



## January 2021 Newsletter

### The Importance of Listening in Achieving Unity By Pamela Erickson

Alcohol issues will soon be at the forefront in legislatures across the nation. Licensed restaurants and bars have suffered greatly during the pandemic. Many have closed and employees have been laid off. And public health is concerned that Americans have increased their consumption, bringing more problems of underage drinking, addiction and domestic violence. These issues will likely show up in acrimonious debates. So how can we unify stakeholders in this situation? In my experience, the first step is listening.

I had a very long career in public service and often had to respond to complaints on behalf of the Governor or some other high public official. Some of these complaints came from people I used to classify as "nut jobs!" But eventually I learned to listen.

**I learned that sometimes people just wanted to be heard.** This came as a surprise to me. In the late 1980's I managed a unit of administrative hearings. I decided to do a customer service survey. Since our "customers" were parties to a hearing, I expected that those who lost would view us negatively. Much to my surprise, I found that even though a party may have lost, they rated us positively. That finding changed things as we made more effort to allow people to just "say their piece." It isn't always possible to construct a law that is literally fair to all. People generally understand that. But sometimes careful listening will reveal an unfairness that could be corrected. Legislators appreciate knowing about these things.

**I learned that when all stakeholders are at the table, you may discover that their positions are not that far apart.** You may discover that people have more in common than what divides them! In Oregon, rule-making authority is conveyed on some agencies. These agencies are advised to start the process by bringing all stakeholders to the table for a full discussion of the issue. I found that when all

stakeholders came and expressed their views openly, people were generally quite reasonable and there was often some common ground. This does not always happen. Sometimes the timing isn't right or people are afraid to speak up. Sometimes public health is left out or can't attend. But when it works you have the opportunity to develop some very good regulations that work best for all.

**I learned the value of listening to opinions that are opposite of mine.** As an administrator, I had always been a fan of plain language versus legalese or bureaucrat-speak. But I didn't see any widespread enthusiasm for my ideas. So, one day, I just pretended I was a fan of "legalese." And, I discovered something unexpected. Legal language has both a communications function and a "ceremonial" function. Some words and phrases are needed to remind us of the importance and legitimacy of our legal system. After all, the basic processes and ideals in our court system has endured for centuries. While I didn't completely change my position, I did modify it to recognize that sometimes ceremony was important.

In the days ahead when we find ourselves in public forums, I urge people to first listen. Sometimes that means drawing people out by asking questions or indicating a need to fully understand their position. I also urge people to listen to all stakeholders on various sides of the issue. Eventually, my hope is that common ground will be revealed and unity will be achieved.