

BUILDING TRUST



Anyone who walks into **Pat White**'s office angry rarely leaves the same way. The **Pavilion Township** (Kalamazoo Co.) supervisor's office staff is often surprised to see a once-disgruntled resident walk out of the township hall with White's arm around their shoulder.

In his 35 years with the township, White has developed a reputation as a good communicator who truly cares about his residents. Township citizens know he'll see them right away when they have a problem, and even if they don't agree with one another, he'll always listen to what they have to say.

White's philosophy isn't complicated. He just genuinely likes people. He makes an effort to get to know anyone who visits his office beyond the usual pleasantries. He knows that when a resident approaches him with a problem, it seems as "big as a basketball" to them, and he treats it that way. While he knows he can't make everyone happy, his approach has

earned him the community's trust and a positive relationship with his constituents.

"I don't put myself above them and I think that's the important thing," said White, an MTA life member and 2003 MTA president. "My chair isn't higher than theirs. I look them right in the eye. It's about good communication."

Building trust is an absolutely vital component of being an effective township official. Without the trust of the community—or of other board members—your term in office is more likely to be wrought with conflict and divisiveness. Trust isn't given automatically. It must be earned over time.

By consistently communicating well, listening to others, being transparent and staying committed to governing best practices, you can create a culture of trust in your township.

Maybe you've had a tenuous relationship with your township's residents since you took office. Maybe you're filling the shoes of a beloved board member, or of someone notorious for their misdeeds. Or maybe you just want to make a fresh start for the year. Whether you're a brand-new official or a seasoned veteran, it's never too late to put these principles into practice. You can take steps today to start the new term in office on the right foot, or to rebuild trust even after it was lost.

Why can't we all just get along? The challenges of building trust

The good news is citizens are more likely to trust their local government than the federal or state levels. In September 2016, a Gallup poll revealed that 71 percent of respondents had either a great deal or fair amount of trust in their local government. Public confidence in their city, township or other local unit has hovered around that number for at least the last decade. But that doesn't mean your constituents will never eye you with suspicion, or that your board meetings will never experience conflict.

Building trust requires taking the time to listen to others. In a world where people are increasingly pressed for time, listening might not happen as often as it should, said Julie Cowie, a trainer in mediation who's also a minister and former clerk in **Casco Township** (Allegan Co.).

Then there's the matter of priorities. The issues that motivated you to run for the board might not be important to some residents, who instead think you should be concerned about something else altogether. At the same time, your fellow board members have reasons for serving that might not be the same as yours. And when your primary interactions with one another are in a public forum, you don't have many opportunities to build relationships unless you're intentional.

This continuing education article and accompanying self-assessment are worth 2.0 elective credits in MTA's Township Governance Academy. See page 24 for details.



OBJECTIVES

- To recognize the importance of creating a culture of trust among township board members and the community
- To discuss methods, policies and practices to enhance positive relations on the township board, and with the public

CORE COMPETENCIES

- Communicates effectively
- Listens attentively
- Works effectively with individuals, departments and committees to achieve desired outcomes
- Demonstrates behavior that results in public trust

Listening—the foundation of trust

The simple fact is, taking the time to really, truly listen to township residents and board members will almost certainly make your board meetings longer. But if your board is serious about building trust, it must be a priority—even if it means a few late nights.

Every resident and board member in your township wants to be heard. If they believe you're not listening to them or are discounting their opinions, trust is eroded.

The best way to build trust is to be an open-minded listener. That's often easier said than done. Despite your best intentions, you are likely attached to a certain outcome and may not be as open to opposing viewpoints as you might think. That means that, despite the best intentions, an official could come to the boardroom with a "my way or the highway" attitude, Cowie said. To battle this, township officials should take time to reflect and be honest with themselves about their true motivation.

“Transparency among township board members and with members of the township creates a very cohesive and trusting board. This also helps to keep everyone involved and makes board discussions on point.”

—Don Rogers, supervisor
Coldwater Township (Branch Co.)

“We're all human, so we all walk into meetings hoping for certain things,” Cowie said. “We all have our judgments. But we have to manage them exceedingly well. We have to be aware of them. Unfortunately, that's not always what happens in our culture. The political debates are very charged. It takes leadership and calmness.”

Strategies for effective listening

It's not enough to simply say that you're listening. Your constituents and fellow board members need to see evidence that you're truly hearing what they have to say.

For White, it's all in the body language. Acting disinterested sends the message that you don't care about what the other person is saying. He looks right at the person talking to him and takes notes. As they speak, he asks them to tell him everything that's on their mind. Then, once the other person has laid everything out, they can discuss it.

When you hear what they have to say, don't jump right in with your response. First, make sure you understood everything they said. Take a beat, say, “Let me see if I understood you correctly,” and repeat what they said back to them. According to Cowie, this can be a turning point



A board meeting is a critical time to stick to good policies, since your governance practices are on public display. If your township board doesn't have good processes in place, taking the time to create them can significantly improve your meetings and show the public that you're professionals who care about serving them well.

in even the tensest conversations, because the other person knows that they've been fully heard. This can be done both in one-on-one meetings and in board meetings. While it takes time and discipline, this practice can help to build trust with your residents.

Being transparent

Any appearance of secrecy can do serious damage to the trust between your board and township residents. Transparency and openness are absolutely crucial to maintaining good relationships. This doesn't happen by accident—your board must methodically take steps to show the community that the board has nothing to hide. For example, Cowie said, it might be helpful to reiterate to residents during board meetings that the township is in compliance with various statutes, such as the Open Meetings Act.

In **Coldwater Township** (Branch Co.), Supervisor **Don Rogers** and his board members follow specific procedures to be as transparent as possible. Minutes from every meeting are posted on the township website, and if the local newspaper doesn't attend a meeting, Rogers notifies reporters of actions the board took.

Rogers, who is MTA District 23 director, also believes it's important that all board members are aware of what's happening in the township and fully understand the issues being discussed at meetings. Board members receive copies of information from the planning commission, zoning administrator and on any other issue that arises. His goal is

to avoid a situation in which a board member is approached with a question on a township situation and has no idea what the person is talking about.

"Transparency among the township board members and with members of the township creates a very cohesive and trusting board," Rogers said. "This also helps to keep everyone involved and makes board discussions on point."

Speaking up in meetings also halts any assumptions that board members are making their decisions behind the scenes. Cowie recommends that board members talk through their thought process in meetings so that the public can hear their reasoning and rationale. Another effective technique—especially when faced with a controversial decision—is to hold a public hearing, then make a decision at the next board meeting. Board members and the public are then free to learn and hear other viewpoints rather than solely advocating for their own position. Citizens also know that their comments are valued and aren't purely perfunctory before the board announces the decision that members have already made in advance.

'Open door' policy

It isn't unusual for township residents to drop by the **Grant Township** (St. Clair Co.) hall regularly and join in the daily discussions with their township officials, Supervisor **Bill Deater** said. That's part of his township's "open door" policy. He wants residents to feel comfortable with coming to the office.

Deater, who serves as MTA Executive Committee member-at-large and District 18 director, also checks on residents to see how they're doing or if they have any concerns. "They feel free to call me on tax issues, road problems or even to have a dead deer in the yard removed," Deater said.

Dennis Bragiel, supervisor of **Kawkawlin Township** (Bay Co.) and MTA District 13 director, makes it a point to be available to his residents, whether that's through a phone call, in his office, or before or after a township board meeting.

The same availability also goes for fellow board members, Rogers added. All board members have his phone number, and they're encouraged to contact him to discuss any issue, at any time.

Good habits build trust

Township residents might have trouble trusting your board if your office is unprofessional or meetings are disorganized. Following state statutes and basic principles of good governance can go a long way toward giving the public confidence in your board. This could be as simple as ensuring that public meeting notices published in compliance with state statute are also user friendly and accessible.

A board meeting is a critical time to stick to good policies, since your governance practices are on public display.

Meetings should start on time, and they should be held in an appropriate location. For example, if you've advertised that a controversial topic is on the agenda and you're expecting a large crowd, it might be helpful to find a larger space for the meeting if your township hall only holds a handful of people. Even holding the meeting at a time when more people can attend shows that your board is sensitive to the needs of the community, Cowie said. If your township board doesn't have good processes in place, such as for how meetings are run or for public comments, taking the time to create them can significantly improve your meetings and show the public that you're professionals who care about serving them well.

Bragiel does everything he can to ensure smooth discussions at meetings. He provides board members with information packets at least a week in advance—and he expects his fellow board members to read it and ask questions ahead of time. Reading the packet during the meeting isn't acceptable.

"My opinion is that meeting time is not the time to get information on agenda items," he said.

The importance of knowledge doesn't end with board meetings. White recommends that all officials and employees understand their township policies and ordinances so that when they're approached with a question, they can offer an explanation. But if you don't know the answer, just say so. Let the resident know you'll do your best to find the answer, White said, and make sure you follow through and call them with what you've learned.

Diffusing the tension

Every board is bound to face controversy and tension from time to time—whether it's with the public or with one another. You can't always make everyone happy, but pros say a few communication techniques can diffuse the tension and create a more positive dialogue.

Tough conversations are unavoidable, but the problem is many people don't have the skills to help these conversations go smoothly, said Joyce Weiss, a communication strategist, coach and past presenter at the MTA Annual Educational Conference.

"You have every right to give your opinion," she said. "But maybe you need to practice how you're going to say it first."

One technique she teaches is called "Making the Conversation Safe." In this technique, you start the conversation with the words "I don't want ... I do want." For example, in a tense situation, you could say, "I don't want to create stress between us. I do want to open up a dialogue." Those two statements address the elephant in the room and make your intention clear, she said.

When you're in the midst of a difficult conversation, or you're listening to heated comments at a board meeting, everyone who speaks must be treated with respect, Weiss said. Citizens at your meetings expect—and deserve—to be heard, even if you disagree with what they're saying. Instead of focusing on how you're going to respond, listen to what they're saying.

A few more tips from the pros

MTA Board members offered additional insights and advice for establishing trust among your township board and your community.

"Be willing to own your mistakes, say you're sorry, and right the wrong if possible. Always speak the truth as you know the truth and have resources to back you up—including materials and information from MTA. If you don't know the answer, state that and work to find the answer. Don't bluff your way through a discussion. Do not consider yourself better than others when interacting with them."

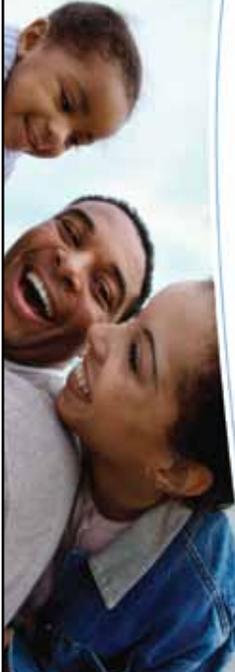
—MTA District 1 Director **Steve Karpiak**, Supervisor
Osceola Township (Houghton Co.)

"Accept new board members as full-fledged members. Don't isolate them. Include them in discussions and get their opinions. Try to determine why they decided to run. Give them your perspective. Ensure their voice is heard during public discussions."

— MTA District 25 Director **Lance Schuhmacher**, Trustee
Oceola Township (Livingston Co.)

"Whether people like what you say or not, give it to them straight. Be honest. Some may not like what you tell them at the time, but at least they will know that you are being truthful with them. Never sugar coat."

— MTA District 18 Director **Dennis Bragiel**, Supervisor
Kawkawlin Township (Bay Co.)



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In these situations, it's important to keep an open mind while also being well-versed in the issue, noted Rogers.

"This comes down to being firm, but fair," Rogers said. "You will never have your residents in 100 percent agreement on issues, so you must make them feel that their concerns are noted and that you will do your best to work with them."

Don't ever use sentences with the words "you" and "but," Weiss said. An example of this could be, "You make some good points, but you never come to meetings." The "but" in the middle of the sentence completely discounts the first statement, she said. And if a resident at the meeting gets defensive, consider that you might be doing something to make them feel that way.

In one-on-one conversations, White makes it a point to ask questions about who the person is, not just what they're there to discuss. He might ask when they moved to the township, or about their family or interests. He spends time talking to them about their lives and isn't afraid to share information about himself or how the township operates. That sincere interest in people can build bridges over gaps that might seem insurmountable.

"You would be surprised how many people will wind up being your friends and advocates," White said.

It could be that an issue with one particular group or citizen might best be solved outside of a board meeting. **Lance Schuhmacher, Oceola Township** (Livingston Co.) trustee and MTA District 25 director, recommends informally meeting with community leaders to discuss the points of disagreement. Together, you can work toward a solution.

These meetings must, of course, comply with state statutes—a quorum of board members cannot be present without properly noticing the meeting. Or, if someone on your board has good rapport with that group or citizen, send the board member to start the conversation, Weiss said.

Sometimes tension on the board comes from among board members. While disagreements or even personality clashes are inevitable, meetings riddled with board conflict don't breed trust from the public. It's your job to get along



While disagreements or even personality clashes are inevitable, meetings riddled with board conflict don't breed trust from the public. It's your job to get along with one another, and if you don't, find a way to deal with it quickly. This is a matter of setting aside your pride and putting the township's interest before your own.

with one another, and if you don't, find a way to deal with it quickly. This is a matter of setting aside your pride and putting the township's interest before your own.

"You must resolve differences immediately," Rogers said. "You cannot let them fester. You must also be willing to listen to all sides and work on compromise to resolve an issue for the betterment of your community."

This doesn't mean that board members will always agree, and that's the way it should be, White said. It's healthy to have discussions and offer differing viewpoints. But when you disagree, it must be done respectfully.

When someone at a meeting, or even another board member, bullies another person or exhibits other bad behavior, don't let it slide. Weiss is a firm believer that you get what you tolerate. If you allow someone to get away with poor behavior, you'll almost certainly see it again, whether it's from that person or someone else.

"If you allow certain people to get away with things and you don't confront them in a positive way, nothing new is going to happen," Weiss said.

Turning over a new leaf

No board is perfect. After some reflection, you may discover that you've made mistakes that need to be corrected in order to build trust with the community. If your board decides to change up your meetings or take corrective steps, be open about it, Cowie said. Tell the public that your board is making efforts to build trust with the community, and explain changes they can expect at future meetings as a result.



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What can brand-new officials do?

This month, many township board members find themselves working alongside brand-new officials—a great opportunity for both new and seasoned officials alike. Start these relationships on the right foot by making the new members feel welcome. On the Grant Township board, new members are introduced as family, Deater said. Everyone makes sure they have the right information and tools to address any concerns they might have.

New officials will need help from the entire board, Bragiel said. No matter how prepared they are, most people can't really know what the office consists of until after they're elected. Just as you make yourself available to residents, do the same for new officials so that they know they can approach you with questions, Rogers said.

As a new board member, you can set a foundation of trust by doing everything you can to understand the job and its responsibilities. Attend educational opportunities offered by MTA, and when questions arise, don't hesitate to ask MTA's Member Information Services staff, other board members and your fellow officials from nearby townships.

White recommends calling elected officials already in office. Someone who's served for several years can draw from experience and offer you sound advice as you're getting started. "How do you learn? It's all experience," White said. "Take each day at a time and deal with issues as they come up."

Doing your job well is the first step toward building trust with residents and your township peers. They need to see that you're committed to serving them and the township, White said. You can't expect to be trusted immediately. That comes from building relationships and proving yourself as a worthy board member and public servant.



Bethany Mauger,
MTA Staff Writer

Learn more about this topic at MTA's Annual Educational Conference, April 10-13, in Lansing, including a session, "We're All In This Together," taught by mediation expert Julie Cowie.



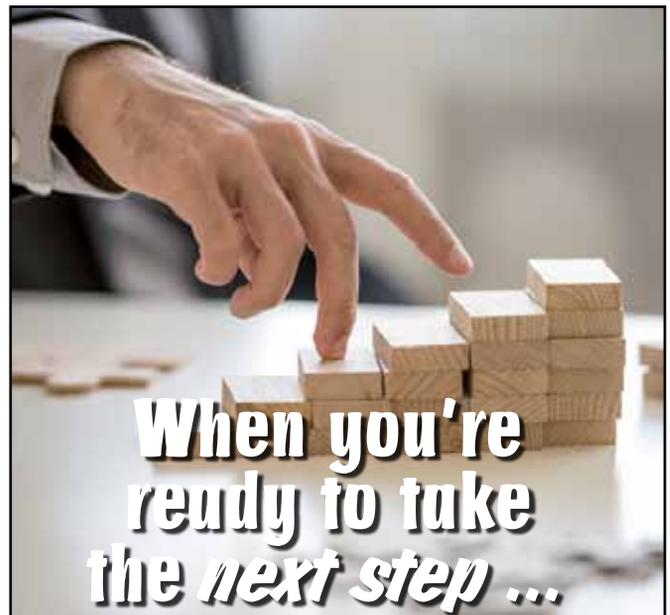
See page 24 for a continuing education self-assessment, worth 2.0 elective credits in MTA's Township Governance Academy.

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Continuing Education Self-Assessment

Participants enrolled in the Township Governance Academy (TGA), MTA's credentialing program, may obtain 2 elective credits for successful completion of this quiz. To obtain credit, participants must answer the following 10 multiple-choice questions by circling the correct answer and receive a minimum passing score of 70 percent. The questions are based on content from the article, "Building Trust". There is no charge for MTA members to take the quiz or to obtain TGA credit.

Completed quizzes should be faxed to (517) 321-8908 or mailed to: MTA, 512 Westshire Dr., Lansing, MI 48917. MTA will notify you of your results within two weeks after receiving your quiz. **IMPORTANT:** Please keep a copy of your completed quiz in your TGA binder. For information about TGA, call (517) 321-6467, email tga@michigantownships.org, or visit www.michigantownships.org/learning/tga.

TGA Continuing Education Building Trust

NAME: _____ **TOWNSHIP & COUNTY:** _____

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- 1) **What can result from a lack of trust between your board and the community?**
 - a. A less active constituency
 - b. Conflict
 - c. Residents with differing agendas
 - d. Transparency
- 2) **What is the foundation of building trust?**
 - a. Listening
 - b. Having an agenda
 - c. Putting your interests first
 - d. Discussions
- 3) **How can township officials overcome their personal agendas and become more open-minded listeners?**
 - a. Come to meetings with their decisions made
 - b. Ensure residents have your phone number
 - c. Reflection and honesty about your true motivation
 - d. Have a good debate
- 4) **Which of the following is NOT a strategy for effective listening?**
 - a. Take notes
 - b. Jump right in with your response
 - c. Repeat back with the other person said
 - d. Look at the person speaking
- 5) **Why is speaking up in meetings important?**
 - a. It gets your concerns off your chest
 - b. You'll get a reputation for telling it like it is
 - c. It halts any assumption that the board makes decisions behind the scenes
 - d. No one can complain that they didn't know your reasoning
- 6) **What are basic principles of good governance to build trust?**
 - a. Publishing meeting notices according to state statutes
 - b. Starting meetings on time
 - c. Providing board members with board packets ahead of time
 - d. All of the above
- 7) **How can boards handle controversy and tension?**
 - a. Limit public comment
 - b. Practice techniques to diffuse tension
 - c. Bring in a mediator
 - d. Disregard comments from those who rarely come to meetings
- 8) **How should boards address conflict between members?**
 - a. Resolve differences immediately and work on a compromise
 - b. Avoid disagreeing with another board member's opinion
 - c. Come to an agreement on decisions outside of board meetings
 - d. Accept that public conflict is your board's method of handling issues
- 9) **When a board has made mistakes and wants to turn over a new leaf, it should:**
 - a. Gradually make subtle changes to its meetings
 - b. Hire a consultant to suggest changes
 - c. Sit down with the local media
 - d. Explain changes the public can expect at future meetings
- 10) **New officials can set a foundation of trust by:**
 - a. Understanding that knowledge of the job and its responsibilities will come in time
 - b. Waiting to make public comments in meetings until you're more comfortable
 - c. Talking to elected officials already in office
 - d. Relying on your background and common sense