



Effective Communications Strategies for Today's New Superintendents

(a "Best Of" / Highlights session)

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Principal, J. Marie & Associates

Your Trusted Friend In Communications

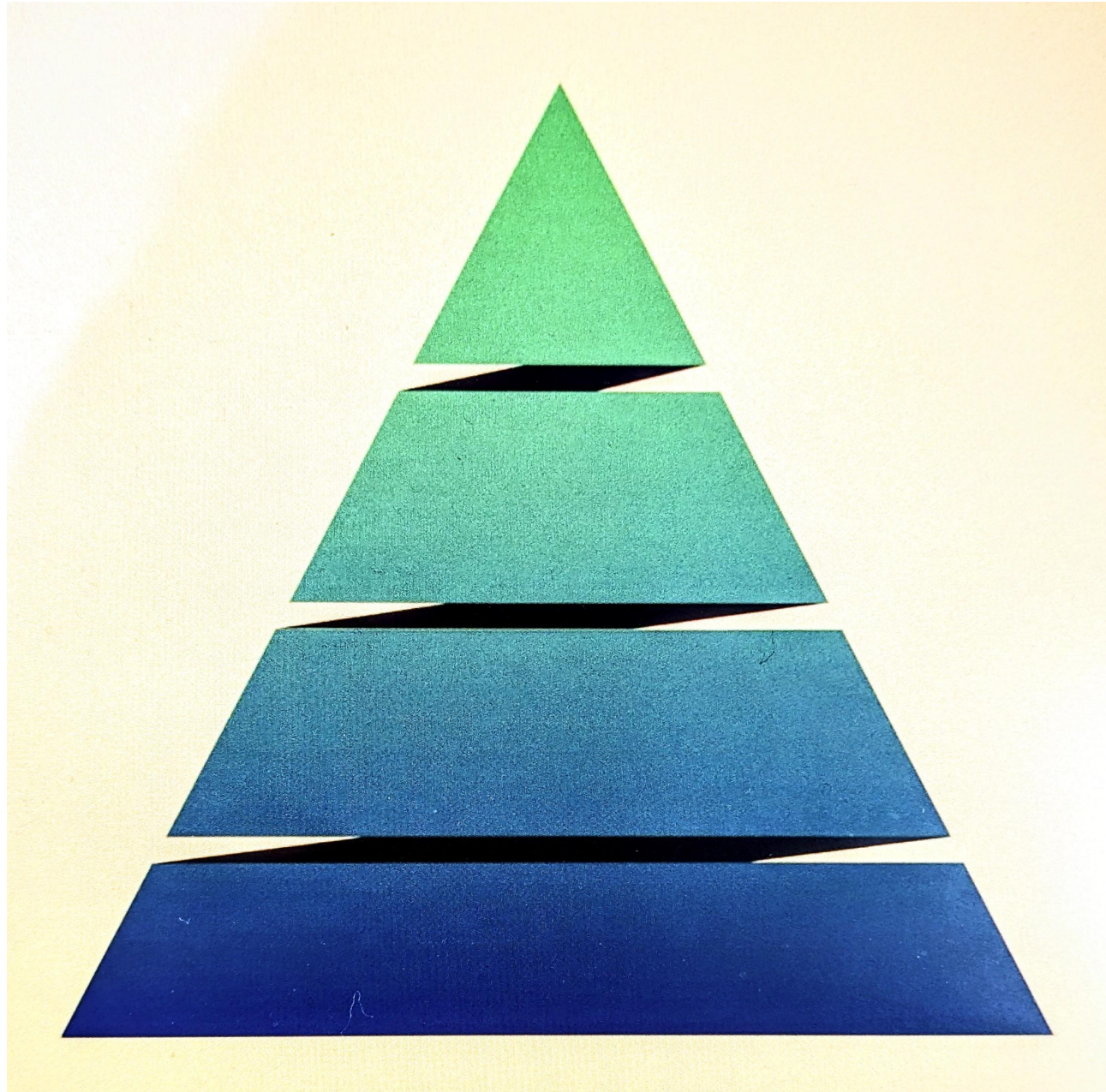
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Communications Planning 101

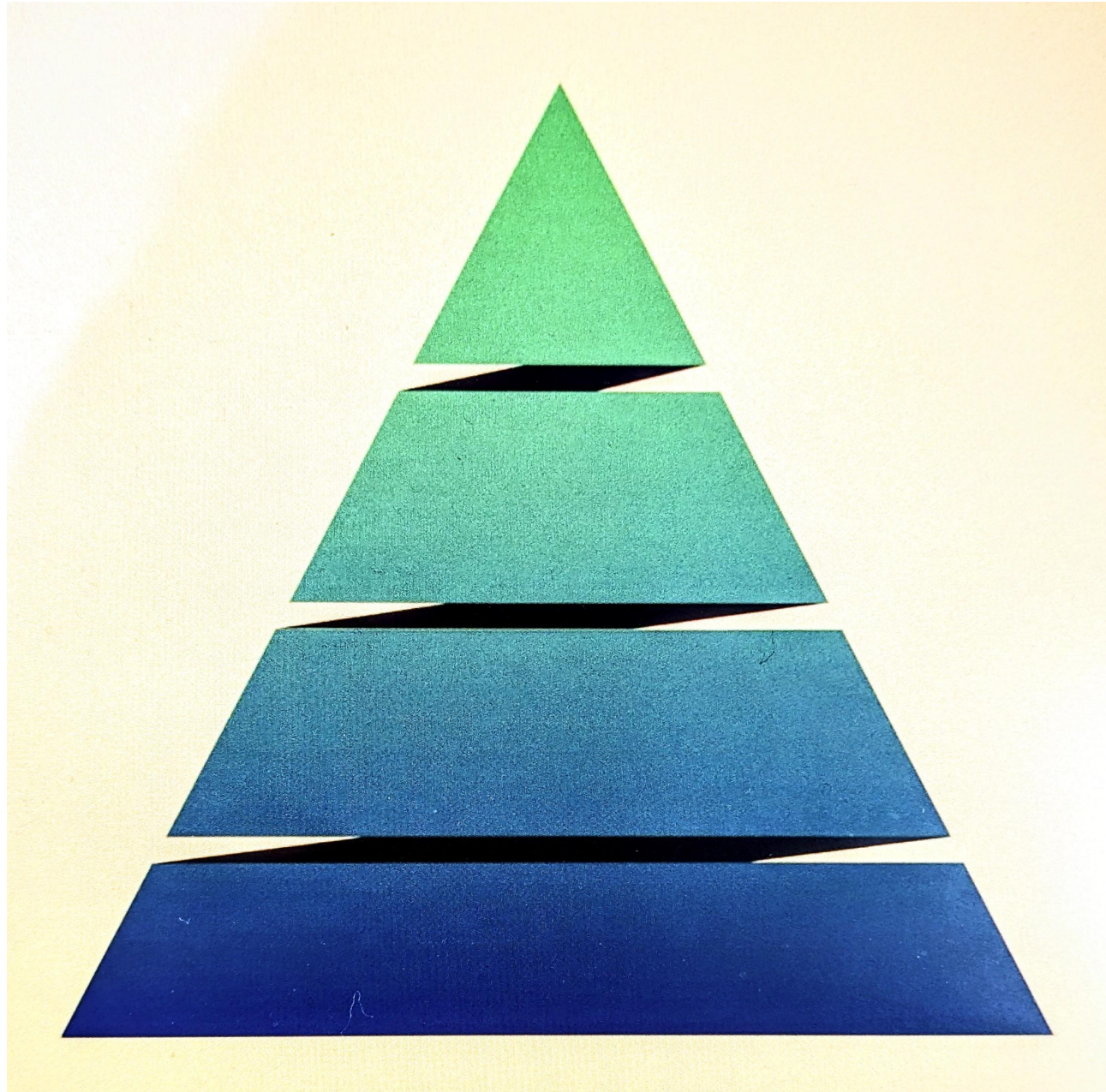
- **Plan ahead.** You need more lead time than you usually think.
- Start by identifying your **audiences** – who needs to be included in this work?
(people affected by the work; those with responsibility, resources, and authorities)
- Identify your **key messages**: people are inundated and will only remember up to about 3 key ideas. So while you might have a lot of details to cover, take the time to get clear about what's most important, and emphasize those key points
- Select a variety of **communications tools** that reach your constituents
in ways that are convenient to them
- Create a **timeline**: Work backwards from your deadline (your decision point, board meeting, implementation starting date, etc). Note who is doing what and by when.
- Be sure you are **including time to circle back** to key audiences to **close the loop**.



Communications Pyramid: The Top

1:1 Conversations and small group meetings:

- Highest impact, most personal
- Customizable and responsive to constituent interests, values, concerns, and priorities
- Time and attention intensive
- Scalable only by sharing the workload
- Use for key communicators, opinion leaders (formal AND informal)



Mass Communications:

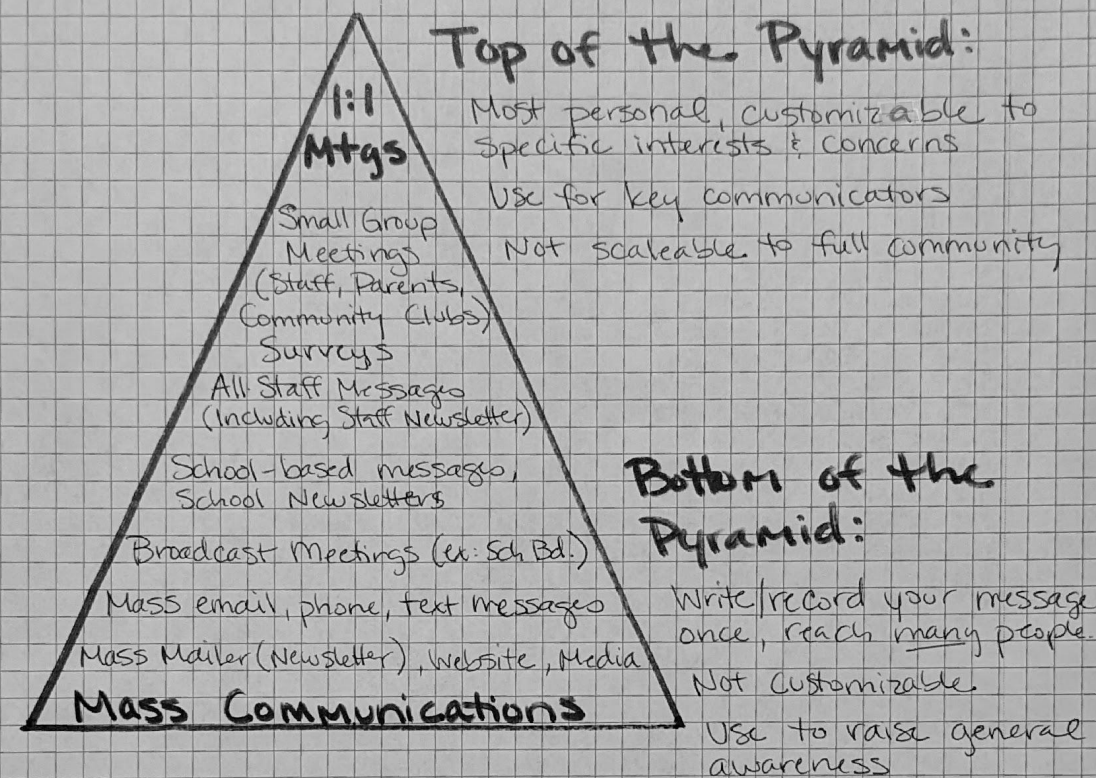
Media, Website, Print and Electronic Mass Mailers

- Not personal or customizable
- Address general community values, priorities, information needs
- Write or record your message ONCE and reach hundreds or thousands of constituents
- Use for building general / grassroots awareness of an issue or topic

Communications Pyramid: The Bottom

Sample Communications Pyramid:

This is just an example. Create your own pyramid with your actual communication tools.



There is no single communication tool that will reach all your critical audiences. The communications pyramid can help you ensure you are using a variety of tools to create both general awareness of key ideas AND personal connections with community influencers.

There is no “silver bullet”

- There is no single communications tool you can use that will reach all of your constituents
- Create a Communications Tools Inventory (a list of all the tools that are available to you)
- Remember internal as well as external constituents
- Draw your own pyramid, filling in where your existing communications tools fall (don't get hung up on details, this is a quick working document)
- If there are gaps, think about tools or activities that can help fill those gaps
- When communicating anything important, plan ahead so you can include tools from the top, middle, and bottom of the pyramid

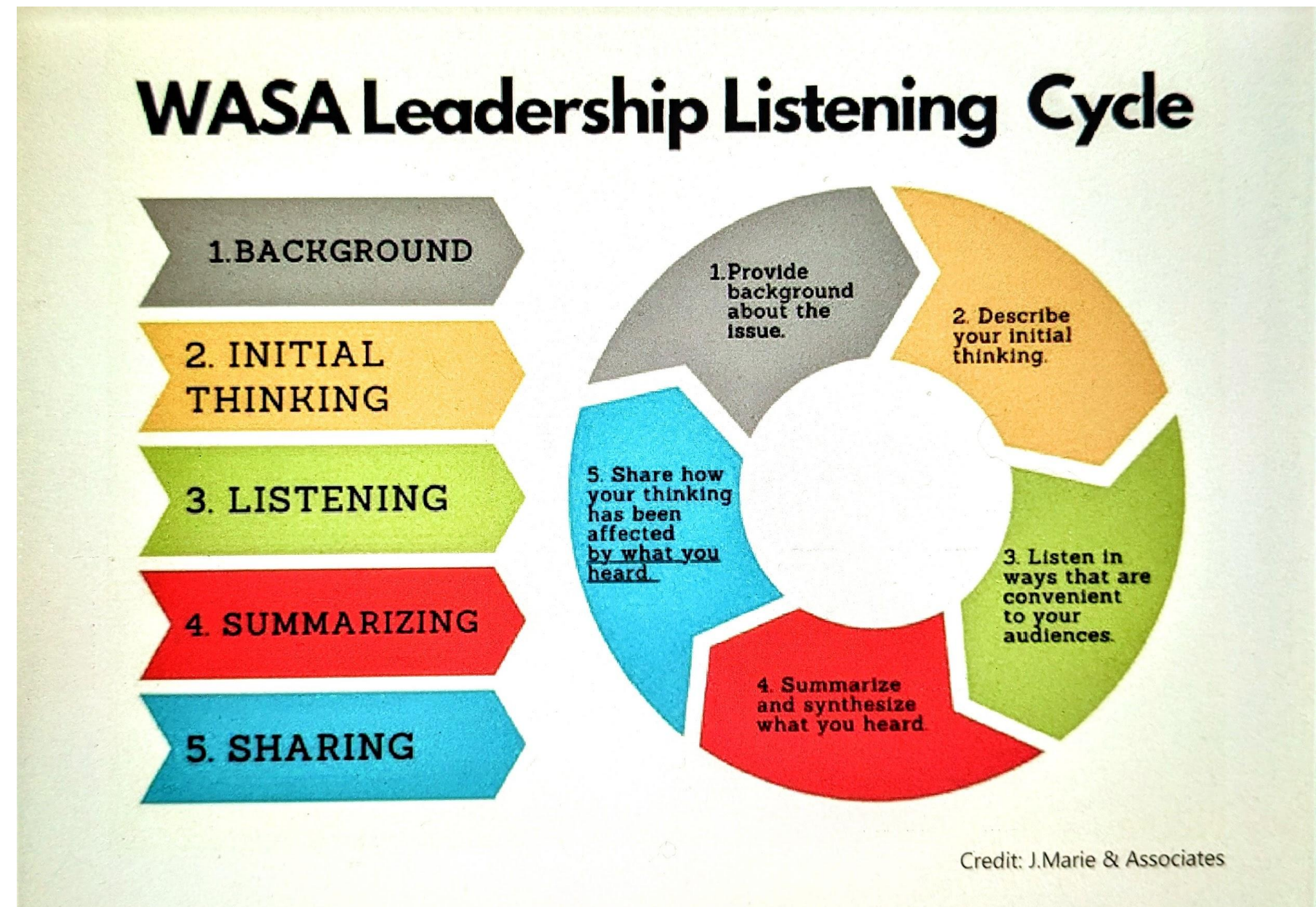


Listening is a Critical Leadership Activity

- **Continually seek feedback** (what gets in our way of this?)
- Engage with people on a **personal level** (don't rely just on email / technology)
- **Listening Continuum:** Ignoring, Pretend, Selective, Attentive, Empathetic
- **Hallmarks of deep listening:** Silence, Open Body Language, Clarifying Questions/Comments to Summarize and Check Understanding
- **Empathy does not mean / require agreement**
- Listening – Specifically **Demonstrating that you Listened** – Builds relationships
- How do we **overcome listening challenges**?
Make a conscious decision to listen; Open your mind; Prevent interruptions;
Listen for real meanings; Watch your body language; Respond appropriately

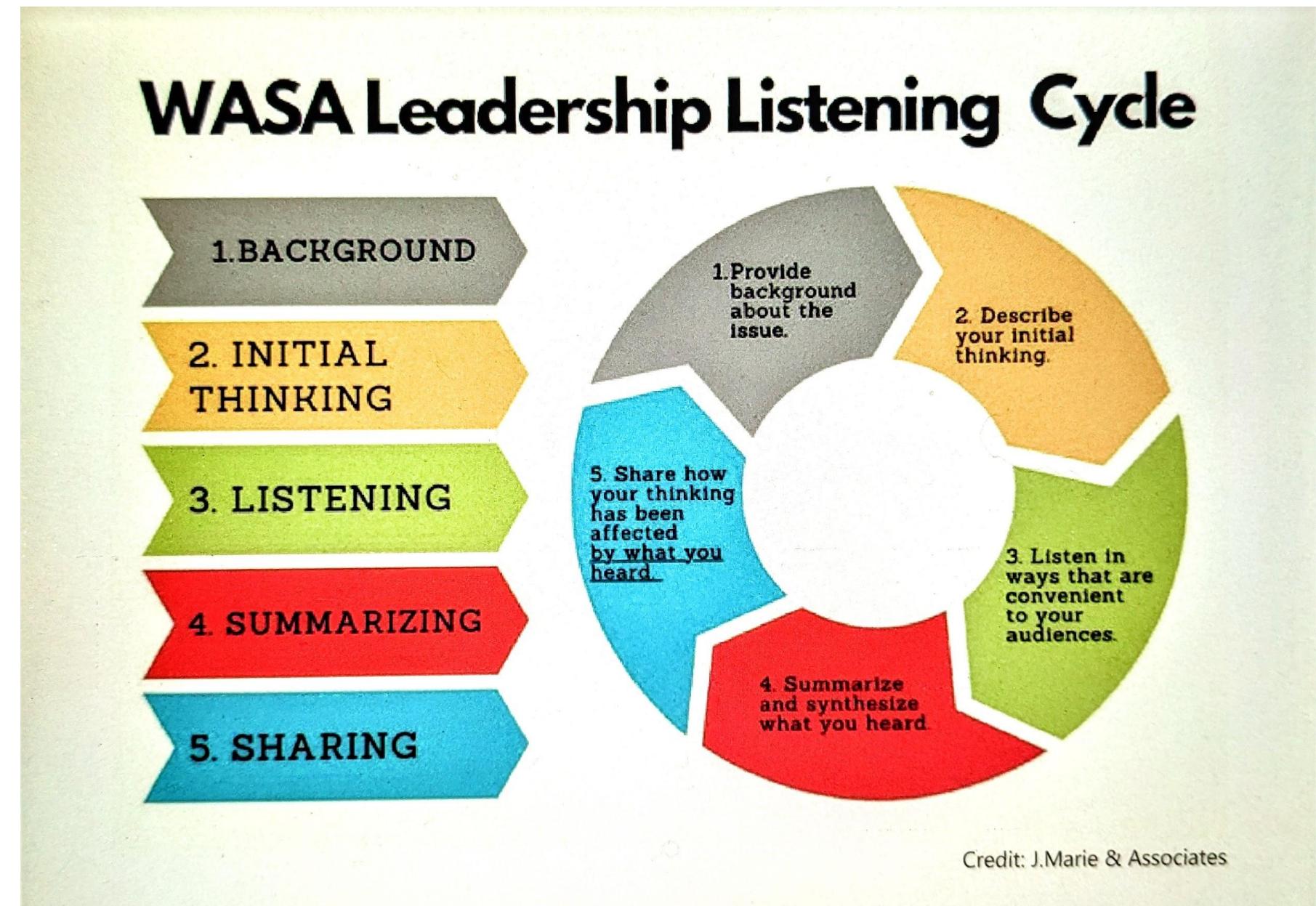
Organizational Listening

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.")



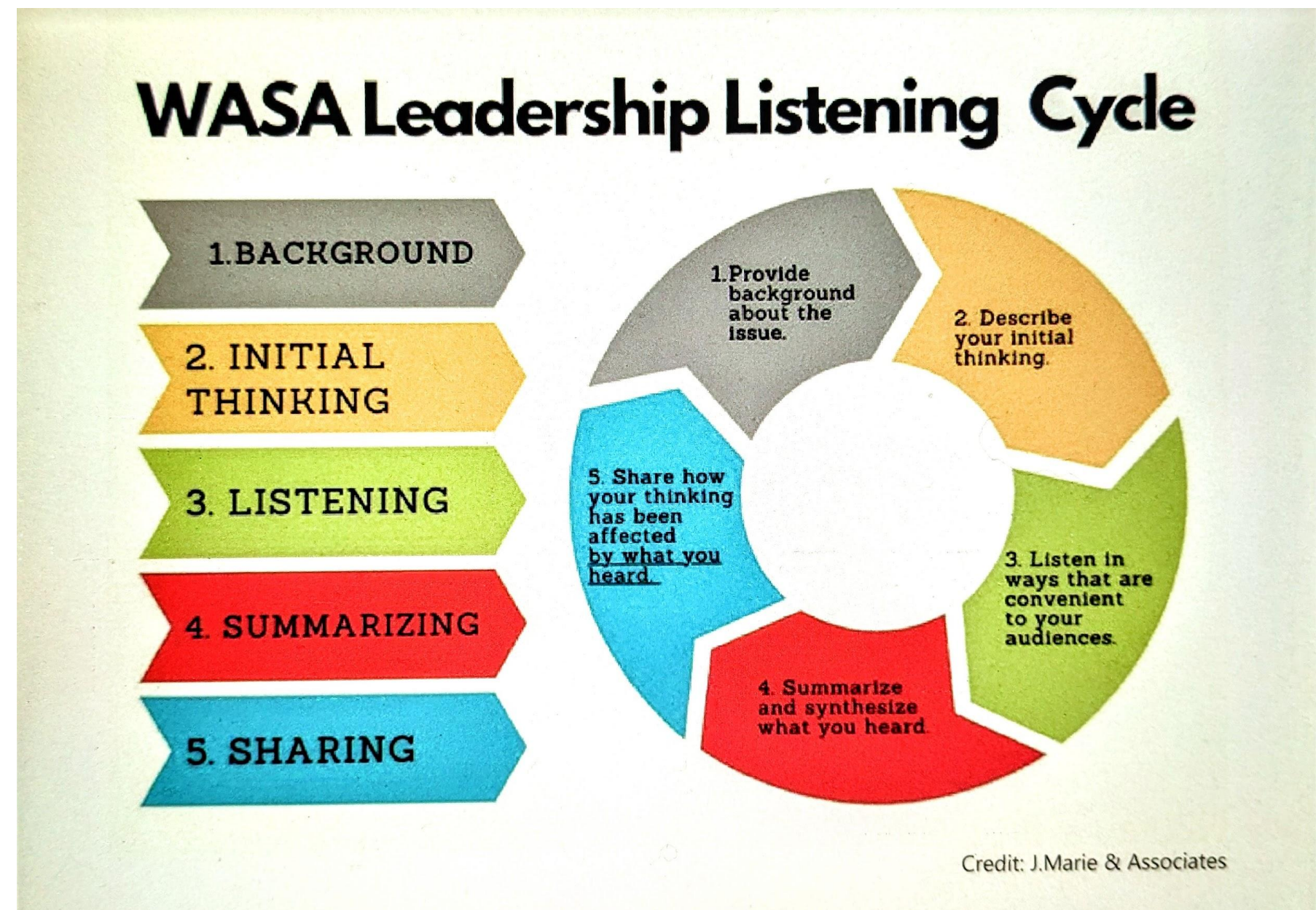
3. Reach out and listen deeply to those affected by the issue, idea, or plan. Include those closest to the issue, as well as those with resources and authorities or responsibilities. Listen in ways that are convenient to them. ("We listened to you in the following ways...")

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.





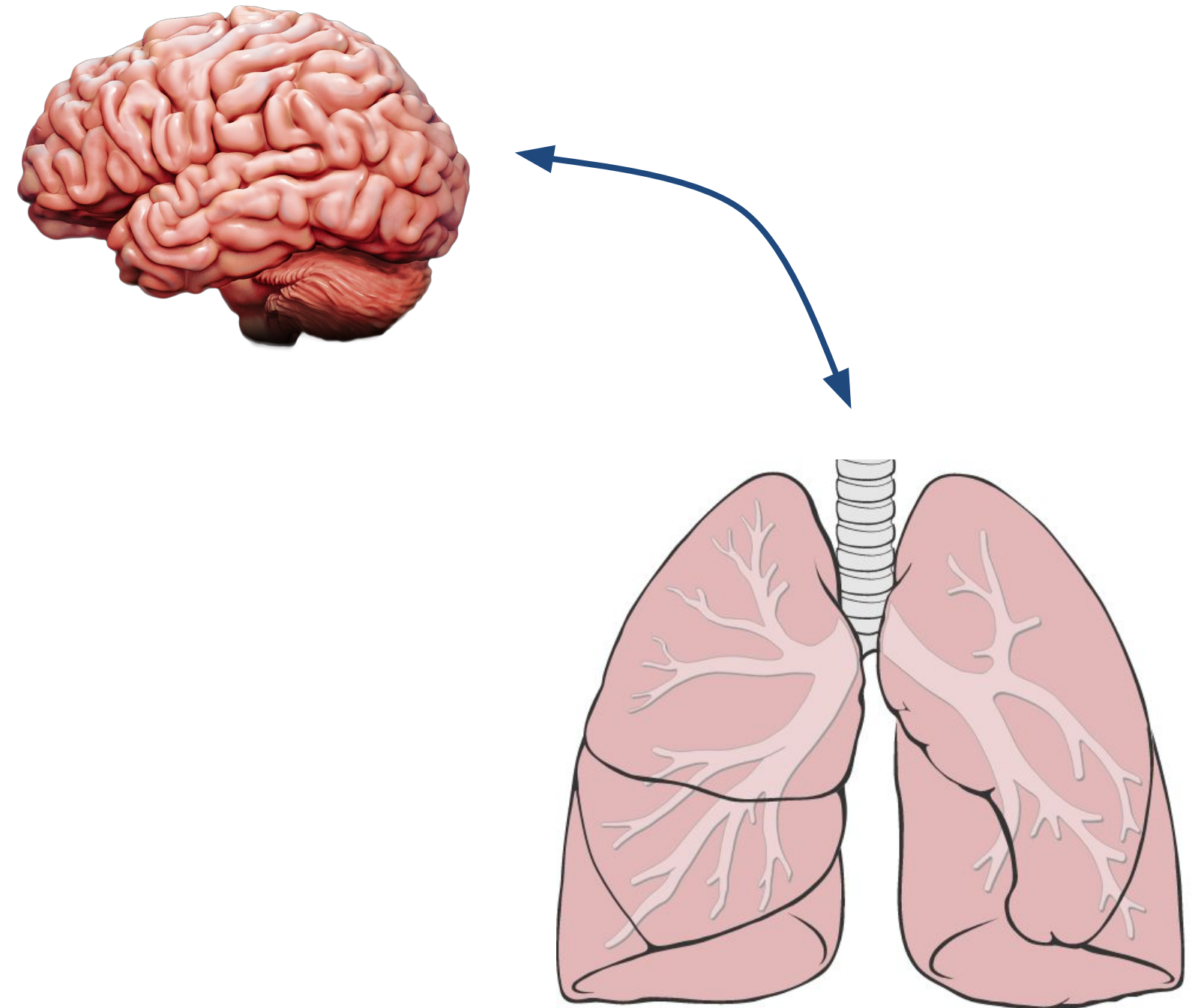
Write your main message once; Share it multiple ways

- Generally speaking, think of the primary message as being the one to families / the public. Depending on the issue, this message might also get posted to your website and/or shared in other communication tools.
- But send it internally FIRST, with an introductory message
- “The following message is going out to families shortly, but I/we wanted you to have this information first” ... or, “I/we wanted you to hear it directly from me/us.”
- Add any staff-only messaging or instructions, including empathy and guidance for how you expect them to navigate this issue, if appropriate
- Then paste in the content of the family / public message.
- Note: assume that any message you send to staff or families will become public. Always write your messaging with an eye toward how the media and general public will interpret what you’re saying.

Communicating under Stress

When we're under stress, our adrenal system is activated. Our breathing becomes shallow and our brain naturally shifts into a more narrow focus – literally and figuratively.

- This makes it harder for us to hear people we disagree with or do not like. **Tips:** manage your exhale to manage your brain; remember the power of mirror neurons; self-care IS a leadership decision (set yourself up for success).
- It also makes it harder for our constituents to hear us. **Tips:** acknowledge big emotions; demonstrate that you have listened *before* expecting to be heard; simplify and plan to repeat your messages.



Attend to Emotions First

*“I've learned that people
will forget what you said;
people will forget what you did;
but people will never forget
how you made them feel.”
– Maya Angelou*



Image from American Libraries Magazine
May 28, 2014 *Remembering Maya Angelou*



“No Comment” implies there is more to the story and invites negative speculation.

Even when you can't say much, **you CAN talk about:**



Your Values

You can always talk about your district values. Pull from your mission and vision, if available, or frame them as community values.

Depending on the situation, you might highlight safety, fairness, respect, and/or a culture of caring deeply for one another.

Policies / Procedures

Referring to your policies and procedures helps convey the sense that your leadership is prepared for these types of issues.

While this is a challenging situation, you have guiding documents and a legal framework directing your next steps. Describe the process your district will follow.

Supportive Resources

Look to reputable national organizations for fact sheets, tip sheets, and other resources.

Point staff to employee assistance programs.

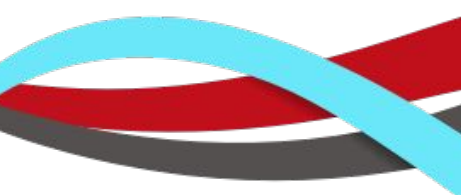
If an investigation is ongoing, provide guidance and contact information for those with additional information to reach out.

Actions & Next Steps

At a high level, what happened?
What has the district done so far?

Who have you partnered with? (e.g. law enforcement, but be careful to only speak for your own organization.)

What's next, even if you're just sharing when you'll communicate again.





Acknowledge ~ Bridge ~ Convert

- **Acknowledge and empathize** “I can’t answer that question right now *because* ... ”
Express respect for the other’s perspective and share context for why you can’t answer directly (because details aren’t yet known; don’t want to get ahead of the facts; this is a personnel / disciplinary matter; etc.)
- **Bridge** Pause. Give yourself a breath ... and continue: “But what I *can* say is ... ”
- **Convert** Point toward the things you CAN talk about. Example phrases include:
 - “We look at issues like this through the lens of ...” (student safety; transparency; our district mission and values; etc.)
 - “We are guided by ...” (policy, procedure; state and federal law; our values; etc.)
 - “I have confidence in (the person/people leading the district’s response)”
 - “We will work closely with ...” (local partners; families; law enforcement; etc.)

Note: it is better to say “I don’t know *yet*” and follow up later than to get it wrong.

My Parting Gift to You:

Bridging works just as well in the produce aisle as it does in a formal interview.

- Acknowledge strong feelings.
- Empathize.
- Bridge: “We are not going to solve this issue here in the produce aisle.” “But I can assure you ...”
- Convert: Express your confidence in the process and people involved. Point the person toward an appropriate outlet for their concern (if applicable).



Thank You

Virtual Communications Training Courses for Groups

- *Listening as a Key Strategy for Leaders*
- *Navigating School Closures*
- *Developing a Framework for Equity & Inclusion*
- ... and more!

ONLINE: www.jmarie.associates/courses





- Founder and Principal of J. Marie & Associates as well as Ideal Communications
- Nationally-recognized communications strategist, leadership trainer, facilitator, and presenter
- Former communications director for Snohomish Public Schools; before that, she represented the American Red Cross
- Past President, WSPRA (Washington School PR Association)
- Past Vice President, NSPRA (National School PR Association) Representing six states and western Canada
- Lover of life, people, books, music, our shared Earth, adventure, fresh air, real food, and BEing
- Full-time working nomad

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