

**Chapter Seven:**

**Constituents' Capers:  
Handling Those Special  
Cases**

*"There are people who,  
instead of listening to  
what is being said to  
them, are already  
listening to what they  
are going to say  
themselves."*

**Albert Guinon**

**Snapshot #45:**

**The Angry Public Speaker**

**B**larney is a retired salesman who is making a career of appearing before the school board at its regular meetings and telling the members just how angry he feels about the job they are doing. Blarney doesn't mince words. He criticizes the superintendent, vilifies the board members, and accuses them of being ill-informed, ill-advised, and purveyors of ill-conceived ideas. Blarney holds nothing back as he snarls his way through his allotted speaking time. Much of what Blarney says is incorrect, but interspersed in his angry rhetoric are some plausible ideas and accurate information. The good stuff, however, is drowned in the delivery system. What should you do?

*Tip :*

Accusations, particularly when they are unfounded, are hard to take. They seem to clamor out for defensive responses. No one likes to be publicly attacked or insulted. It is only natural to want to respond to Blarney's antagonistic public comments, but it's not a good idea. Responding to Blarney's charges is like going to war with the newspaper. The paper never runs out of ink; Blarney will never run out of anger. Trying to explain things to him means engaging him in a conversation that he will be happy to continue as long as you give him the opportunity. A better way is to let Blarney say what he has to say and then go on to the next speaker. This is truly a time when "Silence is Golden."

*Give speakers at school board meetings time to vent. Listen attentively, but don't respond or do so briefly. Engaging in a public dialogue only leads to confrontation and longer meetings. Save your response for a more private time.*

*Silence can send a stronger message than the spoken word.*

## Snapshot #46:

### *The Loyal Supporter*

**K**arl is the owner of the area's largest cleaning and maintenance company. He also was one of your staunchest campaign supporters. He raised funds for you, asked his employees to distribute your campaign signs, and made phone calls on your behalf. Now, he has approached you for support to get the school district to hire his company to clean and maintain your schools instead of using in-house school system employees. You want to support your supporters. You want them to know you appreciated their help in the past and may want it again in the future. You also want them to know their help doesn't mean they can "buy" your vote. What should you do?

**Tip :** Tell Karl that you will look at his proposal to consider what is reasonable and feasible, and possibly bring an item to the board so it can direct the superintendent to consider doing a feasibility study that looks at the pros and cons of contracting for custodial and maintenance services versus keeping it in-house. Don't make any promises. When Karl and other supporters seek "compensation" for their campaign help, keep in mind that, to be an effective school board member, you cannot perpetually be eyeing the next election. Tomorrow brings a different day, a different issue, and the potential for a different response.

***Every school district has procedures in place for procuring goods and services. They are your safety valve. Follow them.***

***Your supporters deserve no more or less than any other citizen: that is respect and access.***

***\* JUST A THOUGHT /***

***You don't owe yourself or your vote to your supporters. You do owe them your honesty and your best foot forward.***

**Snapshot #47:**

***The Lobbyist Seeks  
a Payback***



At a chamber of commerce dinner recognizing outstanding leaders in town, you are seated next to a lobbyist who contributed to your election campaign. Between bites of the familiar rubber chicken, the lobbyist talks nonstop about a client he has who is trying to do business with the school system. You can't seem to steer the conversation in another direction, even though you try. What should you do?

*Tip:*

Explain to the lobbyist that the proper move for him to make would be to talk to the superintendent and appropriate staff and that you would be happy to alert both to expect his call. Suggest he send you some written material about his client so you can be more informed. To politely end the conversation, sacrifice the rubber chicken, get out of your chair, and circulate throughout the room. Work the room diligently, going from table to table, shaking hands, and chatting with people. This action will have multi-benefits: it gets you away from your unwanted dinner companion; it impresses people with your sincerity as you demonstrate that, even though the campaign is over, you still like to stop and talk to them; it helps with personal weight control because it will prevent you from overeating.

***Using the district's  
"chain of command"  
gives you the freedom  
to lead.***

***It's okay to owe  
gratitude, not to  
owe favors.***

## **Snapshot #48:**

### ***The Chronic Complainer***

***One way to silence school critics is to encourage them to personally explore the object of their criticism.***

***Schools are like movies and books. Until you see or read one, you have to rely on someone else's rating.***

**C**ranky constituents are a challenge. Abigail is a retired nurse with time on her hands and complaints on her mind. Her passion is to whine about the school system and she is an expert at it. She stores her complaints in mental torpedo tubes. While you are busy using your school board knowledge to try and deflect one complaint, she is mentally getting ready to fire the next one. Abigail's view of the school system is that: it has too many administrators; the students don't need computer—books are better; there's no discipline in schools; the superintendent's salary is too high; her tax dollars are being wasted; the Japanese score higher than Americans in every subject. According to Abigail, when she went to school, everything was better, cheaper, and safer. Her memory of school mirrors Garrison Keillor's famous and fictitious "Lake Wobegon," where all the teachers have master's degrees and all the children are above average. It's almost impossible to win the complaint war with Abigail or other chronic education bashers by using logical, rational explanations based on your knowledge as a school board member. What should you do?

**Tip :** Try the up-front and personal approach. It's been years since Abigail was inside a public school. She has no idea of what goes on: the amount of learning that takes place; the complexities of the projects students produce; the dedication of the staff; the wealth of material in the curriculum. Her view of school largely is based on some negative media story that appeared in yesterday's newspaper. Offer Abigail a "walk on the wild side." Take her by the hand to visit some schools. If necessary, entice her with the offer of a free breakfast or lunch to get her inside the school. Try to arrange for Abigail to attend a school play or student concert. Perhaps some of her peers will attend with her. Student talent never ceases to amaze audiences. At the very most, you may turn Abigail into one of the school district's major supporters. At the very least, she may stop lauding the Japanese schools, which she never has visited either.

