

IDEAS FOR LOCAL LEADERS FOR REACHING/LISTENING TO THE PUBLIC ON INTENSELY FELT ISSUES WHILE PROTECTING THE SAFETY AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF STAFF AND THEIR FAMILIES

Local elected officials as well as board and agency personnel and staff at schools, health agencies, libraries, arts organizations, and others are increasingly addressing issues that their constituents find upsetting, even frightening. National issues ranging from racial justice and equity dynamics to the economic and social ramifications of dealing with the Covid pandemic may also play out more frequently at this level. When that occurs, these local leaders can, if prepared ahead, usefully deepen their focus on: assessing constituents' views, reaching constituents more frequently and with more information, and engaging them in a more structured, deliberative exchange. In other words, preparation can help engage constituents in democratic governance while at the same time making them less susceptible to fear-mongering and false information.

When emotional issues arise, local leaders seem more and more to face threats to their personal safety and well-being as well as to their staffs and families. Often one hears that they did not anticipate fearing violence when assuming these traditionally less visible leadership positions. The threats are especially alarming because there is no assigned, trained staff to protect them. In contrast, the most prominent public officials may feel reassured about their safety because the U.S. Secret Service and comparable official agencies assigned personnel monitor threats to them, and even family members, and provide protection. In addition, these visible public officials are more likely to seek or accept such positions anticipating that their roles might raise safety concerns that would require that they modify their otherwise private lifestyles and those of their families. Expressing the distress and its effects at the local level, Clint Hickman, Maricopa County, Arizona Elections Supervisor, [told Cronkite News](#) a year after the Presidential elections that “anger began election night and escalated after Jan. 6, when he arrived home to find police guarding his house. Besides the personal impact, he said the abuse is beginning to take its toll on election workers who are quitting because they ‘don’t want to take the abuse, and they want to stand down.’”

The safety threats issue for such persons may have also intensified because of changes in social media communications and gun laws. Being targeted on social media can be terrifying. In contrast to receiving threatening letters and phone calls, these local leaders and staff can no longer keep others from reading hostile social media posts or escape the threats, offensive comments regarding race, gender, ethnicity, or religion, or flagrant lies. And what might have previously been an annoying demonstration near one’s home can become, because of laws expanding open-carry gun rights to citizens, a traumatizing event. Both these dynamics – social media posts and demonstrators carrying assault weapons – are especially terrifying for their children.

Despite light staffing, having a plan to increase public engagement and to provide for safety can improve the response when such a volatile situation arises. The plans will differ, of course,

depending on the assessment made of the goals of those raising the issues, the staffing, and context, but we offer a few ideas to stimulate your thinking. They are based on advice from those involved at the local level. The Divided Community Project will be glad to talk with you about the fit for your situation, understanding that a brief and generalized list such as this should not be viewed as a recipe for all situations. These are not ideas designed to reduce dissent but rather to turn intense public interest into a more engaged, responsive public activity and to make it less scary to serve as a local official.

- 1. Encourage advanced preparation among the leadership group.** It is human nature to assume, when busy, that what is occurring elsewhere will not occur locally. With a goal of encouraging colleagues to carve out scarce time to prepare, focus them on the potential costs of non-preparation and the gains of team readiness. Ways to bring these lessons home might include providing: a summary of issues that have arisen for comparable leadership groups, summaries of selected incidents from elsewhere to use as hypotheticals for how this group would respond, or a table-top simulation followed by a discussion of what participants wished they were better prepared to do.
 - Columbus, Ohio Mayor Andrew Ginther describes how involving his leadership group in a table-top simulation and the polling and discussion afterward helped them to think through how to prepare for divisive issues and work as a team across silos to engage community partners, in this [videotape](#).
- 2. Assess likely local issues as well as issues being pursued at a national level that might have local application.** Consider what issues are most likely to be raised, which individuals and what groups will be raising them, how intense the feelings are regarding each issue, and what is motivating people to speak. Then act on this assessment so that various leadership responses (see points 3-10 below) are based on a series of expected scenarios. The Divided Community Project would be glad to talk with you about conducting an assessment. The analysis might enable the group to determine, for example, that their constituents are truly concerned and would respond to initiatives to bring them into discussions. Alternatively, they may determine that some people may be speaking out solely to gain publicity or increase financial donations to their causes, so they will not respond to efforts to engage them in dialogue.
- 3. Agree on how the leadership group will change the ways in which it interacts with the public when alarming or highly emotional issues arise.** Stated differently, alarming or highly emotional issues might warrant promoting more democratic engagement, not less. Leaders might usefully weigh the following illustrative approaches: Increase the frequency of communications, thereby acknowledging that the public considers the matter urgent. Frequent communication may help as well with rumor control. Give more detail, recognizing what they are concerned about. Look for adopting additional procedural or programmatic responses that might re-assure people that their interests will be considered. Help them understand each other. Add additional ways for the public to

communicate with you. Offer channels for people to help with the underlying problem such as establishing a task force to examine an issue more thoroughly. Use more personal and authentic language. Summarize what leaders have been hearing from the public, both to let them know that you heard them and to help them understand each other. If a local person is becoming emotional and the exchange is occurring in a small setting, express empathy, and think about suggesting an informal conversation before things become more volatile.

- Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, held a news conference daily during early months of the Covid pandemic, turning to his expert, Dr. Amy Acton, Director of the Ohio Department of Health, to speak in more detail to Ohioans. As analyzed in a *New York Times* opinion piece, discussed in this [videotape](#), Dr. Acton, made a personal connection with the audience, was brutally honest about the hard truths she knew and candid when she was uncertain, was authentic in confessing that she struggled herself with frustration, empathized with others about the effects of shutdowns, and inspired Ohioans about the ways that “we” could together, at this historic moment, save lives. Though some people made antisemitic remarks about her and brought gun-bearing demonstrators to her home, surveys indicated that Ohioans across partisan divides responded positively to Dr. Acton’s leadership.

- 4. Discuss how to model respectful deliberative democracy during public meetings and to organize opportunities for residents to engage in it.** Use the intense public interest to engage residents in democratic government. Organizations and individuals seeking to intimidate may find fewer followers if community leaders are transparent and actively involve constituents in their work. Where your assessment (Point 2) indicates this might work, consider organizing a workshop where people reflecting multiple viewpoints are encouraged to come and sit down with each other in small groups to describe their concerns. Use a facilitator and notetaker at each table to encourage all participants to share their concerns (not their positions). The facilitators might ask people to be more specific and encourage participants to add additional concerns or ideas as each table notetaker lists comments on a visible surface. Then each group can report to the larger group or be invited to visit other tables to see what comments were raised. Other formats include using a more structured [deliberative democracy](#), [online discussion forum](#), or [roundtable exchange among experienced discussants](#). The Divided Community Project would be glad to talk with you about possibilities.
- 5. Articulate aspirations that the leadership group can state frequently that are related to the scope of its work and/or include a strategic vision.** If some of these values and hopes are embraced across community fault lines, stating them can remind all persons in the moment – especially if those likely to threaten the safety of others are local -- that they face a shared future, even if they do not share viewpoints now.

- The Divided Community Project has published a guide, [“Identifying a Community Spirit”](#) that counsels communities on ways to put into words the aspirations that resonate deeply and broadly, address the community’s challenges, and authentically convey a sense of belonging and hope.
- Absent the time to verbalize a community spirit, it may help to reference the American Spirit. A bi-partisan and diverse group of Americans agree that the American Spirit [includes](#) seeking to be innovative and entrepreneurial; to be positive -- to employ a “can do” approach; and to be inclusive and to appreciate each other’s individuality.

6. Prepare a draft response that condemns threats portending violence. The statement should be one that all in the leadership group agree in advance to sign and support -- even if some will agree with the policy viewpoint espoused by the attacking individuals. In other words, this would be a values statement rather than a position paper on contested policy issues. To avoid giving attention to the perpetrators or their policy viewpoint, focus on the harm caused by the attacks and the democratic values that are at risk if such threats and attempts to intimidate continue. The goal is not to condemn disrespectful or uncivil expressions that enjoy valued First Amendment protection but to condemn speech or conduct that makes reasonable people fearful for their safety. The statement could advise on ways to have input into decision-making on policy matters and call on the need to be our best selves in order to preserve our democratic processes to address any dispute. Engaging a public relations or crisis management firm to help with drafting may also establish a relationship that could be useful during volatile times (see Point 10).

7. Use the preparation time to review existing and, if necessary, create new communication outlets on websites and through social media that members of the public become accustomed to using, so that when volatile issues arise, citizens are in the habit of, hence more likely to, consult these sources for accurate information. Depending on the community, communication outlets might include: a) dashboards of information the public relies upon, e.g., for voting places, school closings; b) communications with key stakeholders, influencers, community, or social media groups; c) stories of local interest about student successes, athletic teams, etc.; and/or d) launching a grass roots/social media presence (“P.R. Campaign”) to convey the positive aspects of the community to help create resilience during times of stress. The wisdom of this idea depends on capacity. Advance planning is helpful because, particularly in the midst of a stressful issue, a small staff might be more productively used for other purposes.

- The Divided Community Project issued a guide, [Divided Communities and Social Media: Strategies for Community Leaders](#), on using social media that offers illustrations of the creation of trusted online resources, their use to increase input from residents, and their potential role in promoting in-person dialogue, combatting online hate speech, and helping leaders understand community concerns.

- 8. Review and potentially adjust the public meeting procedures to recognize the new realities.** Such a review might focus on such meeting procedures as: the required justification to shift from an in-person to a virtual meeting (including public safety concerns); the timeframe for registering to testify (lengthening notice by even a few hours might give time to plan if a national group has decided to disrupt); the provisions for rescheduling a meeting rather than asking law enforcement to drag out disruptive persons (allowing them publicity) if groups decline to follow the procedures; and using nonexclusive ticketing to help estimate the crowd size. Attention might also focus on uses of the physical space, such as visibly posting ground rules and placing those coming to speak near and facing leaders rather than among constituents, thereby encouraging more constructive interaction with leaders. If constructive interaction seems likely and meeting rules permit, statements can be followed by asking a question of the speaker (“What would you like to happen to improve your student’s education?”) rather than issuing a *pro forma* “thank you.”

- 9. Meet with law enforcement to discuss a plan for dealing with potential violence.** What are law enforcement personnel, especially through their community relations staff, seeing nationally and locally in terms of threats to other leaders? Can they update local leaders when they perceive new threats? Local leaders can create and develop practices of updating “tension charts” to track issues that might be a source of conflict for various parts of the community. Affected leaders might also ask law enforcement: What should be warning signs that indicate that more protection is warranted? Whom specifically should leaders call with concerns about family, selves, and others? What steps should the leaders plan to take in case they are needed (e.g., moving family quickly, taking down social media posts)? They might usefully develop protocols with law enforcement in terms of what will unfold if people disrupt a meeting.
 - The Divided Community Project notes that leaders may prefer to allow disruption of a meeting when all are safe, rather than bring in law enforcement to clear the disruptive persons and create new issues about whether law enforcement acted as it should have. Reaching agreement in advance about who talks to whom when a volatile issue arises is vital to allowing leaders to make these choices. For more ideas, see page 17 the Guide, “[Key Considerations for Community Leaders Facing Unrest.](#)”

- 10. Make a plan to expand the capacity to respond in a crisis.** Keeping in mind that national media coverage, social media posts, and crises may unfold in hours rather than days, discuss how to be ready in hours to call on more media and social media expertise, facilitators, and help to support traumatized individuals, including staff and those embroiled in the controversy as well as leaders.