



BUILDING COMMUNITY MOMENTUM

Turning worthwhile opportunities into informed leadership, credible support, and practical action.

Empathy Is Essential. It Also Can't Become a Veto.

Good community leaders listen carefully to the people affected by change - without allowing the strongest emotion in the room to replace sound judgment.

A proposed development may look very different depending on where you are standing. To a young farmer, a livestock facility may represent the opportunity to return home and build a viable business. To an economic developer, a new facility may represent investment, jobs, and tax base. To the family across the road, the same project may mean trucks, noise, odor, lights, traffic, or a view that will never look the same again.

All of those perspectives can be real at the same time. That is why empathy matters. Good leaders need to understand what a decision looks and feels like from someone else's position. But difficult community decisions require another capability too: **understanding someone's concern without automatically adopting their conclusion.** If those become confused, empathy can unintentionally become a veto.

1 Start by taking people seriously

One of the fastest ways to create opposition is to make someone feel dismissed. **'You just don't understand.'** **'That's not a real concern.'** **'They're against everything.'** Those statements are poor starting points for leadership. If someone believes a development threatens their property, livelihood, family, neighborhood, or way of life, their concern is real to them. Ask what specifically worries them, what they believe will happen, what information would help, and what might make the situation more acceptable. Listening does not commit you to agreeing. It gives you better information - and sometimes reveals something the project team missed.

ASK YOURSELF: Do people who disagree with this project believe we have genuinely tried to understand what concerns them?

2 Separate the concern from the conclusion

Consider: **'I am worried this livestock facility will create odor that affects my home.'** That is a concern. **'Therefore, this facility should not be allowed.'** is a conclusion. They are not the same thing. Good decision-making examines what sits between them: likely impact, frequency, regulations, management practices, comparable facilities, mitigation, property rights, and broader community interests. Empathy says, **'I understand why that matters to you.'** Judgment asks, **'Given everything we know, what should we do about it?'** Both are necessary.

ASK YOURSELF: Are we treating someone's concern as information that deserves evaluation - or assuming the concern itself determines the outcome?

3 Recognize when emotion begins replacing the argument

Contentious meetings often begin with legitimate questions. Then frustration rises. Someone tells an emotional story. Another person makes a stronger claim. Applause reinforces it. Social-media information gets repeated. Motives get assigned. Soon the conversation may be less about setbacks, traffic, drainage, odor, jobs, or land use and more about fear, identity, fairness, trust, anger, and belonging. Those things matter. **But emotional intensity does not make a factual claim more accurate.** Leaders need enough empathy to understand why emotion is rising - and enough steadiness to keep asking what is evidence, what is assertion, and what their responsibility requires.

ASK YOURSELF: If this same argument were delivered calmly without applause, anger, or tears, how persuasive would the underlying evidence be?



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4 Be careful when empathy becomes a weapon

Empathy can become weaponized when the implicit argument becomes: 'If you understand how strongly this affects me, you must agree with me.' Or: 'If you vote differently than I want, it proves you do not care about me.' Now the decision-maker is no longer only asking whether the project is appropriate; they are being asked whether saying yes makes them a bad person. Leaders should not respond by becoming cold or dismissive. They need to hold two ideas at once: **I can care about how this decision affects you and still conclude that a different decision is best.** That is mature empathy - recognizing another person's humanity without surrendering responsibility for judgment.

ASK YOURSELF: Are decision-makers being asked to understand someone's experience - or being told that caring requires a particular vote?

5 Make the decision bigger than the room

The people attending a public meeting matter, but the board's responsibility usually extends beyond the people sitting in front of it. There may also be a young family trying to build a farm, a business considering a major investment, future taxpayers, existing employers, schools and local governments dependent on assessed value, landowners with development rights, residents who support the project but stayed home, and people who will live in the community 20 years from now. This does not mean economic benefit automatically overrides neighborhood impact. It means **the decision must account for the whole set of interests - not merely the interests represented by the strongest emotion that evening.**

ASK YOURSELF: Whose interests are part of this decision but are not represented by someone standing at the microphone tonight?

Empathy + Judgment

Empathy should improve the quality of the decision. It should help leaders understand impacts, uncover information, improve projects, and treat people with dignity. But it should not substitute for evaluating evidence, weighing competing rights and interests, or exercising judgment.

LISTEN	UNDERSTAND	VALIDATE	INVESTIGATE	MITIGATE	WEIGH	DECIDE
What are they experiencing?	Why does it matter?	Acknowledge the concern	What does evidence show?	What can reasonably improve?	Consider all interests	What does judgment require?

Empathy should improve the quality of the decision. It should not make the decision for you.

Four Things That Are Not the Same

EMPATHY	AGREEMENT	ACCOMMODATION	THE DECISION
I understand why this matters to you.	I believe your interpretation is correct.	The project should change as requested.	Considering the whole, what should happen?

THE EMPATHY AND JUDGMENT TEST

LISTENING - Have we actually heard the concern? Can we explain it accurately enough that the person raising it would say, 'Yes, you understand what I am worried about'?

EVIDENCE - What do we know? What information supports or challenges the concern?

PROPORTIONALITY - How significant is the likely impact? Possible is different from probable, and inconvenience is different from substantial harm.

MITIGATION - Can we reasonably make it better? What changes could reduce the impact without making a viable project unworkable?

CONSISTENCY - Would we apply the same standard to another project? Or are expectations changing because this room is particularly angry?

UNREPRESENTED INTERESTS - Who is not in the room? Whose future, property rights, economic opportunity, tax burden, or livelihood is also affected?

JUDGMENT - What decision best balances the whole?

Can I make someone feel genuinely heard even when the answer I ultimately give them is no?

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Communities need leaders who can listen without becoming captive to the loudest voice, care without surrendering judgment, address legitimate concerns without promising every impact can disappear, and weigh individual interests alongside the broader responsibilities of the community.

AgStrat helps communities and economic-development organizations prepare elected officials, appointed boards, and influential community leaders for difficult development decisions. AgStrat also works with project leaders to understand concerns, strengthen worthwhile projects, build credible relationships, and prepare for the local approval process. To start a conversation, contact virgil@agstratsolutions.com.

Empathy | Evidence | Judgment | Courage | Momentum