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School board members can create cooperation from confrontation

School board members should be prepared to respond to conflict when they get elected. They will likely face conflict about a school board decision or as a result of the rising tension in the current political climate. They must develop skills to respond constructively and without escalating the situation.

No one likes to be a target of anger from parents, concerned taxpayers or dissatisfied employees. School board candidates should know that it is part of the job when they file for election. They should also know that their response can create a crisis or an opportunity.

Turn a confrontation into an opportunity

When a concern reaches the school board, it is generally based on passionately felt and strongly held opinions. Most concerns shared at the school board have not been arrived at quickly or simply. A high level of concern, or even anger, takes time to fester. First, be thankful that they are now in the open. Problems and concerns are easier to solve when you know what they are.

If you can, try to bring out areas of concern before they bubble up by conducting a needs assessment and/or surveys about potentially controversial issues — or even regularly about operations and programs. By keeping your finger on the pulse of your community, you can anticipate issues.

Defensiveness can accelerate conflict. Defensive people are unsure of themselves and their knowledge surrounding the situation. Do your homework. Ask questions. Be prepared with as much information as possible.

Share reactions and comments you receive on policies and programs with the superintendent and your fellow board members. Ask them to do the same for you. Agree to a “no surprises” rule. If you foresee an issue on the horizon, encourage the superintendent to share facts with the media, your stakeholders, and internally with staff and on your website and social media.

Tips for constructive responses

Be polite and civil, even when the attack is personal. This is difficult but important.

Listen. Let the person who is confronting you finish his or her comments. Then start verifying what you’ve heard by using such phrases as:

- “So you’re saying that. . .”
- “Let me make sure I understand you. . .”
- “I hear you saying. . .”

(Over)

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Clarify by asking several “what” questions. Avoid “why” questions because they can make the other person defensive. Also, use personal language instead of accusatory language: “I feel confused,” rather than “You’re confusing me” and “I don’t think I’m making myself clear,” rather than “You don’t understand.”

When another person is aggressive or unrealistic, try looking at him or her calmly. Silence gives the person nothing to push against and can communicate power. In many cases, the aggression will dissipate and reasonable communication will be possible.

If the attack is personal or based on an extreme demand, act as if you didn’t hear it and refocus the discussion on the underlying problem or conflict. Ask the other person what they want from you.

Three types of conflict management

Many of these tips are appropriate in specific situations because there are three types of conflict, each of which are managed differently. By managing conflict, you can manage your defensive responses and build relationships rather than hinder them.

Here are the three types of conflict and how they can be managed:

1. Simple conflict — This type of conflict occurs when two people know each other’s goals, but neither feels able to attain the desired goal without preventing the other from attaining his or her goal.

- Try to state the misunderstanding as clearly as possible.
- Use non-threatening or non-emotional language.
- Identify common goals that might supersede the goals on which you disagree.
- Ask for clarification.
- Try to work together to solve your problem.
- Wait before you make hasty comments. Sometimes another solution that neither of you considered will become apparent.
- Try to work together on the issue.

2. Pseudo conflict — This type of conflict occurs when people actually agree on an issue but are unable to communicate agreement.

- Verify that pseudo conflict exists by checking the other’s perceptions of what’s going on and reviewing whether you think there is really something wrong.
- Ask for clarification. The “what” questions come in handy.

3. Ego conflict — This occurs when a person is emotionally involved to a point where they feel a threat to the ego.

- Stop talking. In an ego-involved interaction, people put up barriers to cooperative communication. To manage ego conflicts, you have to lower those barriers. To do this, allow people to express concerns, but do not allow yourself to be punished.
- Try to steer discussion of the conflict to a factual basis.
- Try again.
- If you succeed this far, try to determine the real source of the conflict.