



City Council

Agenda Item

Subject: Home Rule Charter Midterm Review Committee Findings & Recommendations
Meeting: City Council - Apr 07 2025
From: Kristen Bobzien, Interim City Manager/Chief Financial Officer

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Home Rule Charter Midterm Review Committee Findings & Recommendations

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

NA

STAFF RECOMMENDATION / SUGGESTED MOTION:

Presentation Only; No Action Required.

ATTACHMENT(S):

[Staff Report Summary](#)

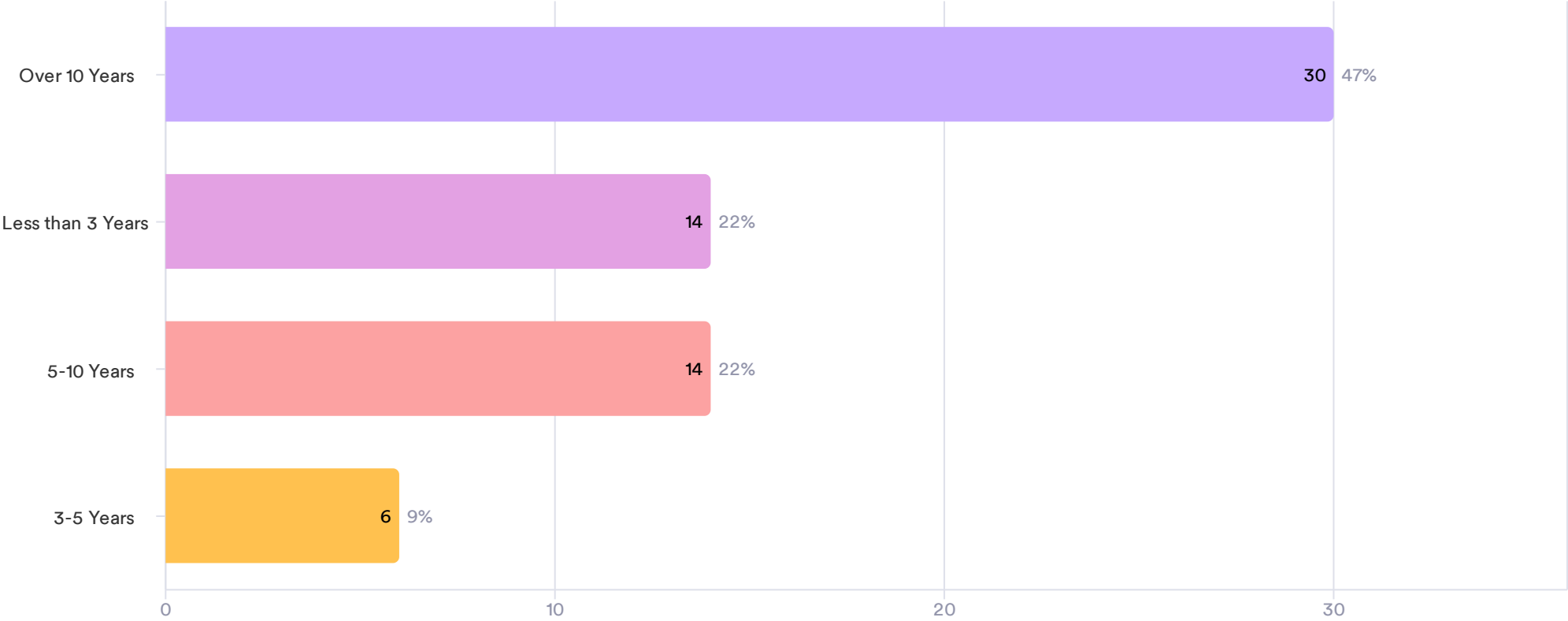
[Department Heads Summary](#)

HRC Review

Staff Summary

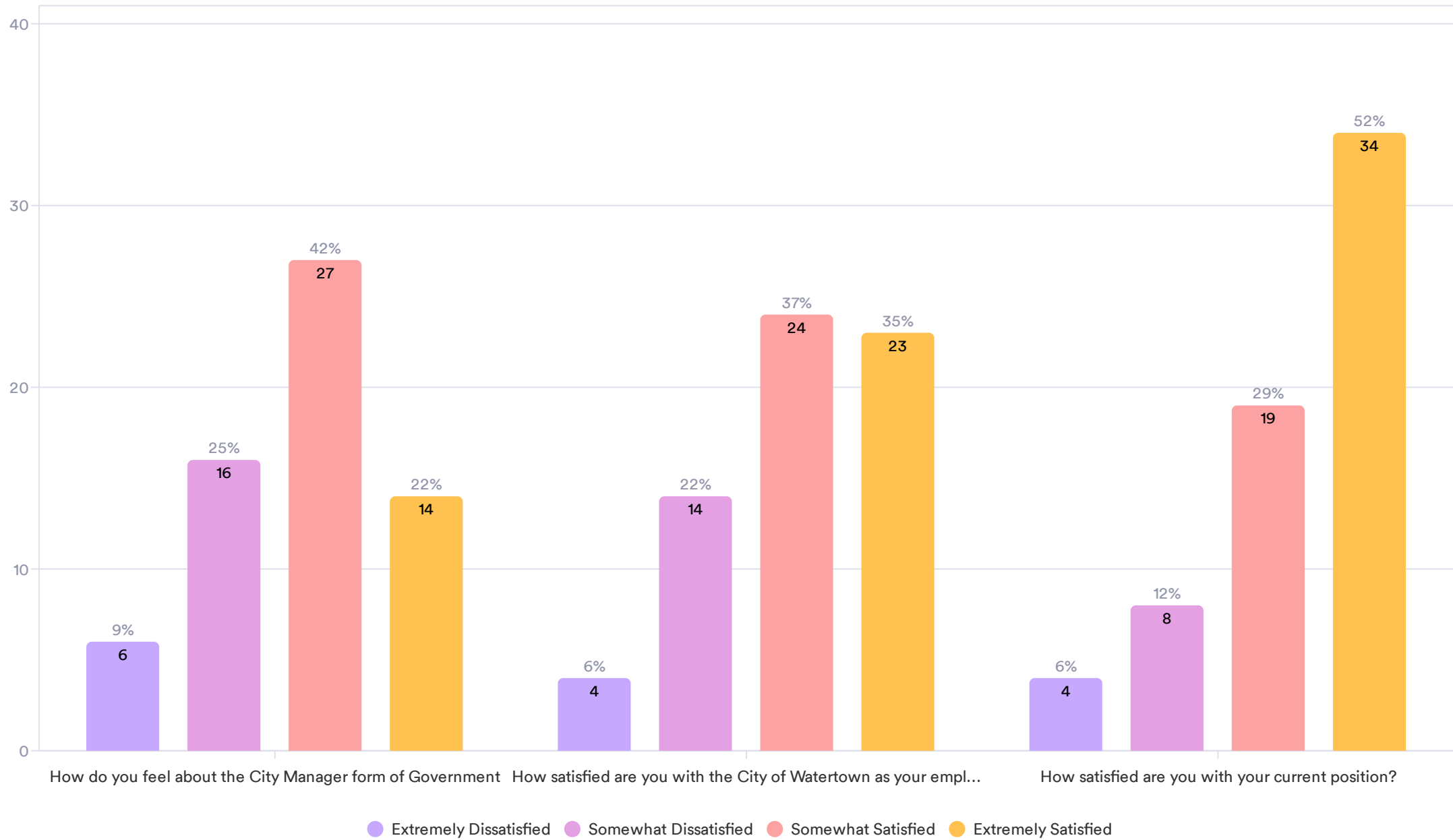
Years of Employment

64 Responses- 1 Empty



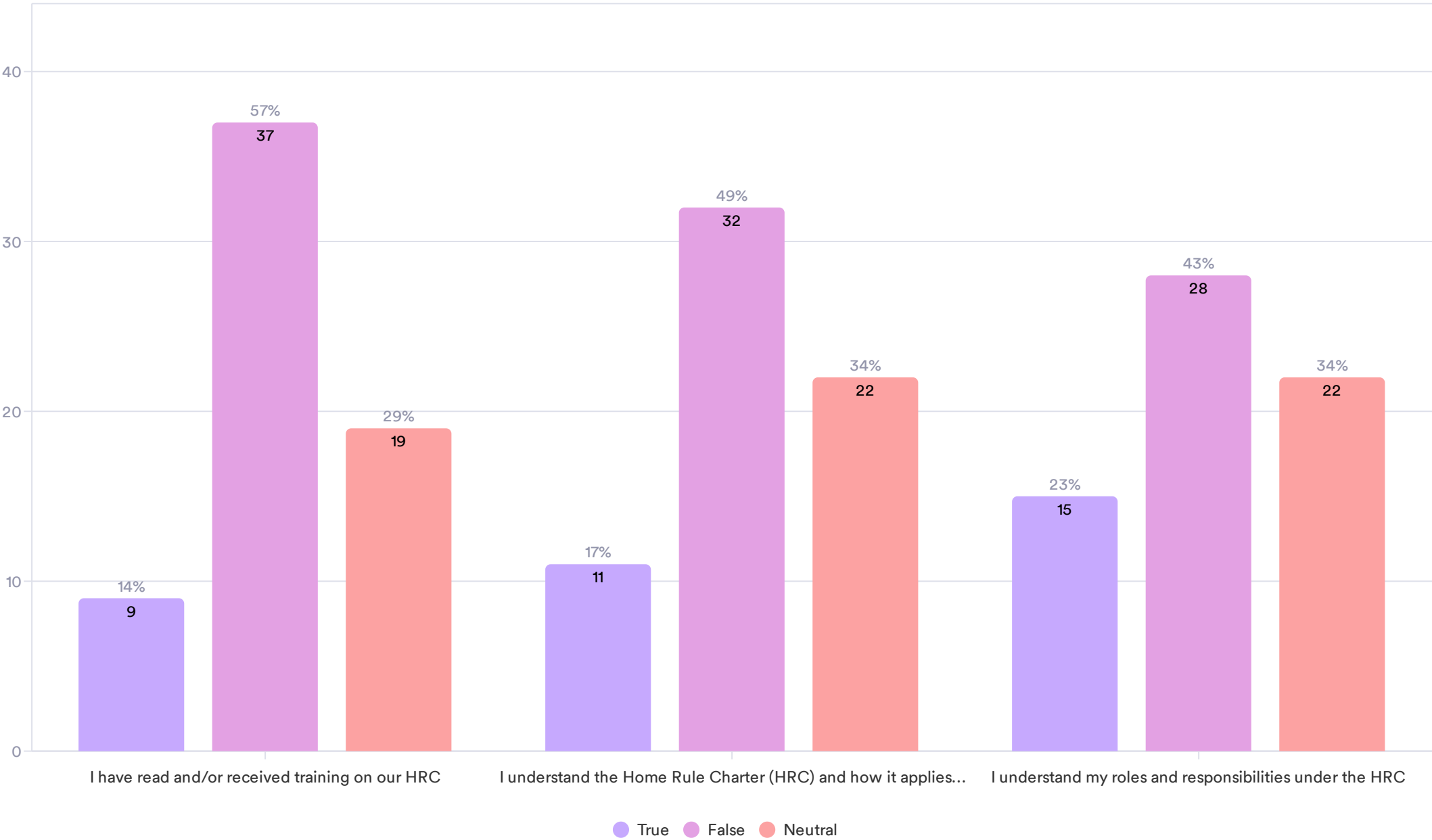
Section 1 : Please answer the following questions as they pertain to you:

65 Responses



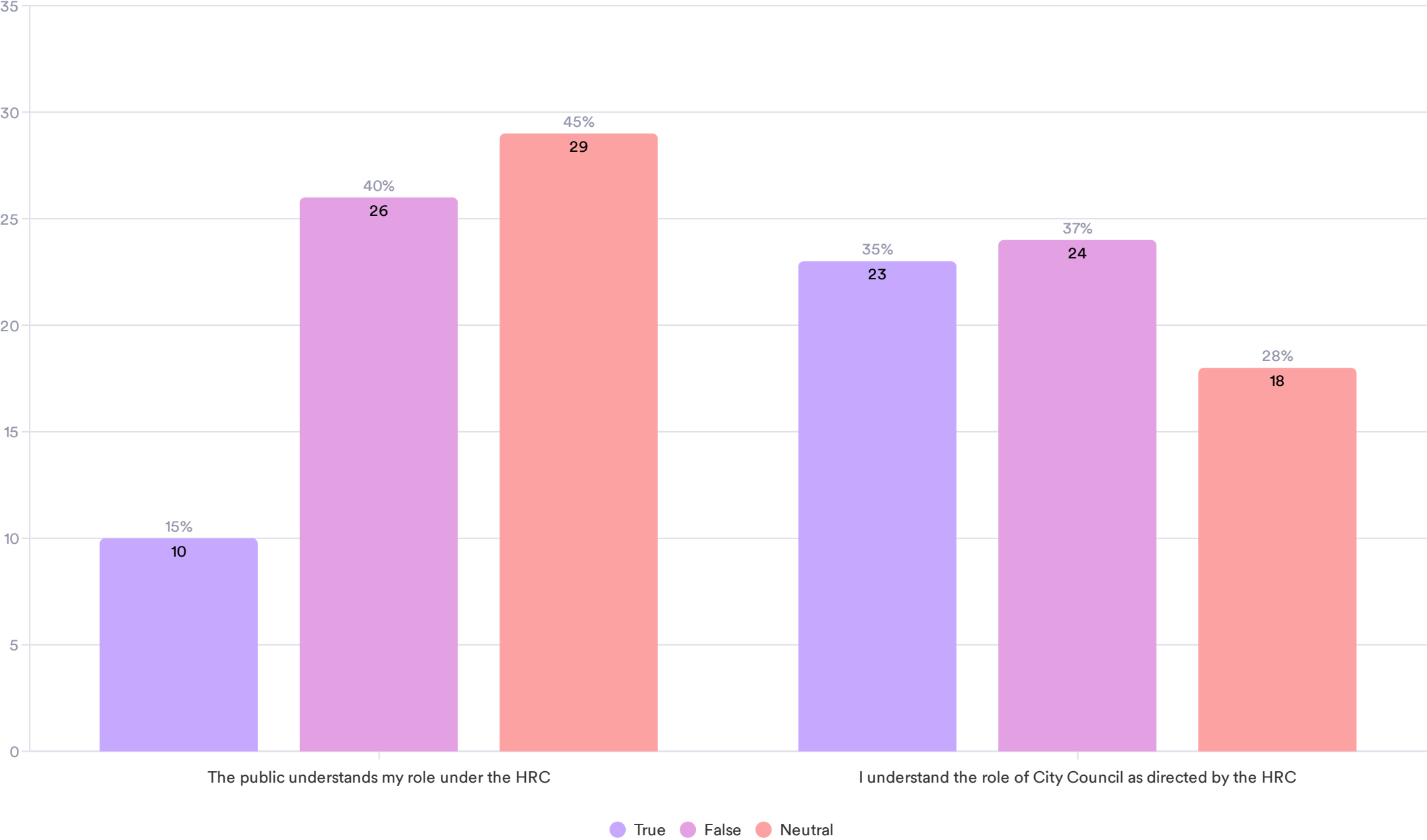
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65 Responses



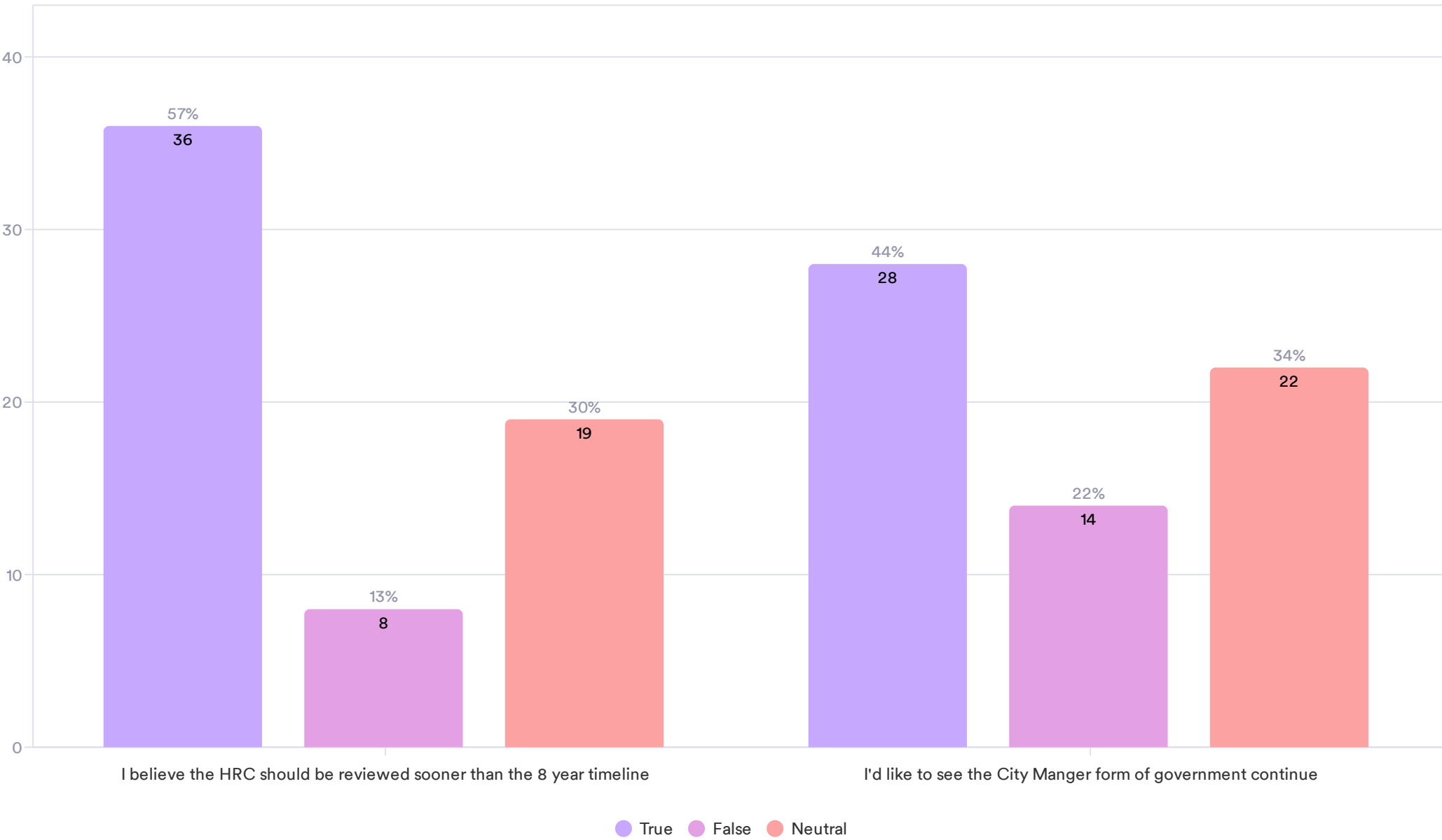
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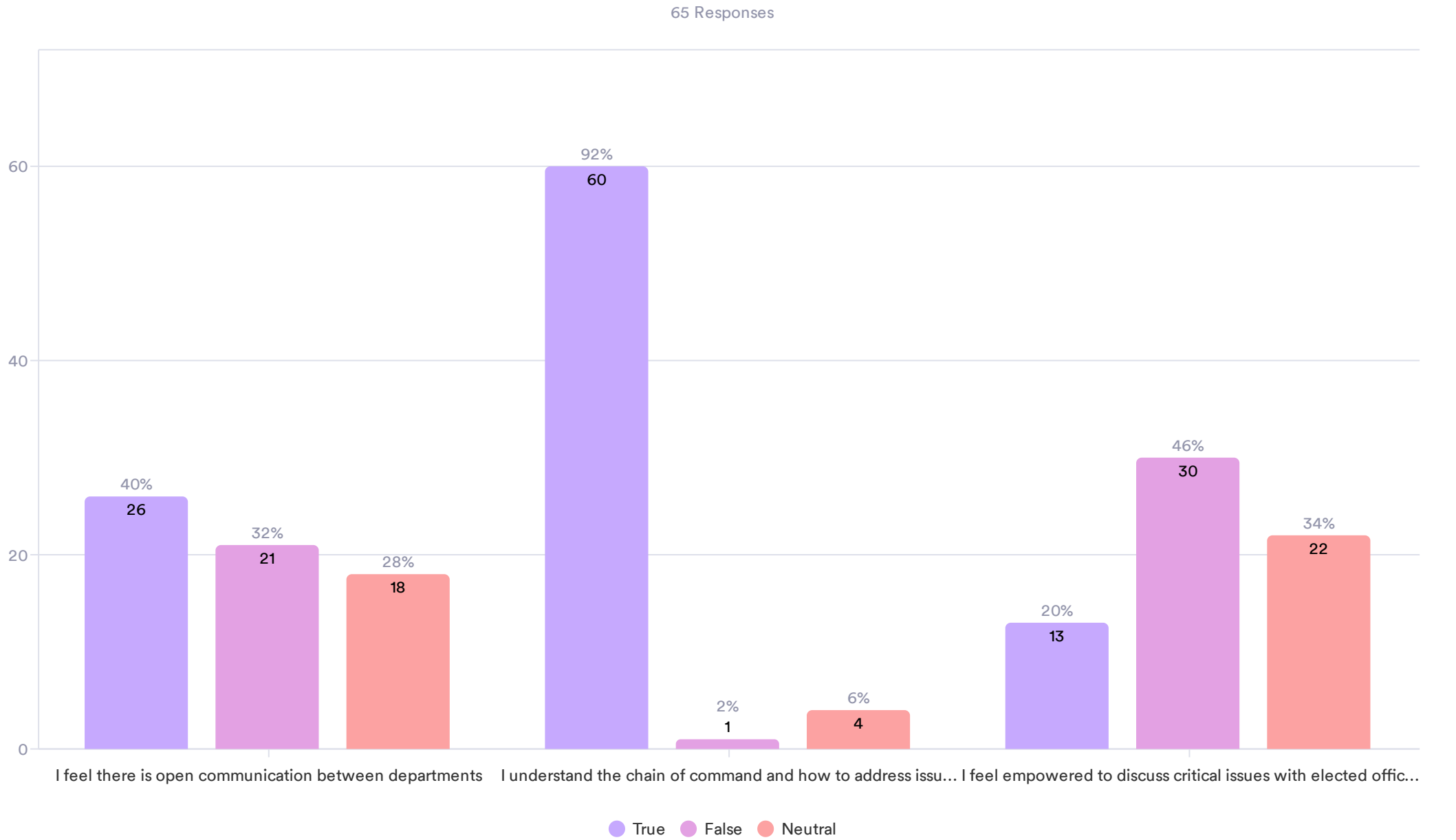


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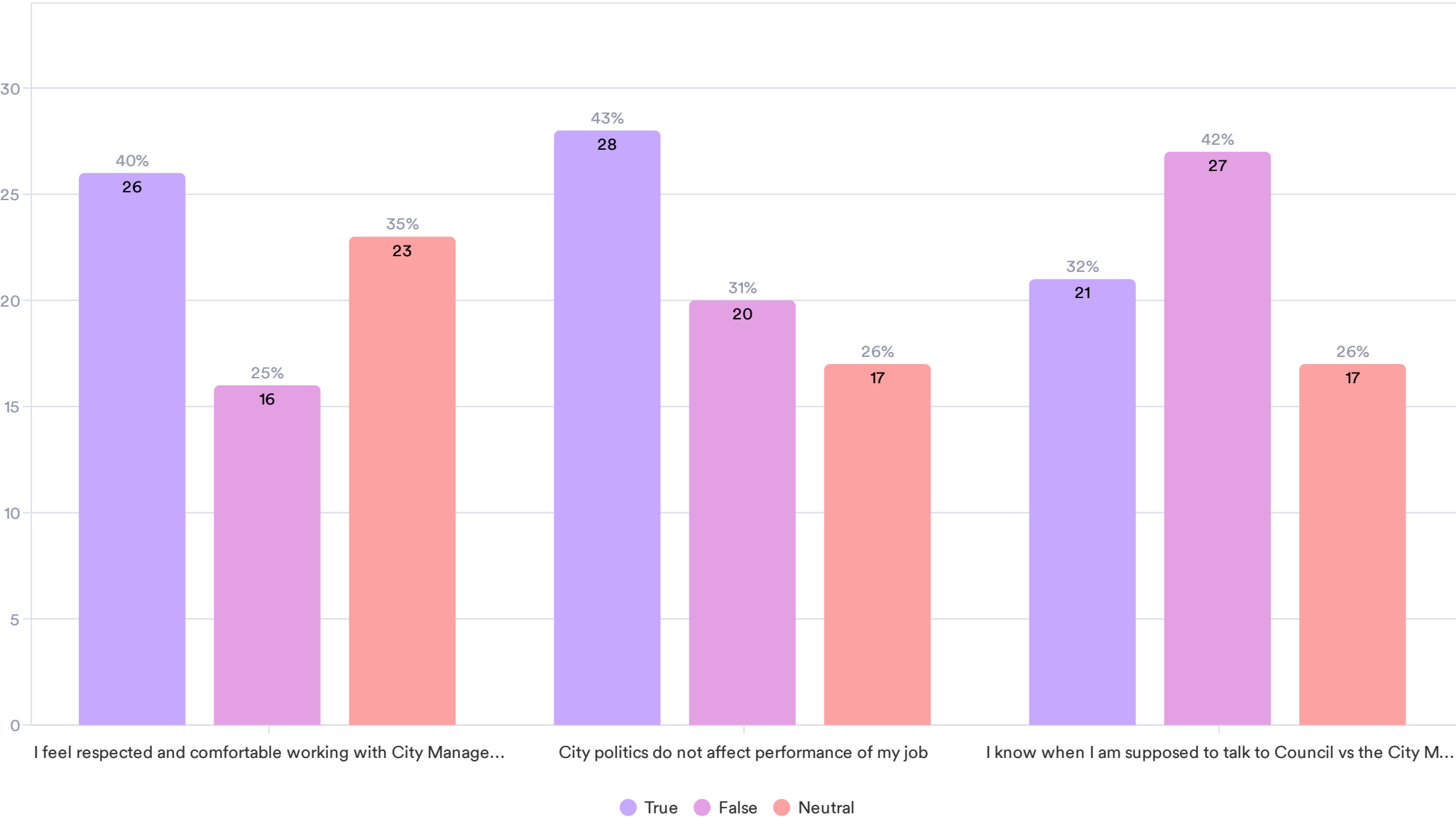


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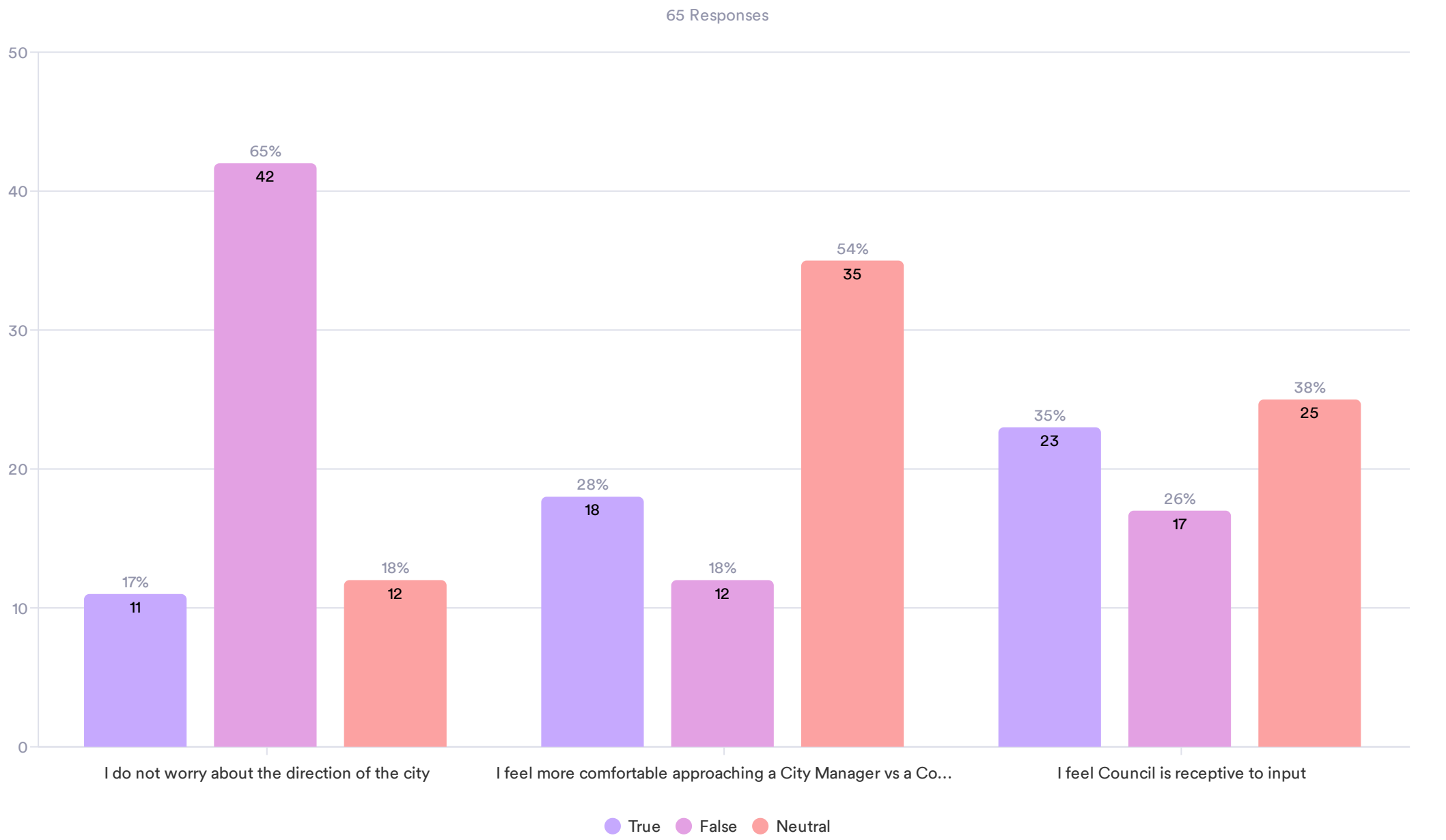


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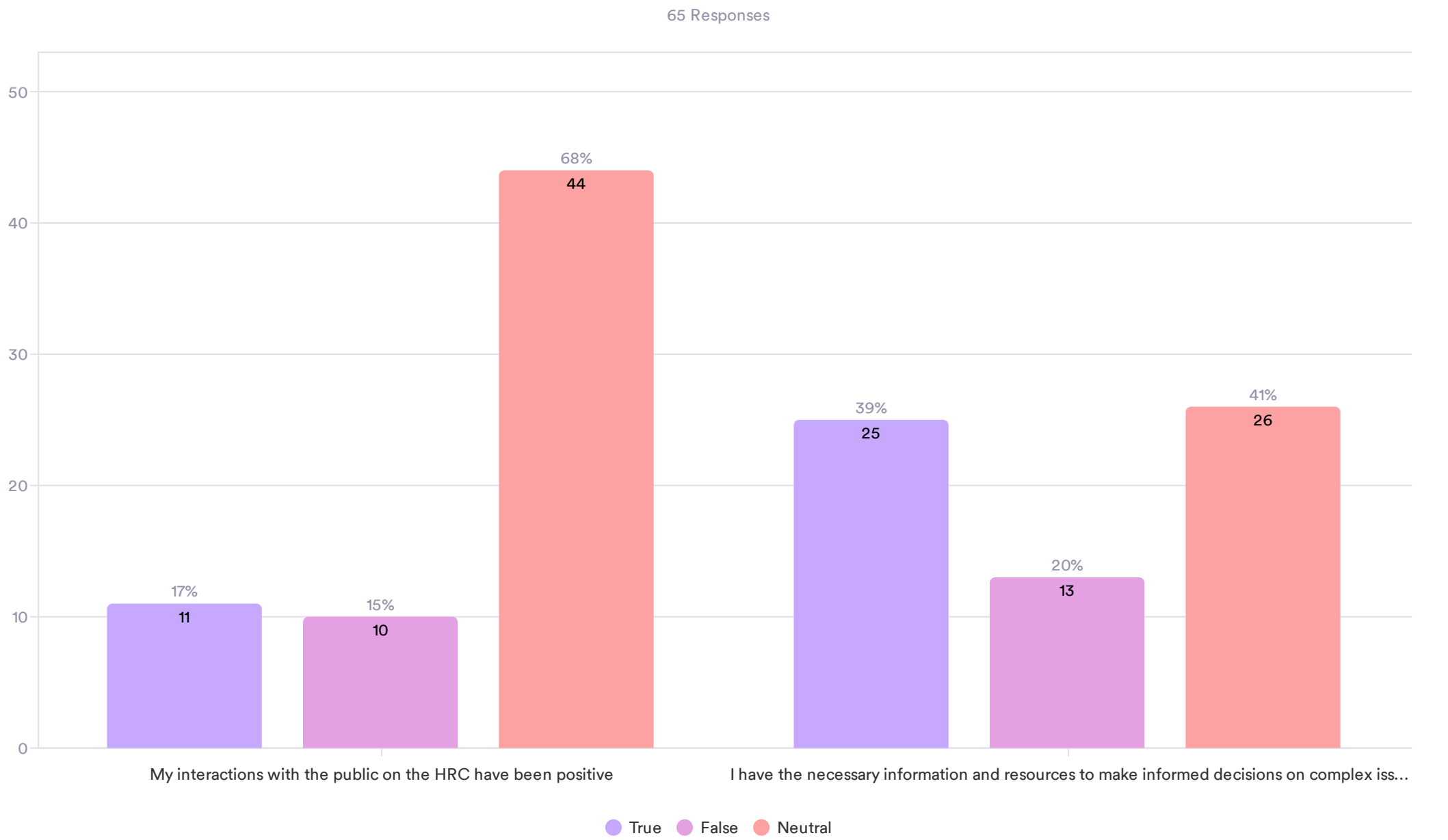
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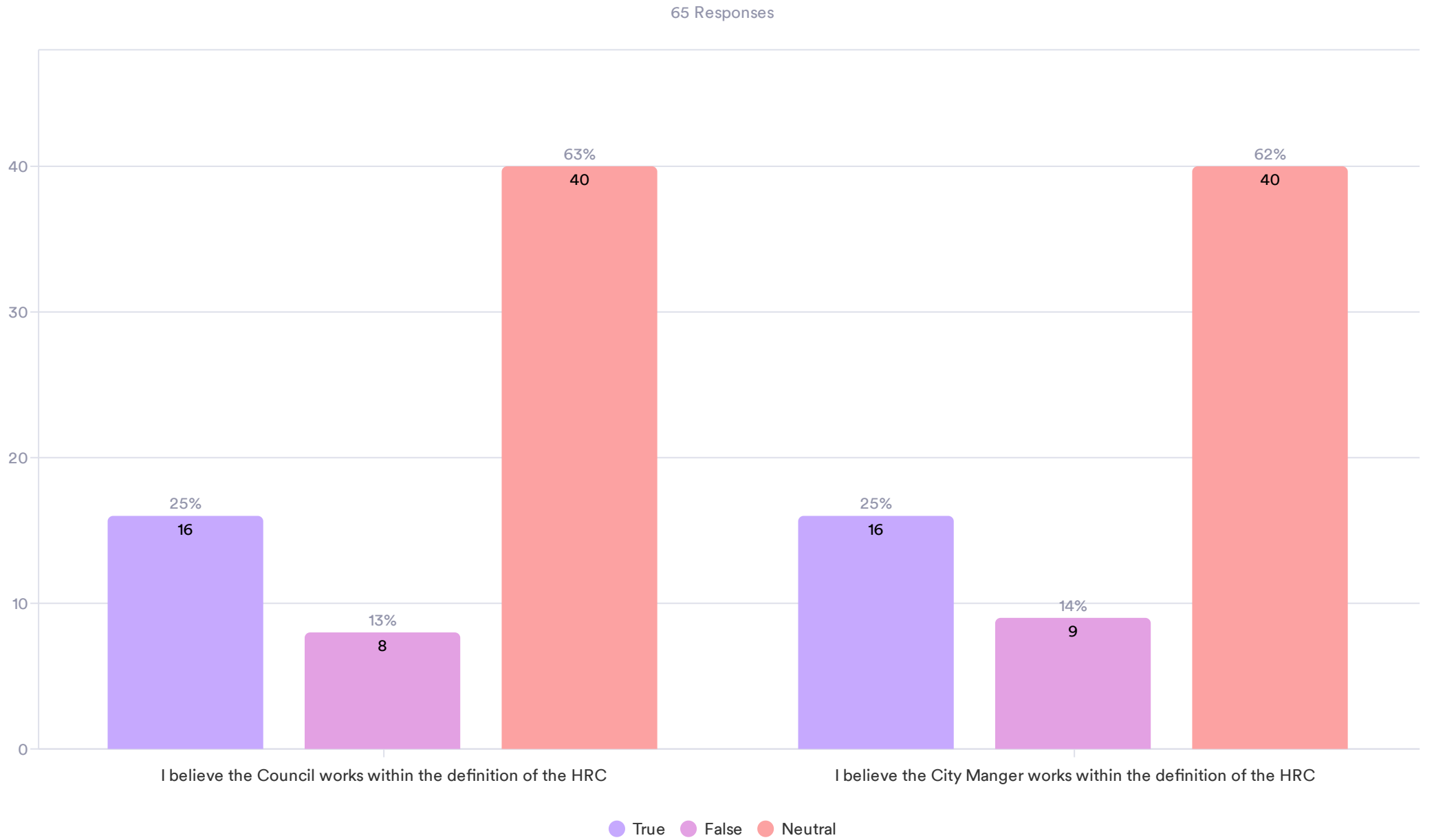
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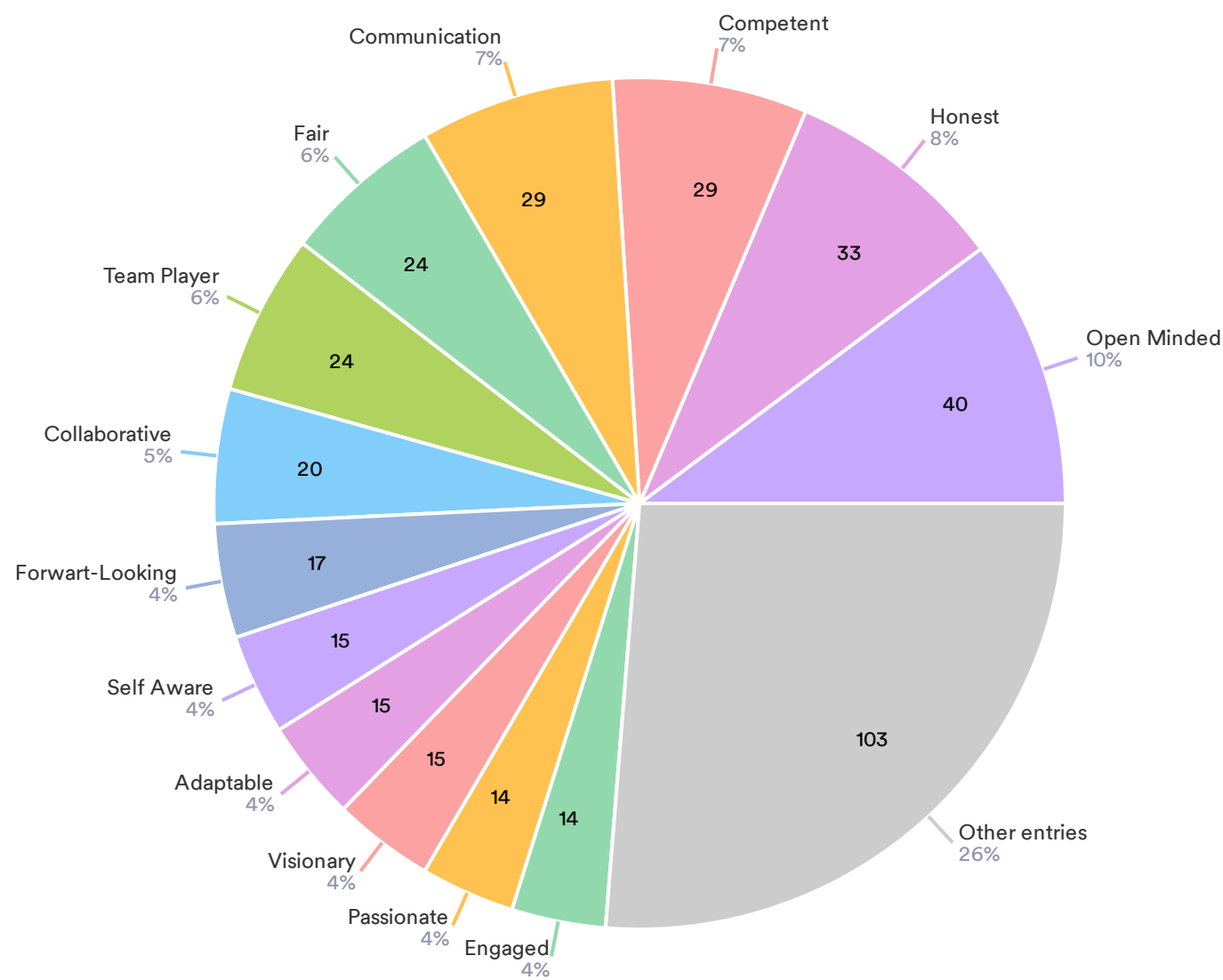


Section 3: Please answer True, False or Neutral to the following questions. For this section, when answering FALSE, please provide details on why you answered false and/or how this can be corrected.



What qualities would you like to see in the next City Manager? Please select seven.

392 Responses- 9 Empty



General Sentiment Toward City Manager Form of Government:

- **Mixed Satisfaction:** Some employees appreciate the stability and long-term planning under a City Manager, while others feel it centralizes too much power in one individual.
- **Concerns Over Leadership:** Many feel the City Manager is out of touch with employees and prioritizes personal projects over community needs.
- **Issues with Past Leadership:** Complaints about the previous City Manager's lack of engagement, favoritism, and inefficiency in completing projects were common.

Communication & Transparency:

- **Restricted Communication:** Many employees feel barred from speaking directly with the City Council or City Manager, being required to go through supervisors.
- **Lack of Transparency:** Leadership is perceived as secretive, with decisions made without input from lower-level employees.
- **Communication Gaps:** Information does not always flow effectively from department heads to staff, leading to confusion and frustration.

Employee Treatment & Workplace Issues:

- **Concerns About Compensation:** Employees are dissatisfied with wages, especially in comparison to other cities, and believe contract negotiations have not been conducted in good faith.
- **Favoritism & Inequality:** There is a perception that leadership favors certain employees while ignoring others, particularly those in lower positions.
- **Lack of Resources & Staffing Issues:** Many departments report being short-staffed, leading to burnout and inefficiency.

Challenges in Dealing with the City Manager & Council:

- **City Manager Issues:** Employees cite a lack of accessibility, favoritism, and slow decision-making as major concerns.
- **Council Challenges:** Employees feel the Council is out of touch with daily operations, makes inconsistent decisions based on political agendas, and does not effectively oversee the City Manager.
- **Fear of Retaliation:** Some employees fear speaking openly due to potential consequences.

Perceived Benefits of City Manager Government:

- **Stability & Consistency:** The system allows for long-term planning without political swings.
- **Efficient Decision-Making:** Some believe decisions can be made without excessive political interference.
- **Better Oversight of Operations:** A City Manager is expected to have professional expertise in municipal governance.

Improvements Suggested:

- **Stronger Checks & Balances:** More oversight on the City Manager's actions and spending.
- **Better Communication:** More direct engagement between leadership and staff, with clearer pathways for input.
- **Employee Inclusion in Decisions:** More involvement in policy changes, budgeting, and department priorities.
- **Fairer Compensation & Hiring Practices:** Address wage disparities and ensure fair treatment of employees at all levels.

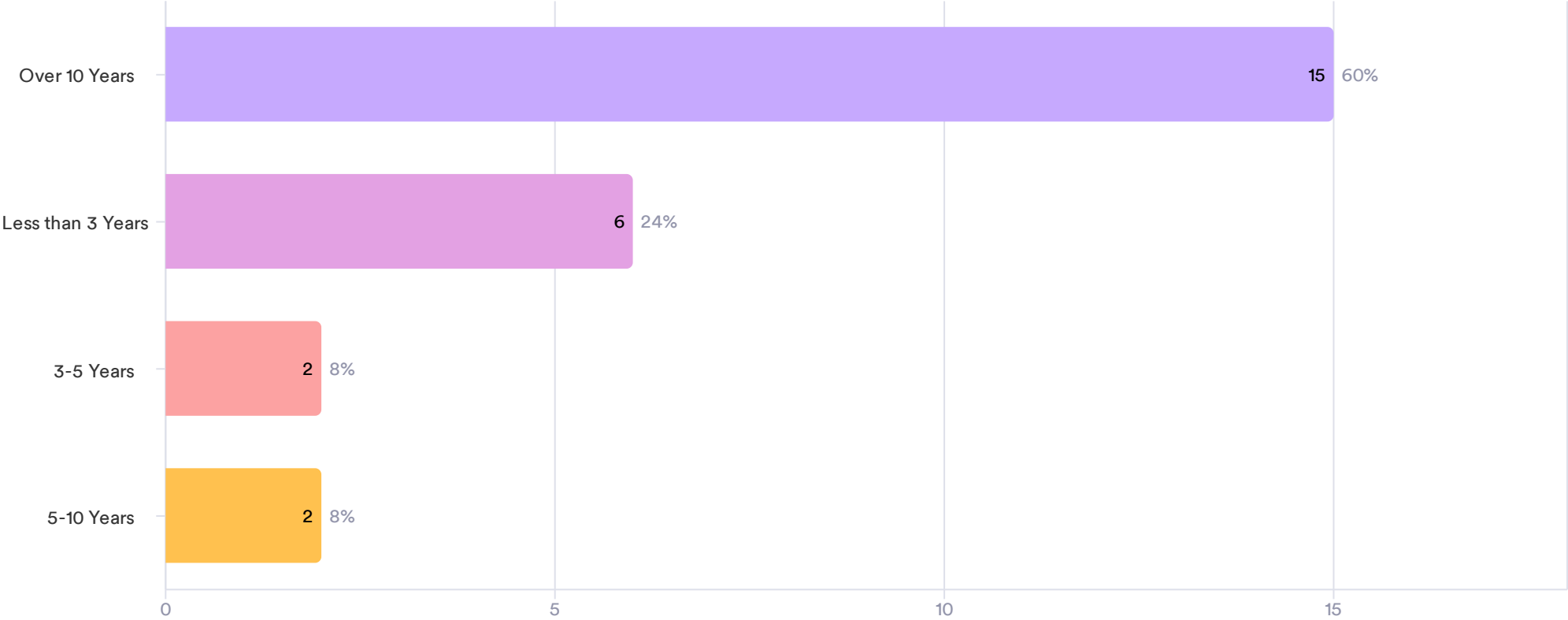
Desired Qualities in the Next City Manager:

HRC Review - Dept Heads and Managers

HRC Review - Dept Heads and Managers

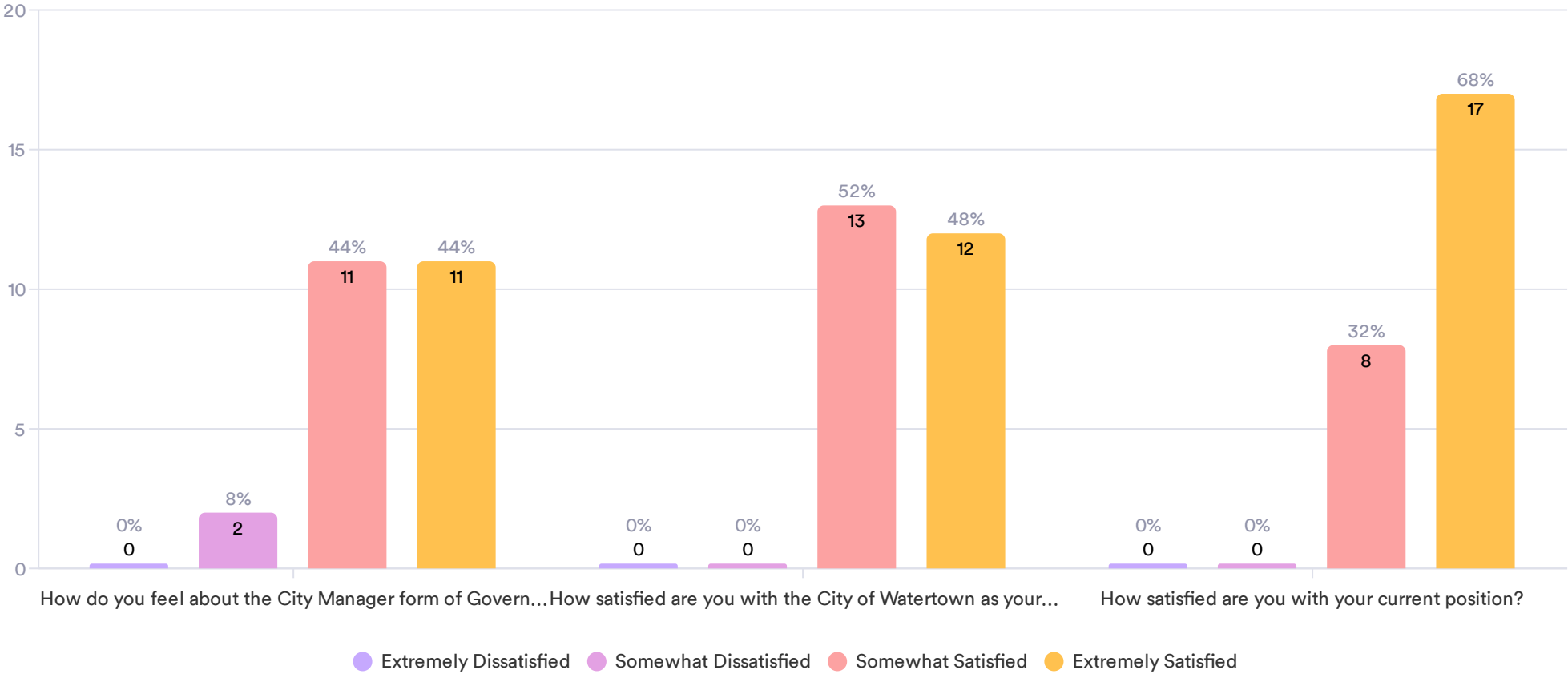
Years of Employment

25 Responses



Section 1 : Please answer the following questions as they pertain to you:

25 Responses



HRC Review - Dept Heads and Managers

Section 2: Please answer True, False or Neutral to the following questions:

25 Responses



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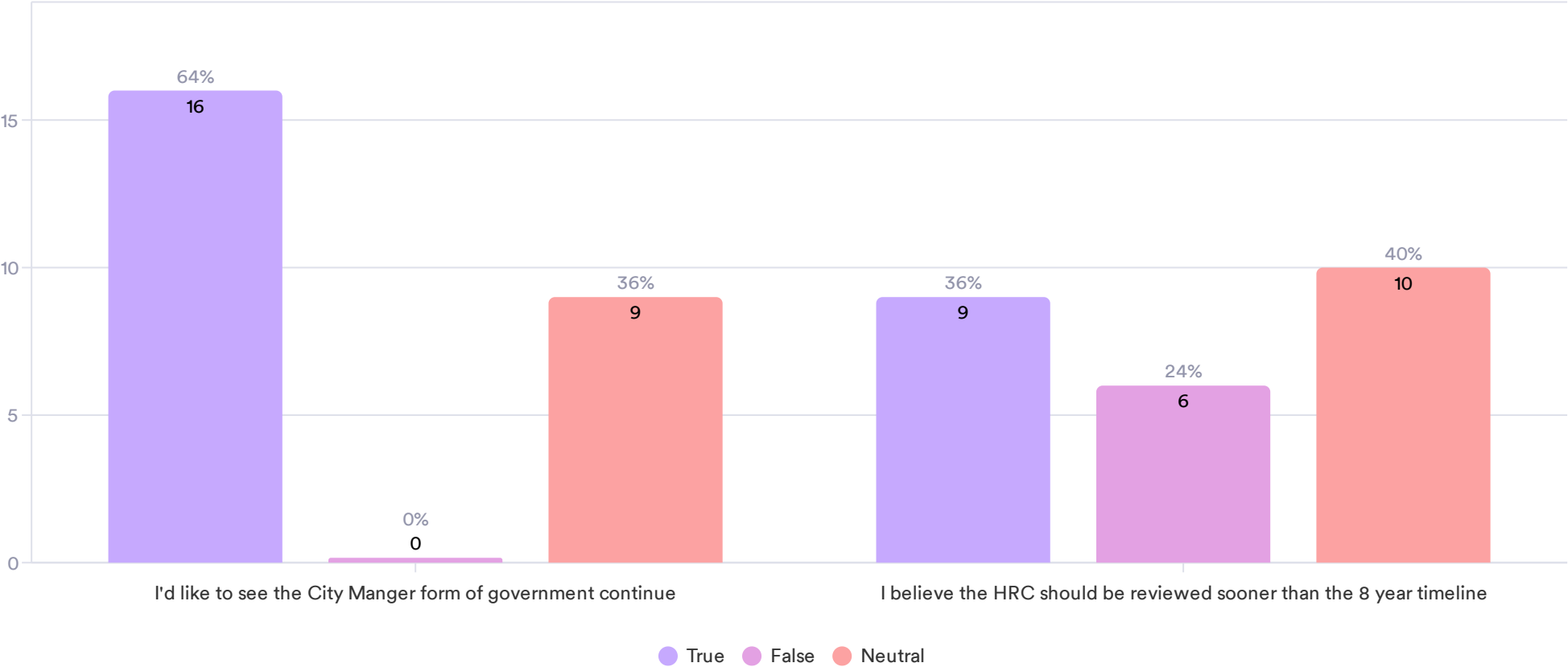
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HRC Review - Dept Heads and Managers

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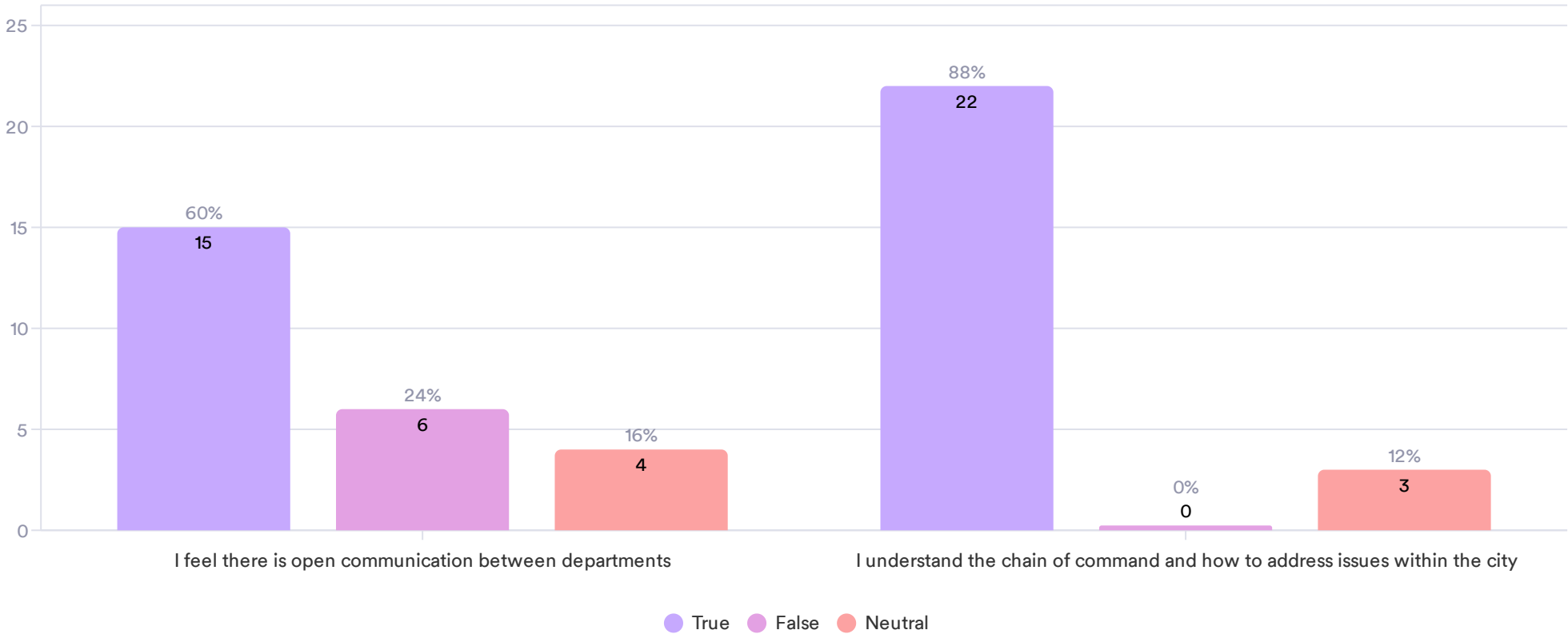
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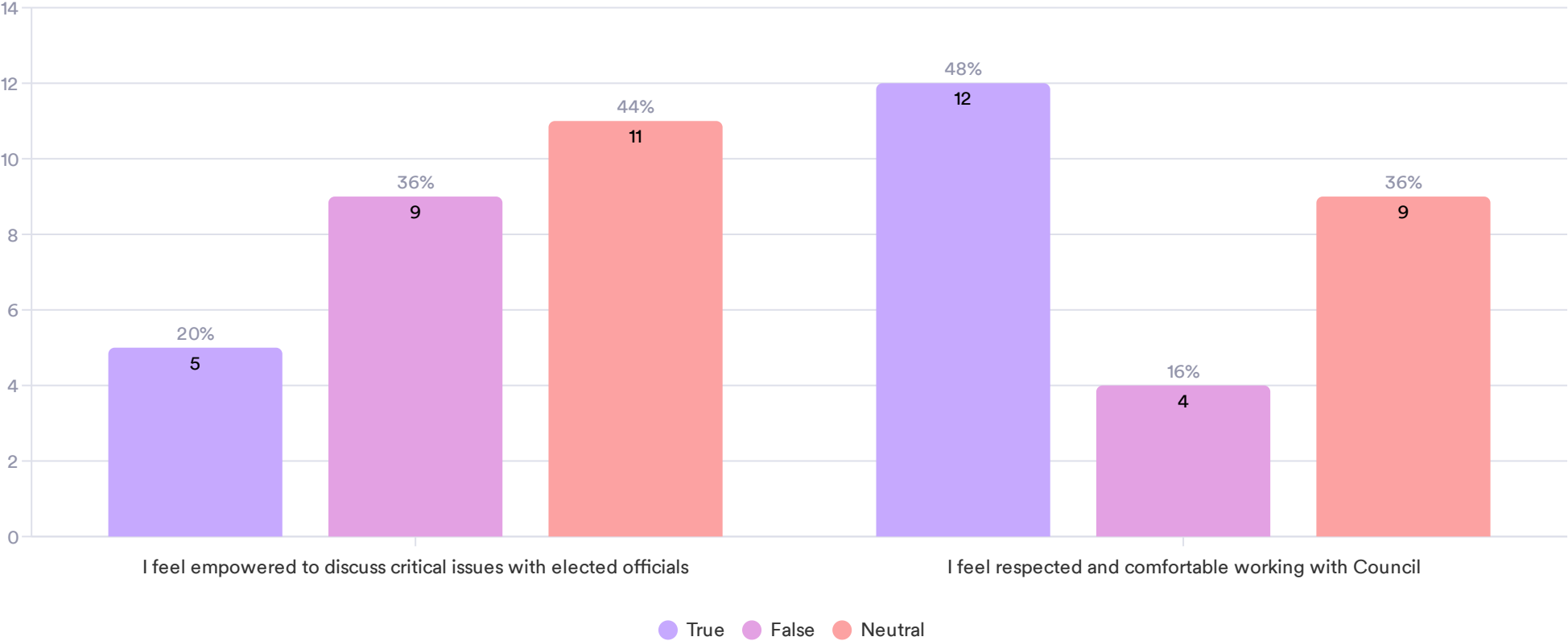
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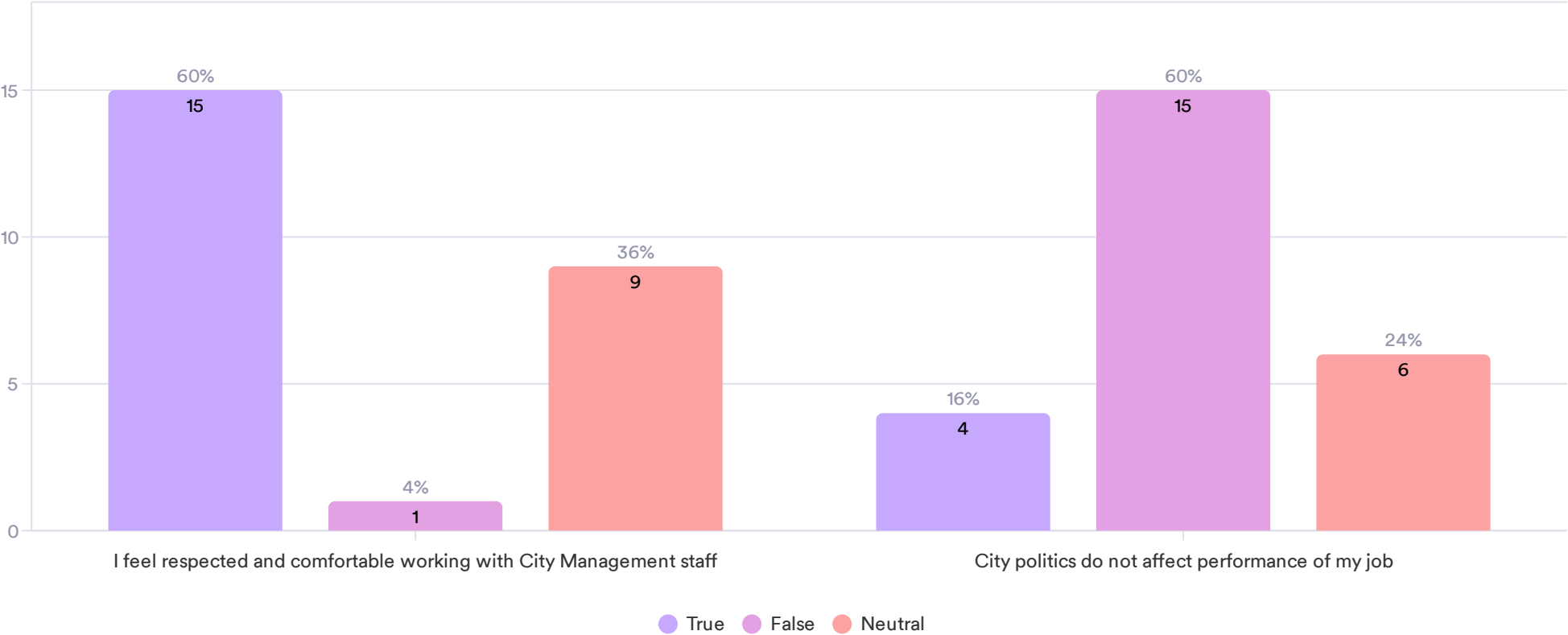
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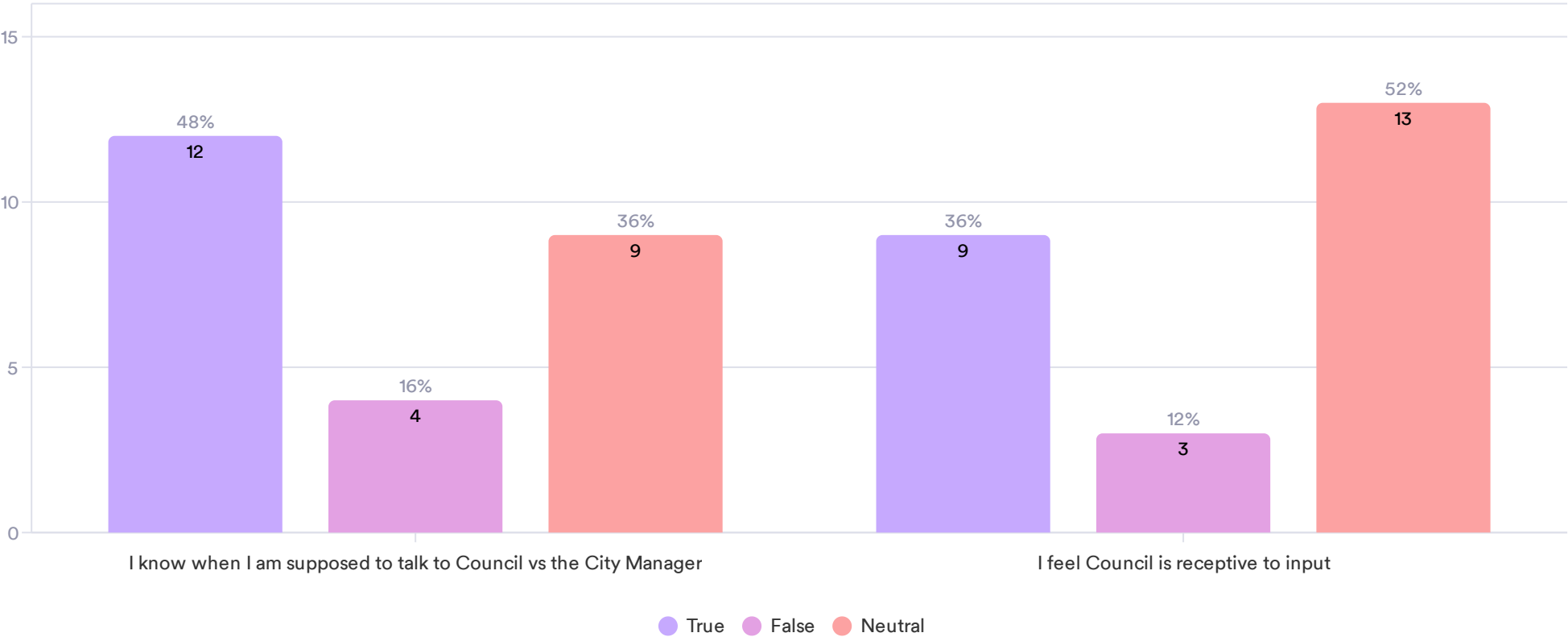
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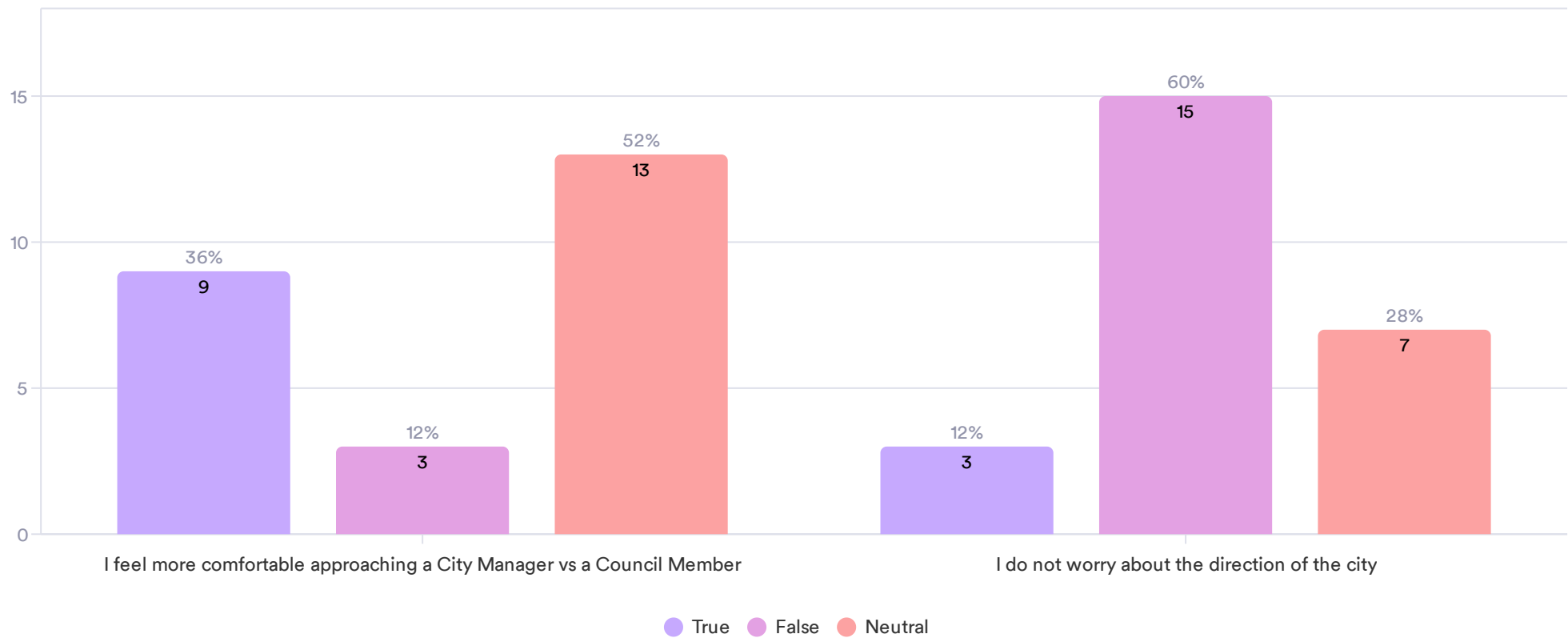
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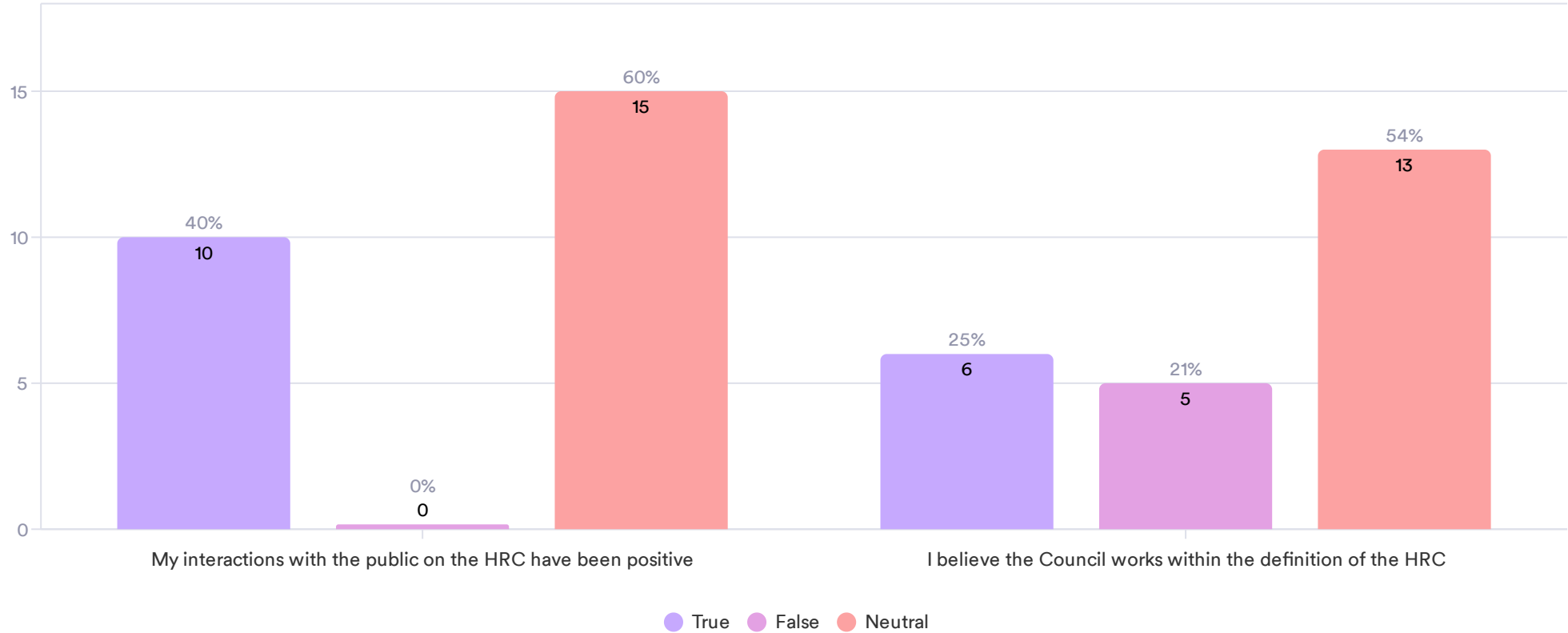
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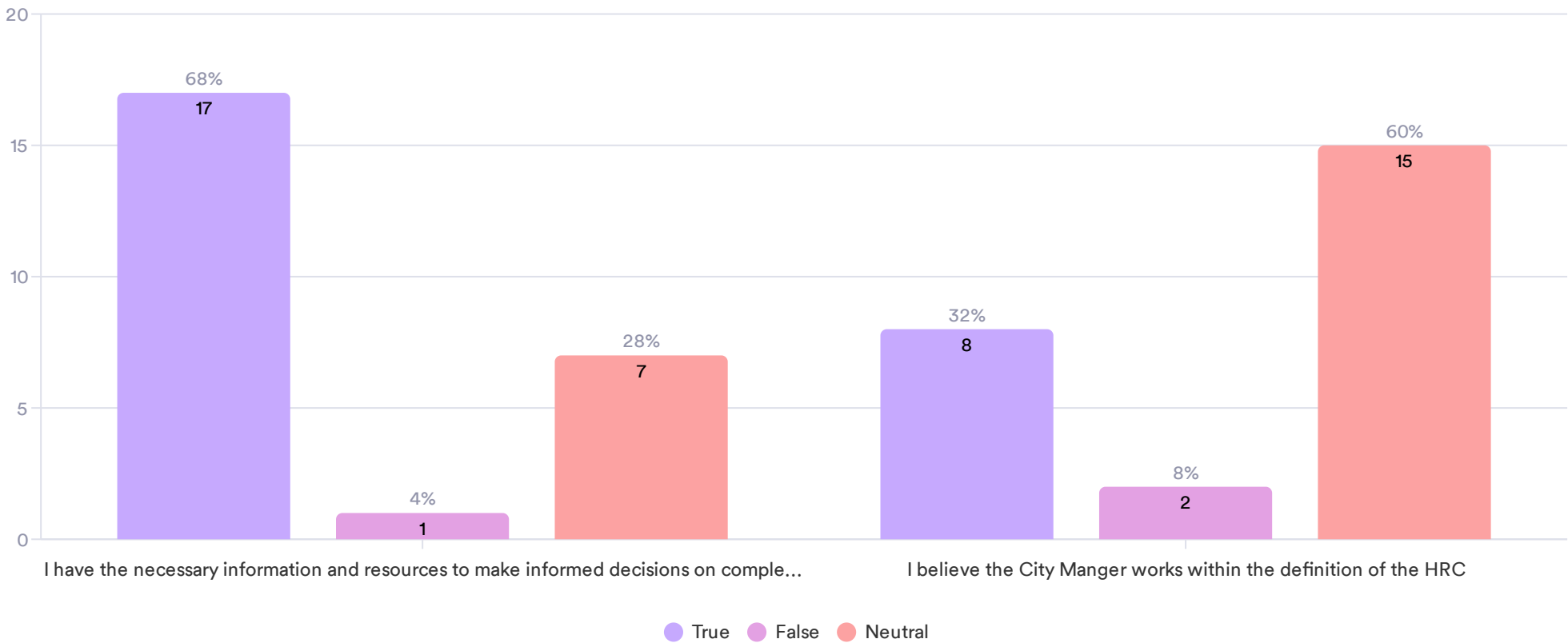
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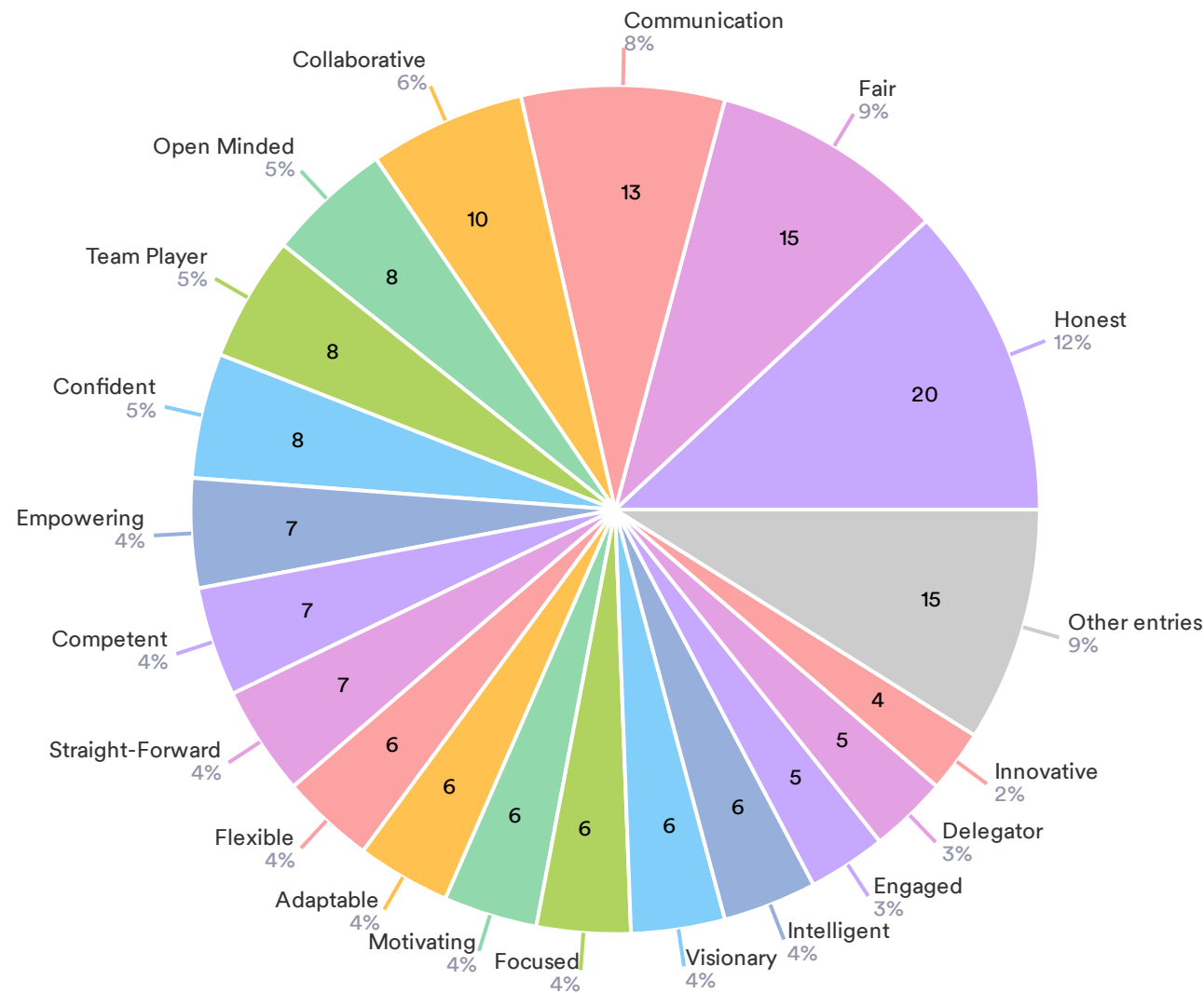
25 Responses



HRC Review - Dept Heads and Managers

What qualities would you like to see in the next City Manager? Please select seven.

168 Responses- 1 Empty



1. General Overview

- The survey gathered responses from department heads and managers regarding their experiences with the **City Manager form of government** in Watertown.
- A majority of respondents have worked for the city for **over 10 years**, giving them extensive experience with both the **Strong Mayor** and **City Manager** models.
- **Overall satisfaction with the city government was mixed**, with some supporting the structure for stability, while others felt there was a lack of transparency and communication.

2. Understanding of Roles and Communication

- Some department heads felt they were allowed to **communicate openly** about city matters, while others believed communication was **restricted** or **discouraged** under previous leadership.
- There was **confusion regarding the decision-making authority** between the **City Manager, department heads, and City Council**—some felt that policies and directives were unclear.
- Many believed that **information was controlled at higher levels**, preventing direct discussions between staff and City Council.
- Some noted that communication was **easier under the City Manager**, while others felt transparency and inclusivity were **lacking**.
- The **past City Manager** received **mixed reviews**—some believed they were effective, while others felt they **barred open discussions and withheld information** from both Council and staff.

3. What is Going Well with the City Manager Form of Government

Key Positives Identified:

- **Stability & Consistency** – The City Manager role provides **continuity** in decision-making and policy enforcement, reducing the uncertainty caused by changing political leadership.
- **Clear Chain of Command** – Having a **single executive overseeing city operations** allows for a structured and efficient administration.
- **Strategic Long-Term Planning** – The City Manager approach enables **consistent budgeting and project planning**, rather than being disrupted by election cycles.
- **Shielding Staff from Politics** – Unlike a Strong Mayor system, the City Manager structure **removes direct political influence from city operations**, allowing for more neutral decision-making.

4. Biggest Challenges in the City Manager Form of Government

Key Challenges Identified:

- **Disconnect Between Staff and Leadership** – Many department heads felt **distanced from decision-making**, unable to provide input on policies that directly affected them.
- **Lack of Trust and Transparency** – Some respondents felt that **critical decisions were made without consulting department heads**, leading to **uncertainty and frustration**.
- **Communication Barriers** – Several department heads reported that information **did not flow efficiently** from the City Manager to staff, creating **misalignment** between leadership and daily operations.
- **Micromanagement from the City Manager** – Some department heads **felt micromanaged**, with **unnecessary layers of oversight** restricting their ability to run their departments effectively.

5. Challenges in Dealing with the City Manager and Council

City Manager-Specific Challenges:

- **Scheduling Time Was Difficult** – Some department heads found it hard to get direct meetings with the City Manager.
- **Lack of Trust in Department Heads** – Some believed the City Manager **did not fully trust department heads** to manage their own teams, leading to excessive oversight.
- **Lack of Engagement** – A few respondents felt the City Manager was **not visible or engaged** with daily city operations.

City Council-Specific Challenges:

- **Reversing Decisions Due to Public Complaints** – Some felt that the Council **did not stand by decisions** if public backlash occurred, leading to **inconsistent policies**.
- **Lack of Respect for Department Expertise** – Some respondents felt the Council **did not consult or trust the expertise of department heads** before making major decisions.
- **Political Influence** – A few noted that **city politics sometimes interfered with operational decisions**, making it difficult to maintain efficiency.

6. Effect of Mistrust on Workflow

Key Findings:

- **Some Departments Experienced Workflow Interruptions** – Certain departments **faced delays or uncertainty** due to **mistrust between leadership and staff**.
- **Council Overreach into Operations** – Some respondents believed Council members were **overstepping their roles**, interfering with day-to-day management.

7. Suggested Improvements for the Government Structure

Key Recommendations:

- **Clearly Define Responsibilities Between City Manager and Council** – Respondents believe there should be a **better distinction between administrative and policy-making roles** to avoid confusion.
- **Improve Transparency in Decision-Making** – More **open communication between leadership and staff** is needed to build trust and ensure everyone understands policies and changes.
- **Council Should Trust Staff Expertise** – Some believe **Council members should rely more on department heads** for expert advice rather than making independent decisions.
- **Better Training on Governance Structures** – Educating both staff and elected officials on **proper governance procedures** would improve understanding and efficiency.
- **Allow Department Heads More Direct Access to Council** – Some department heads suggested that **removing communication barriers** between themselves and the Council would improve decision-making.

8. Qualities Desired in the Next City Manager

Based on **392 responses**, the most desired qualities for the next City Manager were:

- **Open-Minded (10%)** – Willing to consider different perspectives and input (**40 votes**).
- **Honest (8%)** – Transparent and ethical in leadership (**33 votes**).
- **Competent (7%)** – Has the necessary skills and expertise to manage city operations effectively (**29 votes**).
- **Strong Communicator (7%)** – Ensures clear and open communication between leadership, staff, and the public (**29 votes**).
- **Fair (6%)** – Treats all departments and employees equally (**24 votes**).
- **Team Player (6%)** – Works well with department heads, Council, and employees to foster collaboration (**24 votes**).
- **Collaborative (5%)** – Encourages teamwork and values input from various stakeholders (**20 votes**).
- **Forward-Looking (4%)** – Focuses on long-term planning and city growth (**17 votes**).
- **Self-Aware (4%)** – Understands their strengths, weaknesses, and the impact of their decisions (**15 votes**).
- **Adaptable (4%)** – Able to adjust to changing circumstances and challenges (**15 votes**).
- **Visionary (4%)** – Has a clear, strategic direction for the city's future (**15 votes**).
- **Passionate (4%)** – Shows enthusiasm and commitment to the city and its employees (**14 votes**).
- **Engaged (4%)** – Actively involved in city affairs and connects with staff (**14 votes**).
- **Other (26%)** – Various additional qualities suggested by respondents, such as accountability, transparency, and leadership experience (**103 votes**).
-

Key Takeaway:

9. Final Comments

- **Mixed Opinions on the City Manager System** – Some respondents **fully supported** the system, while others **felt it had not been properly implemented or tested**.
- **Stronger Leadership is Needed** – Many believed a **better City Manager** could greatly improve operations **with the right leadership approach**.
- **Council Needs to Respect Its Role** – Some felt Council members **needed more training** to understand their role and **avoid interfering in operations**.
- **Desire for More Open Dialogue** – Several respondents **appreciated the opportunity to share their opinions** in this survey and hoped leadership would take their concerns seriously.

Overall Summary & Takeaways

1. The City Manager system provides stability, but many feel it lacks transparency and trust.
2. Communication barriers exist between staff, the City Manager, and City Council.
3. Department heads want more autonomy and direct access to the Council.
4. The next City Manager must be fair, communicative, engaged, and competent.
5. Stronger oversight and clearer role definitions between leadership entities are needed.