

Listening for Community Success

A Basic Skill Yields Surprising Results

“One who talks, sows; one who listens, reaps.”

BY LANCE WOODBURY



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Years ago, after finishing school, I landed in Wichita County as its first part-time director of economic development. A feedyard employee in the morning, I would rush home, change into better-smelling clothing, and head into Leoti for the afternoon to assist the community in its quest for economic improvement.

At the time, I had no formal background either in economics or community development. What I did have was a keen interest in trying to understand what was happening in the community, and so I began listening. I listened to business owners and employees, teachers and school administrators, hospital board members and staff, church leaders—anyone who would take time to help me understand Wichita County.

Rather than looking at this gathered information simply as a collection of interesting facts or perspectives, I saw it as a valuable asset. I often turned what I heard from people into useful community information. We started a countywide newsletter, we held community meetings on current issues, and we highlighted local businesses (including Wheatland Electric Cooperative), many of which were employing business strategies and making financial investments and returns that would stack up well against their urban counterparts.

As we listened to one another as a community, we gained confidence, hired a full-time director, and subsequently developed a range

of community and economic opportunities. I would argue that the key to our success was learning to listen well to one another.

The skill and process of listening to one another is a foundational element of the Public Square process. By interviewing community members and by having community members interview one another, by creating positive conversation about the future whereby people share their ideas, and by bringing people together to develop a vision and goals, people begin to accomplish great things.

We've seen businesses established, houses built, communities rebuilt, neighborhoods cleaned up, recreation improved, money saved, money raised, conflict reduced, services enhanced, governance improved, youth develop, youth return, and communities get fired up about their next 50 years. Of course it took lots of ingredients to make all that happen, but it all began with listening to the community—and encouraging the community to listen to itself.

There are a number of sayings about the importance of listening, but one Argentinian proverb sums it up nicely: “One who talks, sows; one who listens, reaps.” Our biggest opportunities to reap community success begin with the simple act of listening to one another.

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