



**WASB GoLD Staff ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS ...**

## Listening is the Key to Building Trust

**Q.** *We have a couple of new school board members on our board. How can we establish a good working relationship with these new members?*

**A.** School board elections are over, and the changes in board make-up create new dynamics. Elections tend to bring strong opinions and intense emotions to the surface. Political debates around differing positions can lead to conflicts, making the work of school boards very challenging. Trust is the basis for effective leadership and every successful working relationship. Open, constructive communication is the basis of trusting relationships, and effective listening is at the heart of constructive communication.

Ironically, much of the communication education we receive throughout life focuses on speaking, not listening. Yet, 80 percent of problem-solving is listening. Set the stage to greatly enhance your effectiveness as a school board member by becoming a better listener.

■ **Listen openly.** Listen attentively and completely to others. This is especially important when you need to understand the perspective of those with whom you disagree. When we disagree with someone, it's easy to make assumptions about or misinterpret what they say. Attentive, open listening allows us to hear the intended message without needing to assume anything. Providing an opportunity to be fully heard is a powerful gesture of respect which will generally encourage the other party to respond in kind.

■ **Allow the speaker to finish before formulating your response.** Remember the last time someone's response to you seemed confusing or disconnected because it was expressed before you had fully shared your perspective? The response was confusing because it was based on incomplete information. You can't understand the situation from the speaker's perspective while you are busy

rehearsing what you are going to say next. Waiting to hear the entire message allows the speaker to stay focused and reduces defensiveness. It also gives you the benefit, as a listener, of being able to respond appropriately and accurately. When it's your turn to state your point of view, it's also more likely that the other party will listen to you.

■ **Acknowledge that you have heard the speaker.** Paraphrase, or restate in your own words, your understanding of what was said. This allows the speaker to clarify misunderstandings and encourages them to say more. Ask questions to clarify

and optimize understanding. Questions should be asked in a genuine spirit of learning more. Whether or not you like or agree with the answers, they provide valuable information that helps you make good decisions. Take care to avoid questions in ways that are intended to solicit only the answer you want to hear, or can feel like an interrogation. Instead of "Why did you do that?" ask "What made you decide to do it that way?"

■ **Deal with emotions – theirs and yours.** Recognize that emotions are normal, needing to be expressed and "heard" in order for understanding. The emotions that arise in the midst of a disagreement make it especially difficult to listen. Keep emotions from escalating into problems by establishing ground rules such as:

- One person speaks at a time
- No yelling
- No personal attacks
- I will speak only for myself
- We will share "air" time

It's the responsibility of the group to hold one another accountable to the ground rules and, thereby, keep emotions in check.

■ **Build your listening skills with training.** Sign up for a workshop, individually or as a board. Ask the Governance and Leadership Development (GoLD) consultants to work with your board to help you

*continued* ►

### THIS COLUMN IS FOR YOU!

**Each issue,** a member of the WASB Governance and Leadership Development (GoLD) Team answers member questions about board governance.

**Submit your question by visiting [wasb.org](http://wasb.org).**

Click the "GoLD" tab and then select "Governance Questions" at the bottom of the page.

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develop your skills. Look for training in which you can practice the skills being taught – with feedback – to ensure good learning.

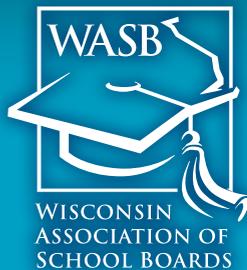
The significance of board members' relationships with one another cannot be overstated. Remember, as the board, you set the tone in your community. Because so much of your communication

happens in public, your ability and willingness to listen respectfully and openly to one another will significantly influence the willingness of community members to do the same.

Effective listening enhances the likelihood that the ultimate common goal of providing students with the best possible education will be achieved. Rachel Remen, clinical

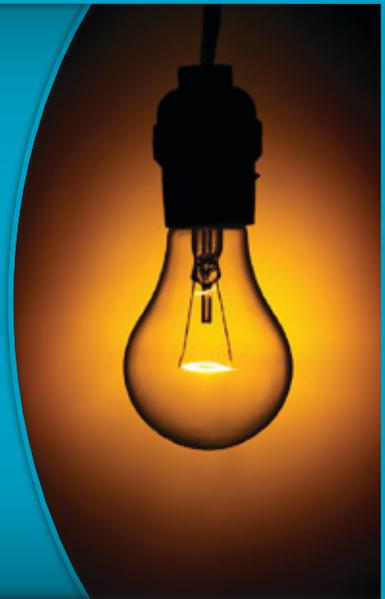
professor at the University of California San Francisco School of Medical, says it so well, "The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention." ■

*Karen Dorn, Governance and Leadership Development (GoLD) consultant.*



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