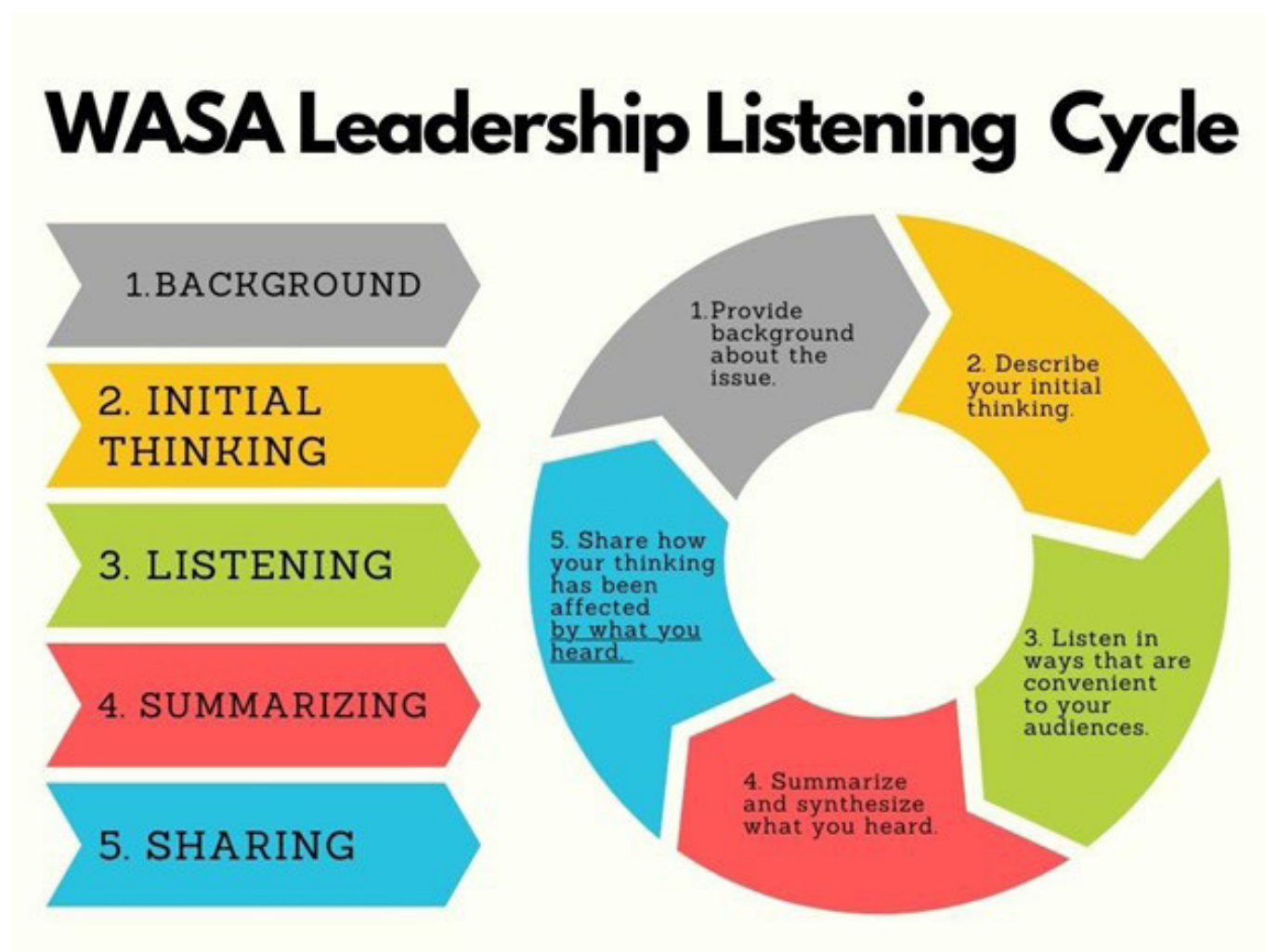


Close the Listening Loop!

While listening is critical to your ability to make good decisions that will stand the test of time...It is not enough just to listen. If you want your listening to not only help with the current decision, but also to help build / rebuild confidence and trust in your schools and public education in general, you must DEMONSTRATE your listening. Show how your thinking or the plan is different because of what you learned.

Regardless of the activity you choose for your district, it's critical that you take the time to complete each step of the listening process in order to rebuild trust in public education.



Credit: J.Marie & Associates

Summary

Each step of the listening process plays an integral role in your outreach effort:

1. Start by describing baseline facts/background about the issue. This creates a shared foundation of basic knowledge.
2. Describe your initial thinking; share a draft plan if appropriate. This gives your constituents something to respond to. ("We are starting out thinking X.")
3. Reach out and listen deeply to those affected by the issue, idea, or plan. Include those closest to the issue, as well as those with resources and authorities or responsibilities. Listen in ways that are convenient to them. ("We listened to you in the following ways...")
4. Synthesize and summarize what you heard into 2-4 key points. Share what you learned. ("You told us Y.")
5. Most important: Be sure to explain how your thinking has been affected by what you heard. ("We now think Z / are planning Z.")

Note: It doesn't always happen that what you heard leads you to change course. Circle back anyway. Even if what you learned from your constituents affirms your original thinking or simply resulted in an increased emphasis of some portion of the original plan, explain that.

It isn't as important whether a particular person's input "won the day"...But the knowledge that input was sought AND SINCERELY CONSIDERED is enough to increase people's trust in leadership and the decision-making process.

The message you will convey by following this cycle is that your constituents' thinking matters: It helps shape the outcome. It was worth their time to share their thoughts with you.

You are affirming their value, and in doing so, increasing their trust in your leadership and your schools.

"Science Fair" / "Open House" Style Meeting

WASA has developed a collection of listening activities you can use to engage with constituents, gather input to inform district decisions and, ultimately—by also closing the loop to demonstrate that you are acting on what you heard—increase confidence in your schools and public education.

This is a public meeting scheduled over two to three hours, advertised so that people can come for a few minutes or stay for the duration of the meeting, at a time when most people are generally available. This can be advertised widely to the school community. Even with broad announcements about the event, it is a good idea to ask your leadership team to target trusted parents and/or community leaders and extend personal invitations. Include students in the invitations, and consider whether some of the topics might be best staffed with an adult and student together. This brings student voice to the forefront, gives students an opportunity to learn about public leadership, and lets your community see your students as knowledgeable, contributing members of the school community.

Organize the meeting into 4-6 table tops, each focused on a different topic. Have each table staffed with two people (for example one board member and an administrator or knowledgeable parent or volunteer). Don't be afraid to include controversial topics – this helps bring people to the event. Use good signage at each table to guide the conversation. Provide a way to capture feedback for all to see, perhaps a piece of chart paper next to each table, or perhaps asking each table host to jot a few notes at the end of the event before they leave.

If possible, offer beverages, snacks, and childcare (even just a table with art supplies); make sure to include this in your event announcements.

Most importantly: Debrief this activity with your leadership team and then communicate back with the community about what you learned.

Pros

- Low risk/high reward opportunity to learn from community.
- Can cover a lot of ground easily.
- Does not require a lot of management by staff.
- People can talk in small groups and no one monopolizes a microphone.

Cons

- It does take a lot of staffing resources.
- Might supplant another board session.
- Must be well advertised in multiple formats, through multiple channels to ensure adequate turnout.
- Personal invitations make a significant difference in attendance levels.

Gold Mining Session

WASA has developed a collection of listening activities you can use to engage with constituents, gather input to inform district decisions and, ultimately—by also closing the loop to demonstrate that you are acting on what you heard—increase confidence in your schools and public education.

Similar to an open house session, create a series of table topics focused on different ideas (topics can be coordinated around a theme, for instance facility issues, or can each be wildly different, depending on the issues facing your district). Staff each table with one or two people, typically an administrator, staffer, student, and/or parent / volunteer who is knowledgeable in that idea or topic.

Unlike the science fair style/open house type meeting, people must attend the full length of a gold mining session, generally an hour. In an hour, attendees will have the opportunity to get to three tables. Depending on the number of people you expect to attend, create 5-7 tables (aiming for an average of 6 attendees per table). It is important that you have more tables/topics than attendees can get to in the allotted time. This allows attendees to join only the table topics that interest them most, and contributes to a feeling of high energy.

Each conversation round will last for 15 minutes. Table hosts will spend the first 5 minutes sharing basic information about their topic, then pose a question and invite those at the table to talk amongst themselves and with the host. After 15 minutes, ring a bell to announce the end of each round and allow people time to change tables.

At the end of the gold mining meeting, ask the table hosts to stay after in order to capture the themes and questions, as well as to note the most common misperceptions they heard from attendees.

Most importantly: Debrief this activity with your leadership team and then communicate back with the community about what you learned.

Pros

Attendees choose the topics of greatest interest to them, learn a little something, and give you valuable feedback.

Low risk/high reward opportunity to learn from the community.

Can cover a lot of ground easily.

Does not require a lot of management by staff.

People can talk in small groups and no one monopolizes a microphone.

Cons

Need to hone the invitation list/work closely with administrators to provide personal invitations to ensure a full room.

Must be well advertised in multiple formats and on multiple channels to ensure turnout.

Personal invitations make a significant difference in attendance levels.

Gallery Walk

WASA has developed a collection of listening activities you can use to engage with constituents, gather input to inform district decisions and, ultimately—by also closing the loop to demonstrate that you are acting on what you heard—increase confidence in your schools and public education.

Set up posters around a large room, each with a topic (topics can be coordinated around a theme, for instance facility issues or information about a specific school ... or can each be wildly different, depending on the issues facing your district). On each poster, include basic information about each topic along with a question or two. Add blank paper next to the poster for people to jot questions/ideas that come to mind.

Invite attendees to spread out around the room, ideally with a handful of people at each poster. Have board members and administrators also spread out so there is at least one school leader with each group. This informal approach to sharing information is an ideal opportunity to include students. The physical movement and conversational nature of this format helps younger participants feel welcomed to contribute fully.

Ask attendees to review what's on the poster, talk with each other, and note their group's thoughts on the paper next to the poster. Give them five to seven minutes before ringing a bell and asking everyone to rotate to the next poster. Continue until attendees have made their way around the room to each stop on the "tour."

Make sure you have time afterwards to debrief with the board and/or leadership team about what was heard and noted.

Pros

Can serve as a board work session.
Works particularly well for schools to present information to the board when board meetings are rotated throughout different schools.
In that case, posters could include information about special school activities, test scores, achievements, challenges, etc.

Cons

Need to hone the invitation list/work closely with administrators to provide personal invitations to ensure a full room.
Must be well advertised in multiple formats and on multiple channels to ensure turnout.
Personal invitations make a significant difference in attendance levels.

"Gimme 5"

Distributed Listening Tour

WASA has developed a collection of listening activities you can use to engage with constituents, gather input to inform district decisions and, ultimately—by also closing the loop to demonstrate that you are acting on what you heard—increase confidence in your schools and public education.

Start with a brainstorming session with your leadership team (e.g., cabinet/administrative team in the district, etc.) to ID a handful of community leaders in the community ("key communicators") who have info about schools. Choose who you bring together for brainstorming based on your district staffing and the strengths of your various leaders. As you do your brainstorming, be sure to include informal community leaders, like cafe owners, hairdressers, people who wear multiple "hats" in your community – not just elected officials and service club leaders. Include students with a variety of backgrounds and school experiences in your key communicators list, not just ASB leaders. Make sure each listener from your leadership team schedules time with at least one student.

In your meeting, in addition to brainstorming community leaders, note which members of your leadership team already know some of these people. Assign each member of the leadership team 3-5 people to meet with. It is ideal to meet with people in person, perhaps over coffee, because the goal is not just to engage in this listening process, but also to build relationships...but phone/Zoom calls can work well, too.

Determine in advance what questions your team will ask these community leaders so everyone is asking the same things. Give a deadline to conduct interviews and schedule a time to regroup and share.

Team follow-up is critical. Host a debrief session with your listeners to determine what key concepts bubbled to the top. Ask the listeners to write down three things they heard most often and what's the biggest misperception community leaders mentioned. Then identify themes from what they all heard. Note, the reason to identify the most common misperceptions floating around your community is so that you can address them. You can then make a point of sharing information in your various routine communications that clarifies or counteracts the incorrect information.

Most importantly: Debrief this activity with everyone who participated as listeners and then communicate back with the larger community about what you heard.

Pros

- Scalable to the district.
- Builds confidence in school leaders to deepen their listening habits.
- Helps ID potential communications issues.
- No resource necessary other than time.

Cons

- In order to make the best use of what is heard, you need to be dedicated to bringing people back together to debrief and examine the themes.

Superintendent/School Leadership Listening Tour

WASA has developed a collection of listening activities you can use to engage with constituents, gather input to inform district decisions and, ultimately—by also closing the loop to demonstrate that you are acting on what you heard—increase confidence in your schools and public education.

This activity may seem familiar as it is often used by school leaders to garner feedback. Listening tours are a proven means for engaging audiences and generating authentic input. We've added a few tips to maximize your use of this listening activity.

Schedule time for the superintendent and/or central office administrators to visit schools and spend time with staff, parent, and student groups. Board members could be invited to go with administrators, too. Identify one to three topics or ideas, with a couple key points to share and questions to get the conversations going.

Keep the sessions brief (20-60 minutes) so they are manageable for busy people. Be sure to schedule the listening sessions at times that are convenient for those you wish to hear from. Advertise these events to staff and families well in advance, noting the specific topic(s) you're interested in while being clear that you're coming primarily to listen.

If there are multiple members of the leadership team participating in the listening tour, be sure to schedule time in advance to identify the two to three key issues or questions you wish to probe in order to ensure consistency among conversations.

Most importantly: Debrief this activity with everyone who participated as listeners and then communicate back with the larger community about what you heard.

Pros

Builds relationships and humanizes administrators with the community.

Familiar format.

Low resource activity, aside from time.

Cons

Time constraints; may need to share with other central office administrators (and be sure everyone is asking the same questions to ensure continuity).

Must be thoughtfully scheduled and well advertised to ensure turnout.