

Invitational Leadership: Deep Listening and “Closing the Loop”

Seeking and considering constituent input is a key leadership function. School leaders have a lot of latitude in determining how to engage the community in our work, and we get to decide how best to communicate the decisions we make. Therefore, we have a lot of opportunity to shape our families’ and community members’ experiences of our schools and affect whether or not they feel heard, respected, and valued when they interact with us.

FIRST, YOU MUST LISTEN WELL... AND SINCERELY

- These times call for leaders who can **listen to people who are emotionally charged without becoming dismissive, defensive, or emotionally charged ourselves**. Learn and apply self-management and active listening skills. Seek coaching or practice these skills with another leader.
- Provide **multiple ways for constituents to share their thoughts with you**. School board meetings are public business meetings: they aren’t generally the right format for a detailed exploration of complex feelings. Board members are discouraged from engaging in dialogue with the public during public comment period. It is best just to listen. Remind your community that the Board’s silence during public comment period neither signifies disagreement or agreement and the Board values hearing from the community. Is your district also offering opportunities like committees, surveys, presentations at other routine meetings, or public forums, as well as providing phone and email contact information for staff who can engage in the topic and answer questions? These additional meetings offer opportunity for more interaction with your community. Meet people “where they already are” when possible; make good use of existing meetings and communication tools.
- Sometimes a person or group will badger you with questions as a method for controlling the conversation or to avoid sharing their own perspective. One way to get out of that cycle is to **“boomerang” the focus of conversation** back out to the person or group. Answer a question with a clarifying question: “How do *you* see this issue?” Or, “Help me understand why [this particular aspect of the issue] is important to you.” You can also state your goal for the interaction: “As a superintendent, I get a lot of opportunities to do the talking. Tonight, I’m really here to listen...”
- **Consider having a visual reference available** to focus or redirect the conversation back to the topic at hand: a flip chart, an agenda, an infographic or image. It provides a third point of reference for you and your audience to focus on.

DEMONSTRATE THAT YOU HAVE LISTENED WELL

It is not enough to ask for input. It is not even enough to act on that input. You **MUST** let people know that their perspective is being thoughtfully considered. The public has no way of knowing that you have truly considered the breadth of community perspective on any particular topic if you do not make your thinking visible. Math teachers call this “showing your work.” It could also be called “closing the loop.”

Many leaders drop the ball here – even leaders who generally do a great job of seeking input and remaining open to what they hear can fail to demonstrate their listening. Fortunately, this is easily resolved. It is as simple as making it a routine habit to talk about how your personal or leadership team’s thinking changes over time.

The formula goes like this:

- 1. When I or we first started to address this issue, we thought X (initial overview of the issue).**
- 2. Early on, we learned A, B, and C (information that reshaped your thinking about this issue).**
- 3. Along the way, we sought input from D, E, and F (constituent groups).**
- 4. Themes we found in the input tended to focus on M and N (a couple examples of the most commonly shared priorities and/or concerns).**
- 5. Based on all of this, we decided Y or we now think Z (note what is different as a result of constituent input, or point out that the input confirmed the initial thinking).**