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The benefits of critical comments on your social media channels

Naysayers and critics — in the old days, they showed up at your board meetings and wrote letters to the editor of the local newspaper. Nowadays, they are more likely to appear on your district social media channels or the “Info” email inbox attached to your website. They are still there, and they are more important than ever to the success of your district.

Social media and email provide effective tools for engaging cynics and getting the best out of their perspectives. But it takes discipline and hard work to use online forums to move your district in a positive direction without providing a platform for negativity and division. Naysayers are more than just concerned citizens. They are people who are passionate enough to call you out when they think you are making mistakes. This can be disturbing, but their voices should be welcomed.

The days of “sit down and be quiet” are gone

For decades, dissenting opinions were tolerated at best and silenced at worst in school board rooms. The conventional wisdom held that you had to let them have their say to a point but you didn’t have to let them slow you down—unless they happened to be politically powerful. It was a given that free speech rights applied to everyone to a point. There was grudging acceptance in school board rooms that the naysayers needed a chance to vent briefly before being told to sit down.

This “sit down and be quiet” attitude was sometimes overtly rude. But more often it took the subtler tones of restrictions on testimony length and parliamentary maneuvers that shut off the conversation and moved the issue to a speedy resolution. The idea was to give the naysayers their say briefly, get the business done and maintain a sense of unity in the district.

Understand and embrace your dissenters

Fast forward a few decades and we see a new emphasis on embracing and protecting the voice of the dissenters. Part of this move has no doubt been due to the tireless effort of advocates for equity in the schools. But another component is the concept of adaptive leadership that has been evolving throughout business, education and many other types of organizations.

Adaptive leadership is based on the theory that there are two basic types of challenges — technical and adaptive. Technical problems can be solved by the existing knowledge of experts. Adaptive challenges require new learning. One of the greatest challenges for leaders in all school districts is being able to correctly differentiate between the two types of challenges.

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For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

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Adaptive problems require changes to behaviors — and can create dissenters

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A simple change in school security may seem like a technical problem with a simple solution — just lock the back gate and make everyone enter campus through the front driveway. However, it might actually be an adaptive challenge in disguise because the whole school community will have to learn new ways of getting their children to and from school safely, crossing new streets, walking through different neighborhoods, coming into contact with people from different cultures. All of these things could add up to challenges that require new ways of thinking and acting instead of a simple technical fix. In this example, an adaptive change would benefit from hearing all voices, not just those who support the change.

In this world of sorting the technical from the adaptive challenges, the naysayer has an important role. The dissenting voice is the one that needs protecting because it is the one that will help move the community to new learning by pointing out concerns that may not have been considered in the decision-making process.

This results in courageous conversations because it challenges the status quo of the system or decision. And when it comes to adaptive changes, the status quo is automatically no longer an option.

If listened to, dissenting voices are most likely to encourage creative thinking. It is human nature to look for solutions and collaborate. But until the real issues are addressed via uncomfortable conversations, those solutions will never even be explored.

When the tension becomes great enough in a community conversation, a true leader becomes willing to take risks. He or she wants to change the paradigm and get the dialogue unstuck. And most often, that leader can look back and thank a naysayer or dissenting voice for getting the ball rolling.

Nurturing your dissenters via social media

So, how do you encourage dissenting voices in school communications? Social media provides a great opportunity to do just that. However, social media is neither self-policing nor self-operating. You have to work to make it meaningful. The same goes for email communications. The “Info” inbox attached to your school website is useless without a commitment to take questions seriously and do the work to answer them thoroughly. You are better off not asking for feedback if you are just going to ignore it or answer it with canned responses.

All social media in a district must start with solid social media policy, which ensures that all opinions are treated with respect and all people are treated with dignity. Spell out what will not be tolerated — discrimination, profanity, hatred, etc. There are many good policy examples online. The key is to create an environment where everyone feels welcome and people who are not OK with that are not allowed to stay.

Once the policy is in place, allow the discussions to become real, not real personal. Bashing people is not acceptable. But bashing on ideas can be encouraged. That is the value of dissent — the heat-testing of ideas. If your newest initiative cannot stand up to a heated discussion on social media, it might not stand up in real life either.

The best way to honor dissenting voices is to listen to them, provide feedback and answer their questions. And to truly answer tough questions requires research and perseverance on the part of the communicator. If customer concerns are all addressed by rote talking

points, it will become obvious that you are prepared to defend positions rather than engage in dialogue. Effective conversation on social media means a commitment to pausing the discussion to find the answers and then taking the time to present them accurately and fairly. The payoff is there because for every vocal critic you answer, there could be another hundred silent people who had the same opinion or concern. By answering one, you are answering many.

Now, when someone has said the same thing several times, or several people have said essentially the same thing, it is OK to say, “We have addressed that several times in a previous post on the topic, which is readily accessible at the following link.” The conversation does not have to go on and on without end, but when a tough question has been asked, the answer should stand. And if the answer changes after getting customer feedback, that should be noted as well. It is a sign of strength to admit shortcomings and make necessary adjustments.

But what if the critics are filling your email inbox? If it is just a few, they should be answered individually and their feedback should be shared up the line of district leadership. If a major campaign of form letter emails has been launched against your district, it is appropriate to respond with a copy and paste message that acknowledges receipt and explains that due to the high volume of messages on this topic, individual responses will not be possible.

However they reach you, the naysayers should be valued. Dissenting voices are necessary when it comes to tackling the toughest problems in our schools. By considering them a helpful part of courageous conversations, the critical voices become part of strong solutions. Social media and email provide tools for the diligent school district to embrace those contrary voices.

Contributed by Jay Remy, communications consultant