

Leading and navigating through divisive situations

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Is it true or does it just seem true that our districts, our greater communities, our state and our country have never *felt* more divided? I used the word “felt” because I continue to believe we’re not truly as divided as it *feels* we are. Nonetheless, as district leaders and administrators, we’ve all witnessed cases of anger and frustration from parents and community members — and even from district staff — since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic.

Sometimes the negative comments have surfaced in board meetings, committee meetings or other public venues. Ignoring them is often our “go-to” which, while understandable, isn’t the most productive response. Here are a few things to consider, remember and perhaps to help prepare for the next time lightning strikes.

First, diversity exists in every community, regardless of size or location. Diversity of opinion. Diversity of longevity or history in the community. Diversity in where each member of the community is in his or her lifecycle. Diversity of understanding about the current issues in the school district. Embrace that diversity! Seek to learn the key issues and challenges in your district. Whether you can “fix” things is less the point than your willingness to let everyone in your

community know they are seen and heard.

Where diversity exists, disagreement will too. How can it not? Be willing to have the dialogue. Endeavor to listen without responding. Ask clarifying questions, not accusatory ones. Let people know you’re seeking knowledge and understanding. Large, complex issues can be scary and riddled with opportunities for misunderstanding. Consider a series of focused discussions on small parts of these big issues. Take things one piece at a time and ask others in the conversation to stay on track with you. Also, consider additional time for public participation at board meetings, especially for specific topics or before action on controversial ones.

Insist on fact-based conversations. Request source materials and be willing to cite your own. Repeat after former U.S. Sen. **Daniel Patrick Moynihan**, who said, “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.” Seek real and true sources of information that may challenge even your own opinions.

Focus on the students in your district. Try not to be distracted from your quest to teach, know and remain committed to your students. Your district’s strategic plan will be instrumental here. Stay aligned with your district’s vision and goals but be willing to be flexible within them. Goals are broad and should be able to

enfold new, specific strategies that have been determined to be important for continued improvement.

When a course of action has been determined, stay on message. Share the rationale and “whys” as much as the “therefores.” Keep in mind that pushback and challenges should be expected, especially by those who were invited to the conversation but declined to participate. Always remember that you are not required to attend every debate — or respond to every argument on social media — for which you are invited. Don’t belittle or bash your critics. Again, stay on message.

Finally, understand that good leaders place a high priority on self-care and encourage the same from the leaders around them. No one is at their best when they are overwrought or tired. Use off time to be off. Ask for a break when needed. Be willing to recess a conversation or meeting when it’s no longer productive. Consider a mandatory “processing time” or “cooling off period” with every big conversation. If people know that a break to consider will be part of your regular processes, anxiety levels may decrease.

Finally — yes, I know I already said finally but I mean it now — call someone at OSBA if you have a question, need an ear for listening or have an idea about something we can do or should be doing to support you as you lead your school district.