

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast Season 4, Episode 9, “I Wasn’t Engaging the Community”

[Podcast theme music begins]

Adriana Temali:

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is City Speak. I'm your host, Adriana Temali. So, today we are sitting down to talk with a mayor who [podcast theme music fades out] has been on all of your TV screens, likely, this year, and been in the media. She is somebody who has tackled the hard things that we've all been working with, with the pandemic, and with civil unrest, and political divide. But her city's also faced unique challenges this past year. And so, I'm very much looking forward to having Mayor Teri Lachermeier, from the city of Buffalo, on the show today.

Adriana Temali:

Mayor Teri has been the mayor of Buffalo since 2017. Before serving as mayor, she served on the city council since 1999. She is currently the chair of the Wright County Mayors' Association. And she's a board member for Buffalo Strong. Welcome, Mayor Teri. I'm so glad that you are here today joining us for The City Speak Podcast. We're delighted to have you.

Teri Lachermeier:

Thank you so much for inviting me.

Adriana Temali:

Well, so, I want to just dive straight into today. And let's start out with you being the mayor of the city of Buffalo. I'd love to know what drew you to public sector leadership, and specifically to run for mayor.

Teri Lachermeier:

I think passion and purpose are the two words that I would use to describe. I just absolutely love this town that I live in, and the people that live here. And, if you can really make a difference at a level of local government, I think being a part of the council and mayor would be the places. And I just, I was drawn to it.

Adriana Temali:

I love that you talked about making a difference at local government. We often like to talk at the League about the fact that you can have the most impact at local government level. And I think we've seen you do that in Buffalo, and I'm excited to dive into some of that today.

Adriana Temali:

This season, you know, we're talking about how we learn to be leaders. Some of those leadership lessons that we oftentimes learn, perhaps with a bit of a misstep, or a mistake, or something that doesn't go all the way right. So, tell me a story about a time that shaped your leadership style. Something that you learned from and grew from as a leader.

Teri Lachermeier:

Well, you know, I was on council for 16 years, and I really thought I had a good handle on how to become mayor. Right? You just ... you step into the position with, kind of watching prior mayors. We started this downtown redevelopment project in our beautiful city of Buffalo that overlooks our Buffalo Lake. And we

put a project in place where it used to be a grocery store, where we would purchase the building with our HRA, and that we would put it into a redevelopment plan. And it was, in our comp plan, it was talked about how this would be possibly high-density housing. And, you know, that being said, we hadn't looked at our comp plan since 2007. And this is 2017. So, you're talking about quite a few years in the mix. And a lot of change is happening in our community.

Teri Lachermeier:

I thought by putting it on the front page of the paper and putting a banner on the front of the building, that people would verbalize, you know, their feelings about it. And feel like they could engage. But what I didn't know is, I wasn't engaging the community. They were feeling like they were being told what was happening. So, some of the things that I learned from that is that you have to look where people are hearing and you have to listen when they're speaking. And validate that you've heard what they've said, and give them ways to communicate with you. Where some people are very intimidated by coming to a council meeting, set up small groups. Set up engagement groups with your downtown. And make sure that you're giving them an opportunity to voice their opinion in ways that maybe are less invasive.

Teri Lachermeier:

And one of the ways that we did that was we created — this was in my fourth year — we created something called flash vote, where we allowed the public to vote on some of the things that we felt were crucial. And one of those things was, how do you best receive information about the city? So, we polled it. We found out. And I wish I would've known that in the beginning.

Adriana Temali:

What did you learn from that flash vote? How did people want to engage and learn about what the city was doing?

Teri Lachermeier:

Very differently. Social media was one. They loved hearing about things through the local paper. But it was definitely very spread out. So, we found out that ... and having engagement. Like, engaging them with these ... an opportunity to come in a group with other people from the community. Give them an environment where they felt safe and able to speak.

Adriana Temali:

That's amazing. So, that project happened in 2017, as you just said. We're now quite a few years on from that. How has that shaped some of the learning that you've taken into your leadership role these past few years?

Teri Lachermeier:

Well, there's been a lot of changes on how we engage the public. We now have visioning groups. We have a downtown visioning group. We had stakeholders, business owners in that group, residents of all ages, and met over a long period of time. And it was all to talk about the visioning for our downtown. And so that we could ... when we do our comp plan, which is gonna happen this year, we can incorporate those ideas that came from the public.

Teri Lachermeier:

So, that was a huge learning piece for me. And that's something that I know that we have to continue. You almost have to fight to engage the people, because I think they want to tell you what they ... but they're hesitant. And then, when something happens, they feel like they didn't get to speak. So, you have to invite them in, like, a lot. You can't just do it once. You have to continuously ask and then, and then make it easy. Don't make it hard.

Teri Lachermeier:

So that was, that's maybe one of the main things I've learned is, engage people and really work at it. Don't just do it once.

Adriana Temali:

That is great advice. So, Mayor Teri, we've been talking to everybody about the last 18 months, how it's been challenging, and in new and unique ways for city leaders. What lessons have you learned during this time that's impacted how you show up as a leader?

Teri Lachermeier:

I've considered myself very open-minded and had an open-door policy. I have had to make that even greater at this point. I have to put every filter that I've ever put in place, and I open the door wide open. And I need to be just strictly listening to what that person's saying.

Adriana Temali:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Teri Lachermeier:

I think the failure that we've had over the years is that people don't feel heard or validated for what they're saying. I don't know that people's opinions are so strong that they're not willing to listen to the other side, if they're getting validated. But, in a lot of cases, I think over the years, people have felt not validated, but being told. So, I've had to literally take everything I've ever learned off the table and say, "Stop." And listen.

Adriana Temali:

So, what does that validation look like? If you could just describe that for others who are struggling with that.

Teri Lachermeier:

Oh.

Adriana Temali:

'Cause that's hard.

Teri Lachermeier:

When someone's speaking, validation happens when I see them and repeat to them, what I heard. And if they come back and say, "No, that's not what I said." I say, "Then please, tell me. Explain to me. I want to understand."

Teri Lachermeier:

And that's when I feel like, then something clicks. And they go, "Oh. Maybe she does care." You know? It may not look like it from behind a council chamber desk or a gavel. But, if you just stop and acknowledge that person, that they're standing there, and what they're saying is meaningful ...

Adriana Temali:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Teri Lachermeier:

... they will repeat and tell you what they want you to hear. And, the minute they feel heard, a light switch goes on. And then the open communication happens in a more valuable way, so that people walk away being able to say to their neighbor or their friend, "You know what? You may not have felt like you got your way, because it maybe was against the ordinance, or it was against this or it was against that. But

they heard me." That's what ... that's the message I would have. Over the last 18 months, that's what I have learned.

Adriana Temali:

I like that there's a really specific strategy, that you're giving people a tool to use as well, that repeating what you hear and then asking for clarification. That is a fantastic technique. Let me ask you a little bit about, the city of Buffalo has had its own unique challenges in addition to other challenges that we've all been experiencing. There was the shooting that occurred earlier in 2021. I know that we talk a lot about resiliency, about how we can bounce back from things. And I wanna know, when things get really tough, and your city went through a tough time this year, what helps you get through that? Or what is a thing that you rely on?

Teri Lachermeier:

Community. If I took all this on my own shoulder, I would not be a good leader. And I would not be a strong leader. And I would not be able to stand up for the things that I think our community values. The key to it is, is looking back at the people that represent the community and say, you know, "You guys can do this. We can do this. We can do this. We do it together. We can't do it separately." You let them do what they do best. And, let everybody have a piece. And then, there's this unity and this feeling of, "I'm a part of something bigger than myself." And then, people walk away and they want to be in that community, because they don't feel like a stranger anymore. They feel like their neighbors aren't strangers. They, you know, they can walk around the neighborhood, or go to events and feel valued and their kids feel valued.

Adriana Temali:

I'm so, so delighted to have had the opportunity to chat to you, for our listeners to hear from you, and our city officials. Thank you for all that you do on behalf of your city and for being a valued member of the League. And thanks for chatting today.

Teri Lachermeier:

Thanks for this kind of a place where people can hear about it. Have a great day.

Adriana Temali:

Well, thank you everybody for listening to The City Speak today. Our conversation with Mayor Teri really brought out some of those key points that we like our elected officials and our top appointed officials across cities to execute in their roles. Those things like ensuring you bring your passion into everything that you do. Listening. And, in particular, I loved her advice on how to validate a person when you're listening so that they actually feel heard. And that advice was to repeat back what you heard. Get rid of all of those distractions that we all have around us. Ensure that you're really focusing. And then, have the person confirm that what you heard is actually correct. Or give them another chance to explain further. And that's a great way to show validation when community members are reaching out to you.

Adriana Temali:

[Podcast theme music begins] Thanks everyone for listening today. As a reminder, you can find us on all the places where podcasts are found. You can rate and review us, or you can do it the old-fashioned way and tell a friend about The City Speak. If you want to get in touch with us with an idea for the show, or an idea for our next season, please reach out to podcast@LMC.org. Until next time, take care. [Podcast theme music ends]