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Recovering Your Relationship

TWO “MARCHING TO a different drummer” school board members were playing way too active a role on their own subcommittee that was planning to present a disastrous proposal at the next board meeting. It could not have been a more perfect storm for a new superintendent. Sound familiar?

All of the pieces of this relationship played out pretty much as one would expect. The two board members and the committee were beaming as they presented recommendations they were sure the whole board would embrace. This did not happen.

The administrative team sat quietly, but the body language of the superintendent and his staff spelled alarm, and the rest of the board members could hardly contain their outrage. The tension in the room was building as the superintendent, realizing his honeymoon period was over, did his best, with only limited effect, to mitigate the damage.

It all boiled over in the executive session. The board lashed out at the members serving on the committee for not giving them a heads-up. The board members on the committee were angry at the public criticism and rejection of their plan and, as is often the case, everyone was angry with the superintendent for not magically preventing this from happening.

One Crafty Tool

Terry Dougherty, superintendent of Hancock Central Schools in New York’s Southern Tier, knew this scenario all too well, as he had experienced just this situation in his first year as superintendent. Recently, I heard him coach a group of aspiring superintendents, telling them the most important item in a superintendent’s toolbox is the ability to recover from a damaged relationship. He calls it “relationship recovery.”

“In my preservice training for the superintendency,” he told the aspiring leaders, “I acquired a lot of strategies for solving complex problems, but little attention was focused on how to recover from bruised and damaged relationships, especially with my board. Without learning this on my own, it is unlikely that I would have survived my first contract.”

Relationship recovery requires a distinctly

different set of skills — active listening, empathy and what Dougherty calls “relationship radar,” something that may not come naturally to task-oriented leaders. “You have to train your senses and instincts to notice trouble brewing and pre-empt, if possible. You won’t, however, catch everything, so recovery is also important to successfully managing ongoing relationships.”

The first thing Dougherty did was to schedule a meeting with each board member individually and with the leader of the committee to let them talk. Listening, acknowledging feelings and then responding with symbolic gestures rebuilds trust, which is imperative to fixing anything, especially relationships.

Listening beyond details to how board members are feeling is not the easiest thing to do when being attacked. “Like blinding sun in the eyes of a center fielder, you have to learn to get past your ego or it will block your view,” he says. Mentally arguing often reveals itself in body language, spoiling the opportunity. A helpful strategy is to approach active listening as an exploration of perspectives rather than a determination of right and wrong or factual truth.

Energies Redirected

Spending too much time looking backward is unproductive and tends to reinforce hurt feelings. While board members who take longer to get over things innocently rehash, others with an agenda served by sustaining the controversy may use this as a tactic. Redirecting is the best strategy because relationships naturally heal when you move forward.

Dougherty redirected by getting the committee going on a new project and focusing the board’s attention on other matters, even as he worked behind the scenes for a face-saving fix, which as it turns out was not necessary, as everyone just moved on.

Robert Feirsen, superintendent in Garden City, N.Y., offered this additional advice: Recovery goes more smoothly when superintendents have built foundational relationships with board members *before* the inevitable strains arise. They provide you with a cushion, and while this is time-consuming, any shortcuts come at your own peril.



JEFF OLEFSON is president of Staff Development Associates in Westtown, N.Y. E-mail: jolefson@optonline.net. Twitter: @jolefson50