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Communications Before, During and After Bargaining

Chris Davis
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Background

- ❖ 6 Affiliated Bargaining Groups
- ❖ 1,400 Employees
- ❖ 10,000 Students
- ❖ 302 Square Miles of District
- ❖ \$89,000,000 General Fund Budget
- ❖ \$111,000,000 Total Fund Budget

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Background

- ❖ Previous budget carried over \$3.2 million in targeted concessions
- ❖ Facing \$6 million in cuts
- ❖ Previous negotiations with MEA had been “noisy”; “demonstration” attendance at Board Meetings; “spinning” information to members, community and media; attacks on the Board of Education, etc.
- ❖ Elections: Inexperienced Board of Education
- ❖ Settled contracts with most other unions: 4% total compensation concessions
- ❖ Good relationship day-to-day: union ↔ administration

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Background

- ❖ MEA had a history of trying to gain public sentiment using “not completely true” statements about negotiations
- ❖ Traditional Bargaining Posture: Start far apart and narrow table positions as we go
- ❖ MEA strategy of dividing Board and Superintendent, Superintendent and Executive Director of HR, staff and Board negotiating team
- ❖ Convergence: Huge cuts looming, need for clear and consistent communication with staff and community, and urgency of time

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Beginning of Negotiations

- ❖ New Players: Superintendent, Uni-Serve, Union President
- ❖ Inexperienced Board
- ❖ “Spin” addressed when MEA goes to community, not until then
- ❖ Experienced and effective negotiator

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Factors in Place

- ❖ Financial “time bomb” ticking: deficit spending, declining enrollment, state budget cuts
- ❖ Legislation dramatically changed bargaining laws
- ❖ Relatively “healthy” reports on revenue coming from the State Government
- ❖ Good relationship day-to-day: union ↔ administration

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Root Cause Analysis: Focus

What were the basic problems we had to deal with and what was the root cause?

- ❖ Needed to eliminate a structural deficit
- ❖ Needed to make sure communication with our staff, community, and media was accurate
- ❖ Needed to limit "spin" so that table positions were clear

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Message to Deliver

- ❖ Staff and community needed to understand the connection between the budget deficit and the bargaining position of the Board.
- ❖ Communication will help foster trust and keep the Board focused on reducing the structural deficit.

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Future Condition

- ❖ Settled contract that reflects 4% to 5% reduction in total compensation
- ❖ Foster trust in communications between the Board and negotiating team, negotiating team and MEA, board and staff, and board and community

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Strategy: Administration

- ❖ No Cracks in the Dam: 100% Board Support
- ❖ Educate the Board: MEA tactics once we inform them of our intentions

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Strategy: Board/Negotiating Team

- ❖ Narrow my initial proposal to the settlement parameter
- ❖ Post table positions on the district web page within 48 hours of submission
- ❖ All bargaining groups to demonstrate consistency

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Strategy Continued

- ❖ Refer staff, community, and media to the website when inquiries are made about negotiations
- ❖ Include media = posting of the positions on the website

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Counter Strategy

- ❖ Threats: “This is a big mistake and will take negotiations to a much bigger arena.”
- ❖ Immediately tried to engage Board of Education
- ❖ Request to “negotiate” the conditions of the web postings
- ❖ MEA to Media: District is trying to “discredit” the union

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Consequences for Board

- ❖ Narrowed negotiations parameters
- ❖ Community perception: Board position is aligned with budget and is fair to employees
- ❖ Employees updated regularly: fostered better understanding of the relationship between budget and negotiations

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Consequences Continued

- ❖ Eliminated impact of MEA “spin”
- ❖ Strengthened Board’s resolve = community support
- ❖ Reduced “demonstration” attendance at Board meetings
- ❖ Reduced clarification communications: staff, media, community

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Outcome

- ❖ Sped up negotiations
- ❖ Settlement = 4% total compensation reduction
- ❖ Became “normal”
- ❖ Set an expectation by community, staff and media for future negotiations
- ❖ Recognized and commended by: MSBO, Mackinaw Center for Public Policy, and local media for transparency in negotiations

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Union Strategies

- ❖ Union tried to avoid giving proposal
- ❖ Minimal misinformation
- ❖ Minimal “demonstration” attendance at Board meetings

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Agree Upon Numbers

- ❖ 1% salary increase
- ❖ Step costs
- ❖ Insurance costs
- ❖ Retirement costs
- ❖ etc., etc., etc.

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Subsequent Negotiations

- ❖ Posting proposals is expected practice
- ❖ Narrower initial proposals
- ❖ Significant reduction in questions about negotiations

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What CAN You Communicate

- ❖ Status of negotiations
- ❖ Financial conditions and assumptions
- ❖ Proposals
- ❖ Costs of proposals

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Prohibiteds are Prohibited

- ❖ Remove all prohibited subjects from contract
- ❖ Don't allow Board policies to be grieved

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No Unfair Labor Practice If...

- ❖ District gives proposal to union before posting
- ❖ District posts proposals on website and gives proposals to Board and employees after giving to union

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Communicating

- ❖ Chief spokesperson
- ❖ Facts and Briefs

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Communicating at Board Meetings:

- ❖ Public comment policy
- ❖ Time limits
- ❖ Larger facility

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Communicating Internally:

- ❖ Use Administrative Team
- ❖ Be out with staff
- ❖ Newsletters
- ❖ Social media

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Communicating Externally:

- ❖ Media
- ❖ Chamber of Commerce
- ❖ Parents
- ❖ Students
- ❖ Community

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Effective Communications:

- ❖ Union vs. teachers
- ❖ Honest and accurate
- ❖ No name calling

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Successful Bargaining:

- ❖ Prepare, prepare, prepare
- ❖ Anticipate
- ❖ Stay positive and professional
- ❖ Don't take it personal

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Questions?

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