve nine terms with numerous accolades along the way, ending with the question of how he has led such a transformation.

### Exploration (30–35 minutes):

Open the discussion by asking the class:

- *What were some early barriers Curtatone had to overcome? How difficult was it to transform Somerville City Hall into a learning organization?*
  - Sample participant responses:
    - The case mentions that many city hall staff members at the beginning were uncomfortable with the data-centered approach, and they may have thought, for example, that the mayor aimed to use SomerStat to be punitive. The mayor had to be consistent in delivering the message that change was coming, and change was good. His SomerStat staff also had to build trust across the organization and prove that they were indeed endeavoring to work with departments to help them secure what they needed to improve performance.
    - Changing the culture in Somerville may have been easier compared to other cities; At the time, Somerville was fortunate to be located near many high-quality academic institutions with a constant supply of graduate students and others who are drawn to innovative practices.

- *How did becoming data-informed improve the city, and what are some examples?*
  - Solicit answers and note them on the board. The responses may fall into the broad categories of more effective, efficient, equitable, accountable, and collaborative.
    - More effective:
      - better problem identification (e.g., 311 could now help identify growing issues throughout the city.)
      - policy design (e.g., Gathering data through SomerVision 2030 helped spur a zoning overhaul.)
      - operational decision-making (e.g., 311 had an evidence base for why they took on certain customer service responsibilities.)
      - evaluation of results (e.g., SomerStat meetings managed performance of departments.)
    - More efficient:
      - smarter allocation of time and money by examining business processes and budgets (e.g., SomerStat performed staff analyses, provided data for negotiations, etc.)
    - More equitable:
      - disaggregating data to diagnose and reduce social and racial inequality, and monitor progress (e.g., ResiStat was used to correct biases from 311 data, and demographic data was used to predict health challenges, such as obesity.)
    - More accountable:
      - creating transparency and building legitimacy and trust through public dashboards (e.g., ResiStat invited the public to attend meetings and ask questions, and the city presented its budget through an online tool, etc.)
    - More collaborative:
      - investing in open data and cross-silo and cross-sector, data-analytic capabilities, (e.g., The city partnered with Tufts University through Shape Up Somerville.)
- *What resources did the city need, and what conditions were necessary to build a data-informed city government?*
  - technology infrastructure, hardware, and software
  - data standards
  - access to data within and across departments
  - staff
  - business processes and practices focused on data collection and analysis, etc.

If the topic of an enabling culture hasn't been discussed already, you might bring it to the fore in the context of a necessary condition.

- *What made up the culture at Somerville City Hall?*

Participants may respond with some of the following answers:

- The city had an attractive vision and noble values: an “exceptional place to live, work, play and raise a family” as well as being data-informed and customer-service centric.

- Senior staff reflected the city's values: many department heads' high regard for data and public service.
- There were norms and mechanisms for decision making: using SomerStat to help make wide-ranging and far-reaching decisions.
- Two-way communication—such as ideas for innovation coming from both staff and the mayor—was embraced: the mayor's charge to “bring me your wackiest ideas.”
- The city's budget reflected its culture: literally adding performance metrics to the city's budget and funding the SomerStat team, the “rat czar,” Shape Up Somerville, etc.

Harvard Business School professor, Francis Frei, has written, “In short, culture guides discretionary behavior and it picks up where the employee handbook leaves off. Culture tells us how to respond to an unprecedented service request. It tells us whether to risk telling our bosses about our new ideas, and whether to surface or hide problems. Employees make hundreds of decisions on their own every day, and culture is our guide. Culture tells us what to do when the CEO [or mayor] isn't in the room, which is of course most of the time.”<sup>2</sup>

Ask participants to reflect on how their own colleagues and teams perform when the mayor or other leader is in or out of the room.

### **Diagnosis** (30–40 minutes)

After serving nine terms, Curtatone pondered whether it was a good time to leave city hall.

- *How might the mayor think about answering this question?*

In Frei's work, she defines leadership as your presence empowering other people, and ensuring that your impact continues into your absence.<sup>3</sup>

- *What can the mayor do in the presence of city staff and constituents that will continue into his absence?*

Frei argues that it is through the levers of trust, love, and inclusion that one's leadership endures in one's absence.

*Trust*, the foundational element, requires authenticity, empathy, and logic. (See Appendix 2 for a diagram that can be drawn on the board or shared via a slide presentation.)

- **Authenticity:** a leader is more likely to be trusted if their team feels they know the leader as a “real” person.
- **Logic:** a leader is more likely to be trusted if they seem rigorous in their reasoning.
- **Empathy:** a leader is more likely to be trusted if it's believed their interests include people beyond themselves.

*Love*, in this context, means setting up others for success. Frei says that people thrive when they are not only in the presence of high standards, but also of someone who they feel is deeply devoted to their success. Importantly, these two conditions must be occurring simultaneously, even if this might run opposite to human nature (i.e., when you're deeply devoted to someone's success, you shouldn't lower the bar for them).

*Inclusion* refers to setting more people up for success. It also entails actively managing people's differences. Frei argues that beyond inclusion being "the right thing to do," it creates an "unbeatable advantage," as new knowledge can be accessed and performance can be heightened.<sup>4</sup> (See Appendix 3 for a diagram that can be drawn on the board or shared via a slide presentation.)

Using Frei's framing, ask students to assess how Curtatone might have expected the city to function in his absence.

- *What distinguished his style and how did that fit/conflict with Frei's framework?*
- *What other conditions might have been important for leaving a city set up for success?*

### **Application** (optional, 10–15 minutes)

Have students work together in groups or in plenary to apply the concepts and frameworks to their own collaborative challenges.

### **Wrap Up and Takeaways** (5–10 minutes)

Discuss insights most relevant to participants' organizations' challenges. Some sample, high-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion are the following:

- Using data intentionally and systematically can help public leaders better understand problems and needs and better monitor and evaluate the city's response to them.
- Formulating a vision, setting an example, enforcing norms, and upholding values are imperative to unleash the capabilities of data analytics in cities.
- Part of a leader's role is to diagnose resistance to change and identify levers to change practices and overcome obstacles to using data.
- Being able to learn, improve, and innovate continuously as an organization is no easy feat; the work of spotting new trends, practices, and technologies, as well as being imaginative in how to use them for the benefit of cities, is never finished.
- City leaders who really achieve greatness don't just leave a city better than they found it; they develop the people around them to carry on the work to lead and thrive after they have gone.

## **Suggested Reading**

Jorrit de Jong, Fernando Monge, and Stephen Goldsmith, "The Art of Governing through Questions," *Governing Magazine*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.governing.com/archive/col-art-governing-questions.html>.

Quinton Mayne, Jorrit de Jong, and Fernando Monge, "State Capabilities for Problem-Oriented Governance," Oxford Academic, in *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance*, November 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ppmgov/gvz023>.

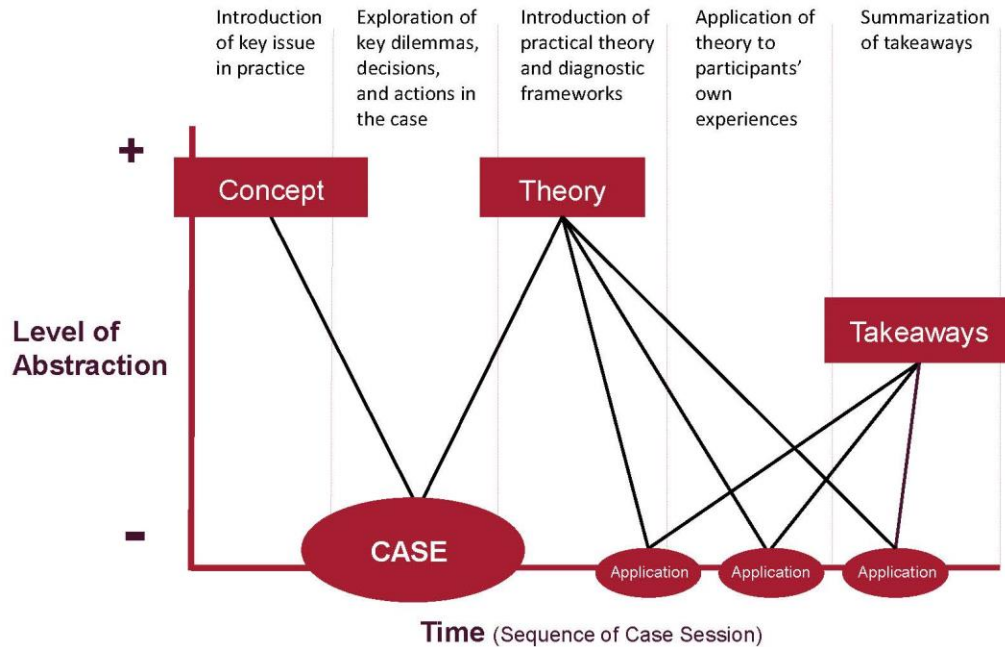
Frances X. Frei and Anne Morriss, *Unleashed: The Unapologetic Leader's Guide to Empowering Everyone Around You*, June 2020, Harvard Business School Publishing.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Designing a Case Session

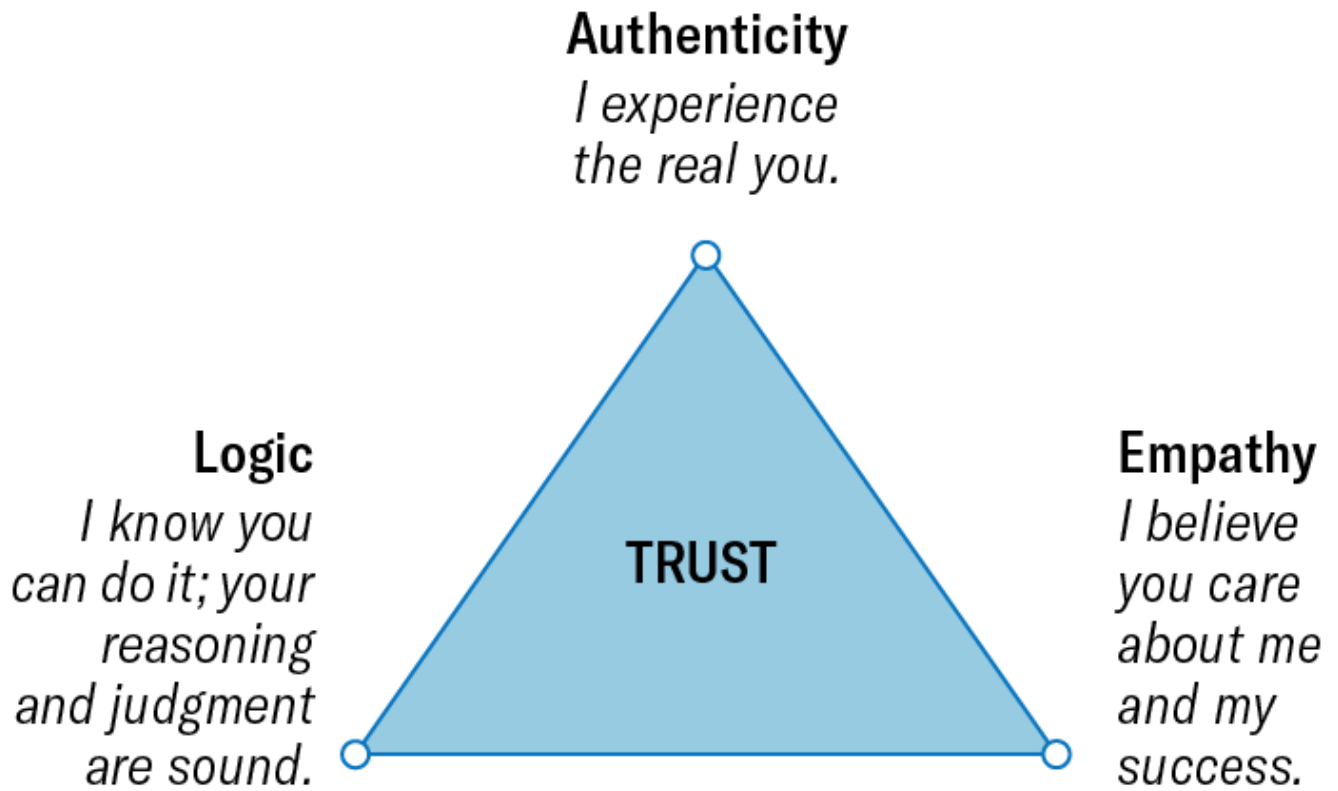
#### One Approach to Designing a Case Session

A case session aims to increase participants’ ability to use theory and frameworks to guide their thought and action in practical circumstances. To train the mental muscle and integrate theory and practice, a case session moves up and down in level of abstraction frequently, testing and refining abstract theory through practical application.



Jorrit de Jong, 2020

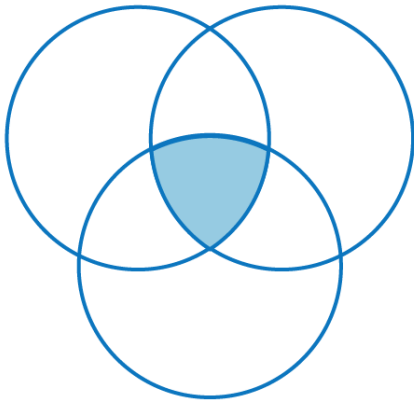
Appendix 2



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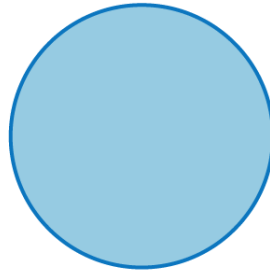


**Appendix 3**



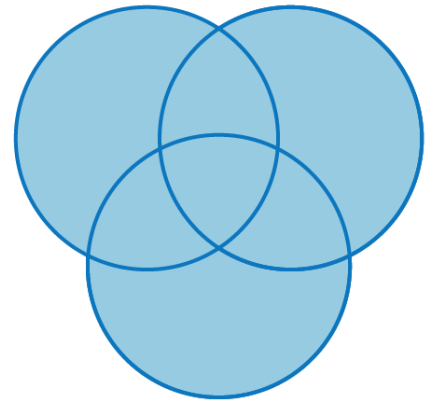
**Diverse teams**

A diverse store of knowledge is partly shared.



**Homogenous teams**

A common store of knowledge is fully shared.



**Inclusive teams**

A diverse store of knowledge is fully shared.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> In-person interview conducted by Alexander Shermansong and Neil Kleiman, who both teach at NYU Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, on February 19, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Frances Frei and Anne Morriss, "Culture Takes Over When the CEO Leaves the Room," *Harvard Business Review*, May 10, 2012, <https://hbr.org/2012/05/culture-takes-over-when-the-ce>, accessed April 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Frances X. Frei and Anne Morriss, "Begin with Trust," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/05/begin-with-trust>, accessed April 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Frances X. Frei and Anne Morriss, "Begin with Trust," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/05/begin-with-trust>, accessed April 2021.