Examples of ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ Tone

Here are several examples that illustrate ‘good’ tone and ‘bad’ tone in statements of opinion. These examples were e-mailed to an elected official in county government regarding a proposed merger of city and county schools.

Good Tone

The following three opinion statements got the policy maker’s careful attention and received a substantive reply.

A) You currently face a difficult decision regarding the proposed merger of Chapel Hill/Carrboro and Orange County Schools. I am writing to suggest a public referendum on this matter given the significant impact that the results of your decision will have on your constituency. Thanks for taking time to consider this request.

B) The merger discussion is heating up quickly, and I’m hoping the real issue of the disparate funding for the two systems doesn’t get lost in the commotion. The push for a referendum, called for by so many Chapel Hill parents, seems a veiled attempt to simply stifle discussion, allowing the real issue to again get swept under the rug, still unfixed.

C) Here are a few questions I’d love to have answered. I know you’re busy and probably receiving hundreds (??!!) of emails daily on this issue. I hope you can fit me in.

   1) Do you see a funding imbalance between the two systems?
   2) –7) [Subsequent detailed questions not shown here]

We need a solution. Thank you for considering my questions.

Bad Tone

In contrast, the following three opinion statements (like many similar ones generated by a letter-writing campaign) got little attention and received no reply.

A) I understand that the Orange County Board of Commissioners is evaluating a merger of the Chapel Hill and Orange County School Systems. I would like to communicate that:

   I, along with most of my local colleagues and neighbors, are vehemently OPPOSED to a merger.

   1) Request that a public REFERENDUM be held on this issue ASAP
   2) Unless proper procedure is followed throughout, a proposed merger will be challenged in the NC and Federal courts to the extent necessary
   3) The voting records of the entire board will be well remembered and publicized in time for the next ELECTION.

B) I am greatly disappointed in your decision Wednesday night to short circuit democracy in our country. None of you ran last November with a position on school merger. You have suddenly sprung it on the citizens of the county. Since you would not face voters on the issue, you should allow a referendum on the issue in the county. Otherwise, you should delay the issue until an election year, and run on your beliefs. The idea that you can have a ‘stealth’ merger of school systems and avoid the will of the citizens of the country, as some of you
seem to believe, is not in keeping with the traditions of transparency and progressive politics in our county. I voted for you all last November. But I did not vote for school merger. Now I feel that your election was as much a sham. I would like a chance to vote on school merger or to vote again on your positions on the county commission.

C) I am very concerned about an article in the Herald, which indicates that the schools in Orange County and Chapel Hill may merge. I don’t understand what the advantage of such a move would be.

   If there is an advantage to the move please let me know what it is.

   If there is no advantage to the move, please let me know by ignoring this message.

What All These Examples Show

A lesson to learn from all these examples is that a public policy communicator has to make many, competing choices. Purpose, contents, presentation style and tone, medium of delivery, concern for immediate reception and use as well as the permanent record—all this must be considered, and choices made, each time you communicate.

All the choices are important, because the consequences can be so significant. Communication affects the process and the outcomes of public policy activity. The process, the related communications, and the outcomes affect people and places in real ways.