

Countering Critics at Public Meetings

BY JEFF M. OLEFSON

Back in the 1990s, I served on a board of education in Westchester County, N.Y., that experienced more than a decade-long string of easily passed budgets and uneventful board meetings.

That changed with the formation of a small anti-tax group aided by cable broadcasts of our meetings and a local newspaper that thrived on controversy. At every meeting, three or four individuals skillfully attacked the board and superintendent. We responded, but we always were playing defense.

The attackers were two steps ahead of us, and we knew it. The irony was not lost upon us that the comment section of our monthly meetings, designed to provide community members with access to their elected school board, was being hijacked by people who had no interest in speaking to us. This was verified when they ignored our request for a meeting with their group.



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What we did not initially understand was that we had created a perfect opportunity for our critics to play to the audience, cable viewers and our local paper. All of the attacks were without substance, but by the time we looked into one matter, they ambushed us with another. We naively believed, with the facts on our side, we could win them over. They wisely understood their agenda was best served by making us look confused and incompetent.

Time Limits

It took us a little time, but once we figured out their game plan, we knew what was needed to counter it and turn the tables on them.

Flexible and undefined public comment procedures were not serving us well, so we changed them.

We set a three-minute time limit and insisted speakers leave their seats and speak from a podium with their backs to the TV camera. We insisted all questions be addressed to the board president. We promised we would respond to every question, but not necessarily when the questions were asked. As a matter of practice, we did not respond to any question until all comments were completed and everyone had left the podium. This was to prevent the critic from engaging in a debate with the superintendent or the board.

If the question was about an operational matter, our superintendent would respond. If it was about a policy, the response would come from the board president. Only if she thought it appropriate would other board members chime in. This clear division of labor between the board and superintendent was an important part of our strategy.

To blunt the potential criticism we were limiting access, we expanded opportunities for community members to be heard. We made index cards available for individuals who were uncomfortable with public speaking. A

special board mailing address and later an e-mail address were created for this purpose. When limiting speakers, we mentioned other options, such as submitting comments of any length in writing. The more we expanded access while limiting our critics' ability to hijack our meetings, the more frustrated they became.

We employed other strategies, as well. At meetings likely to draw a large crowd, we used a timekeeper and a keeper of the public address system. We set up two podiums with separate public address channels. When a speaker ran well beyond the permitted time, the board president would signal for the shutoff of the mike. Having a second podium with its own sound system enabled the board and audience to focus attention on the next speaker.

Practicing Responses

Generally, it's better to let frustrated people speak as soon as possible. With our chronic critics, we did the opposite, especially when children made presentations. The critics looked annoyed and bored — which did not go unnoticed by the audience. When they finally spoke, the local newspaper reporter had left for the evening to meet a deadline.

We carefully practiced what to do in the event of personal attacks. This allowed us to react quickly and sharply. Our responses ended with the phrase “We don't want that here in our community.”

Once enough time had passed so the critics could not assume the role of David to our Goliath, we decided to take them on. We knew we were ready when we observed audience members rolling their eyes when a critic stood up.

The major weapon of the critic is ambush, so we used the same technique against them. They gave us just what we needed. On a continuous fishing expedition, the critics submitted loads of freedom of information requests. We looked for duplicates and found them.

When the comment section of the next meeting began with the typical ambush, we did not fall for the bait. Once the critics returned to their seats, the board president talked about the importance of transparency. Then he laced into this group for irresponsibly submitting duplicate requests for the same item, a waste of taxpayer money. He ended with the phrase Ronald Reagan used in a presidential debate, “There you go again.”

The critics were shocked and unprepared to be on the receiving end of what they so often dished out. They continued to come for awhile, but each time they would rise to speak, the board in unison would repeat the Reagan line. A few meetings later, they were gone.

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