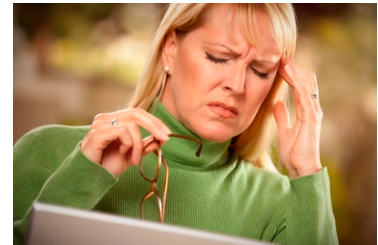


When public pressure is intense



At a recent workshop, a director from a school board split by pandemic-related decisions asked me what board members can do in the face of intense public pressure. These are tough times for local non-partisan government bodies, for sure. Here are some thoughts about what can be done.

Listen to your constituents, while accepting your own responsibility

Of course, you will listen carefully to what your constituents are telling you. Be willing to hear views that differ from your own. Remember, however, that elected office gives you the responsibility of voting based on your own best judgment, not solely in response to crowd opinion.

Ensure fair discussion at meetings

It is vital to hold free and fair discussion at your meetings. Be sure that every board member has an equal chance to speak, and that the minority is not marginalized in discussion. It can be hard, when passions run high, to maintain equal opportunity for all to speak, but you must. The chair needs to keep a cool head, setting aside the desire to have their own opinion prevail in order to focus on facilitating the discussion.

Manage public comment effectively

When people are upset, public comment sessions can be challenging. Always remember that the purpose of public comment is to hear the views of your community, not to get into dialogue with them. You may find our [Guidelines for Public Comment in Local Government](#) helpful.

When an issue is very inflamed, the regular public comment period may be insufficient. You may want to schedule an additional public forum on the subject, in order to preserve the board's time to work at its regular tasks.



Once a decision is made, stand by it

It's a fundamental principle of democracy that the decision of the majority, voting at a properly called meeting, is a decision of the body as a whole. If you voted in the minority, be prepared to say, "I voted against this decision, I gave it my best effort in discussion, and I support it as the decision of the board."

Prepare "talking points" for your own use, and repeat them

When I was serving in the U.S. State Department, we wrote "talking points" listing the key items to be made in a discussion. The board can do this, or you can do this for yourself. Writing them down gives you strength to remember them. You will also need to repeat them, sometimes often, to different people, without getting irritated or annoyed at having to say the same thing over and over again. See some sample talking points below.

Be prepared to revisit a decision if warranted

As circumstances change, if your board needs to revisit a decision, be prepared to do that. You can read our article on "[Reconsider, Rescind, and Amend previous decision](#)" to learn how to do this.

Show solidarity with colleagues, even if you disagree

Board members need to confine their discussion to issues, and show solidarity with their colleagues. During the meeting, show respect in your remarks, and especially in your body language. Outside the meeting, don't badmouth other board members. Focus on the decisions, not on the people who made them.

Be careful about posting on social media

Social media can become a sinkhole, commanding more and more time and effort for little return. Consider carefully what you post and what you respond to. And of course, be sure that you distinguish between your personal views, and speaking as a representative of the board on which you serve. Even when you do this, the two are often confused in the public's mind. It's best just to keep it positive and factual.

Keep clear and keep connected

In all your communications, you need to do two things that are easy to do separately, but hard to achieve all at once.

- Be clear about what you think. A leader is able to articulate the challenges that went into a decision, and the rationale for their own vote.
- Keep connected with the other person. It's easy to become defensive or impatient when someone is attacking you. Do your best to keep rooted in your own integrity, and to acknowledge that the other person is worthy of your respect, whether or not you agree. One useful tip is to avoid using the word "but." When you say "but," you cut yourself off from your opponent. Better to say, "Yes, you are raising very serious issues, and I would also like to mention..." Always thank someone who gives you feedback.

Absorb the pain and don't pass it on

It's not easy to be the target of public pressure. You will serve your community if you are willing to absorb the pain, the hurt feelings, the realization that your good intentions are misunderstood, and let the pain stop with you. Don't lash out or retaliate when you feel hurt. Don't turn in on yourself. Just acknowledge that times are tough, your local government is doing the best that it can, you are doing the best that you can, and recommit to serving your community, even in these challenging times. Your commitment to something bigger than the individuals caught in the current moment, to the greater good, will sustain you even in the worst of conditions.

What advice do you have for responding to public pressure? [Let us know!](#)

SAMPLE TALKING POINTS

- *The board has given lengthy and thoughtful consideration to the question of whether to hold school in person at this time, or not.*
- *Relying on the best public health information we could obtain, the board decided to keep our physical schools closed until the infection metrics have reached a measure where we feel safe.*
- *We understand that this poses a serious hardship to students and parents, and that online learning is not as effective as in-person instruction.*
- *Speaking personally, I would have liked us to set an easier target to reopen. After giving this my best consideration, I voted against this decision. Since the majority decided it this way, I support the decision of the board.*
- *Thank you very much for taking the time to share your thoughts on this challenging issue. I appreciate your commitment to our kids. I hope that with the advent of widespread vaccination, we will be able to reopen sooner rather than later. Again, thank you.*

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