

The Intersection of “Public Outreach” and “Conflict Management”

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In this post, I continue to share the insights both confirmed and stretched by teaching two sets of veteran [county](#) and [city](#) elected officials through our LELA program, Managing Conflict: How to Disagree and Still Get Along.

Choosing policies and budgets on public matters puts elected officials in the center of conflicts. **Understanding and responding to conflict is a central leadership competency.**

This post addresses the second of two factors which make effective approaches to conflicts harder to achieve: Changes in public modes of sharing information and opinions.

The diminishment of local news media and the cacophony of social media. Particularly in our more rural areas, there are fewer locally operated newspapers and radio stations, with the corresponding reduction in reporters comprehensively covering local public issues. If local governments want citizens to have a thorough explanation of a situation or decision, they often have to generate and distribute the communication via in-house resources, and they have to hope their citizens will pay attention to it.

In contrast, online options for exchanging information are diverse, fragmented, and sometimes anonymous. Overall, this is empowering to individuals: You can put your interesting idea on a blog, where anyone can read it. In general, robust public discourse supports our democracy. When the information shared is inaccurate or the commentary deliberately polarizing, this freedom can erode common ground, generate distractions, and strengthen controversies. Many platforms of social media promote clashing opinions with various degrees of respect or civility.

How can elected officials counter the negative effects of changing media?

- **Conduct more outreach in new and varied ways.** Through recent conversations with [Town of Lewisville](#) leaders, [Rick Morse](#) and I offered these thoughts:
 1. **Go where the citizens are.** If it is hard to reach busy parents with young children, flyers at day care centers or at playgrounds may be effective;
 2. **Map the informal and formal organizations in your community.** There are people who are hubs of communication and gatekeepers for access. Identify the people who naturally function as modern-day “town criers.” Treat them as envoys – and listen to their ideas – for how to reach residents on particular issues;
 3. **Make information and processes engaging.** There is strong positive feedback about understanding choices through the group [“game-and-discussion” designed for county and city budgets](#) offered by the School of Government.
- **Learn about the online options – many of which are free – to reach people where they spend time.** [Here are some thoughts](#) from Knightdale Communications Director Brian Bowman
- **Public officials can learn how to get their views out through social media and engage their local bloggers.** The School of Government frequently builds this topic into its leadership courses. We have on [general webinar on social media and public participation available](#).

I’m glad to be part of the School of Government team to help elected officials on communication, strategic planning and conflict management.