

The Individual's Role in Legislative Advocacy

Introduction

The American political process not only provides the opportunity for citizen involvement, good government demands it. It is wise to follow Plato's analysis: *"The punishment of wise men who refuse to take part in the affairs of government is to live under the government of unwise men."*

Many times individuals feel they are outside the political process and should not be involved in legislative advocacy. They may view the political process negatively. They may think political causes are unworthy of involvement. They may think their work is not affected by politics. They may think that their employment rules prohibit involvement. Often, they pass their prejudice about political involvement to their children or students, if only by their lack of involvement.

Students also often ignore political action. They may think it's an adult activity. They may have developed an impression that politics is less than honest work. They may be so concerned with their own activities – sports, studies, clubs or friends – there simply is no thought given to politics. The unfortunate aspect of students' lack of political awareness is they will be ill-equipped to participate in politics when they become responsible adults.

Employment rules may prohibit involvement in partisan political action (such as working directly on a campaign) and it may be smarter to maintain an objective or neutral position on a particular political issue, but every citizen retains the right to communicate his or her concerns to legislators. As long as communication is professionally presented and nonpartisan — in other words, information and education about ideas and ideals — professionals and students are within the bounds of citizenship. It is part of the political process to attempt to influence the passage or defeat of proposals believed either beneficial or detrimental. In Kentucky, lobbyists are recognized as a part of the political process. Their job is to influence legislation on behalf of an organization's or business' goals. They must register with the state, and they receive employee-like badges for access to the capitol and legislative offices.

Sometimes, individuals may think their voice is not strong enough to be heard. That no one cares. That legislative advocacy is just a waste of time. A U.S. Senate staff member once advised senators based on the height of the piles of constituent letters received on the issues before the committee. The highest pile got the recommendation. This demonstrates that individual action does count, even something as simple as writing a letter, sending a fax or posting an e-mail.

Consider, too, the 1998 efforts of the Alabama Vocational Association (now the Alabama Association for Career and Technical Education). It was asked to help secure \$5 million more for vocational (now career and technical) education from the Alabama legislature. The association decided to ask for \$20 million. The legislature appropriated \$15 million — three times what originally was considered. It was achieved through grassroots legislative advocacy emphasizing the success of career and technical education programs and how those programs were absolutely critical for Alabama's youth and re-skilling adults to obtain the jobs of the future. The request was framed not only as an educational issue but also as an economic development and standard-of-living issues.

Kentucky is facing the same challenges. Studies, reports and analyses from government and private-sector research indicate that every job in the emerging global, information society will require some degree of technical and career proficiency. Those life skills are taught in career and technical education programs blended with rigorous academic study. Fully 65 percent of all jobs in Kentucky are filled by individuals graduating from the career and technical education system.

Kentucky's economic and workforce success is directly dependent on a career and technical education system — from middle school to college, and beyond — that provides skill training for the jobs in Kentucky's private sector. As Toyota Motor Company's Dennis Parker said: *"High-quality graduates from Kentucky's technical education system are as important to Toyota's success as are high-quality products from our business partners. Improvements in Kentucky's technical education programs are observable in improvements in Toyota's world-class workforce."*

Individuals at the forefront of this effort – students, teachers and administrators – understand this truth for Kentucky's future better than anyone else. They are the best people to convey the message that career and technical education in the Commonwealth is successful and is improving – meeting goals to support a world-class workforce. This requires continuing investment to maintain teacher skills, provide modern equipment for instruction, and sustain a quality learning environment. If you don't speak for yourself, who will?

An Example

An event occurring in 1993-94 proved that grassroots action does work. Kentucky's governor proposed splintering of the Employment Security System, making Unemployment Insurance part of welfare and privatizing the Employment Service. Labor Market Information was to be cast into a conglomerate agency of workforce programs. A group of Kentucky Employment Security employees developed a statewide, grassroots strategy to convince the public and the legislature the proposal was ill-advised and there was a better alternative to serve the Commonwealth's citizens. An alternative suggestion advocated change but emphasized fiscal and organizational efficiency.

This effort convinced the public, the media, statewide organizations, and the legislature, and did so in a manner leaving the employees' organization with a higher level of respect, even from the governor's office. Dedicated and organized people can make a difference at the grassroots. Building broad-based coalitions brings more supports to an issue and often opens new contacts with legislators and public officials. Fact-supported belief and truthfulness are the paths to success. This booklet is designed to offer suggestions for managing public advocacy, whether dealing with such crises locally or statewide if and when they occur, or in maintaining regular issue awareness.

Organizing

Identifying the Issue

The standard *who, what, when, where, why and how* questions must be answered when identifying the issue.

The *what* is very important and can become the theme of an issue-awareness, grassroots advocacy campaign. What exactly is being done that requires action? There are national, state and local issues, but as former House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neil said, "All politics is local." It is not possible to focus on winning unless you know exactly what it is you want to win? *What is the issue?*

The experience from Kentucky noted in the last section is an example of identifying the issue. The general issue was the disintegration of the Employment Security System and primarily the privatization of the Employment Service. This proposal came from the governor and would become a reality when passed by both houses of Kentucky's General Assembly and signed into law by the governor.

Analyzing the Problem

Any analysis of the issue or problem must include the source of the issue. *Who* or *what* created the issue in the first place? This is not always as easy. Here, the *why* of the problem may be a consideration, if only to clarify the source and the level of concern behind the proposal.

Proper analysis allows focusing on the source and intent of the problem. This is a necessary step before any attempt to alter or stop a course of action. Uncertainty about the exact nature of the problem will prohibit focusing on an appropriate action.

It is important to understand not only the *what* of the proposal but also the *who* that is behind it and the *why*, or motivation, leading to the proposal being made. Sometimes those insights can help guide specific actions or identify coalition partners. Identification and analysis are keys to any successful endeavor. John Naisbitt, author of *Megatrends* and a noted futurist, called these keys strategic goals. Naisbitt further believes it is impossible to plan any endeavor unless a specific goal is known and understood. To paraphrase the *Koran* – If you don't know where you are going, any path will get you there.

In the example, the governor stated his proposals and intentions very clearly. It was the abolishment of the Department for Employment Services and the transfer of its functions to other agencies. The stated intent of the governor's proposal was to streamline the Cabinet for Human Resources (CHR), provide one-stop shopping for the public, reduce administrative overhead, and increase efficiency.

The realities were quite different. Analysis revealed that the governor's proposal would streamline CHR, but the addition of Unemployment Insurance to another department would make it the largest single department in state government, complicating an individual's ability to file an Unemployment Insurance claim. The proposal also would not provide one-stop shopping or reduce administrative overhead. There were no concrete examples of increased efficiency. In fact, it appeared efficiency would decrease in at least three areas.

This breakdown and analysis of the governor's proposals and intentions allowed the employees' organization to proceed to the next steps: determining a course of action and developing a tactical plan. A tactical plan is the collective tasks to affect change on a single issue. It involves creating a strategy, but this is not a strategic planning process, which sets the long-term direction for an organization or business.

Define and analyze. Define and analyze. Define and analyze. Know what accomplishment is expected before creating a game plan. Understand the problem and know the goal. This is essential. Plans without goals are meaningless. Organizations or businesses must create a picture – a tactical vision – of the goal or mission. One of the most perfect examples of vision was President John F. Kennedy's declaration to place a man on the moon by the end of the decade of the 1960s. Everyone clearly understood the goal. Plans were implemented to meet it.

Having defined and analyzed the issue, next is identification of the campaign's focal point. It is time to concentrate on strategy.

Planning

Developing a Strategy

All campaigns require planning. The strategy depends on planning. Developing a strategy will involve all of the elements of any action-oriented effort. The following questions must be answered:

How Can the Problem Be Solved?

The *how* probably will involve *who* or *what*. *Who* can resolve the problem? Will this involve legislative, administrative or legal action? Is a new law necessary? It is something that an administrative ruling could correct? Is it a problem that must be dealt with through court actions such as injunctions? Is the problem national, state or local? Targeting the Kentucky General Assembly is not a solution if the situation is a result of U.S. Congressional action. Never lose sight of the primary target.

What Resources Exist?

Resources are both material (money, publications, geography, etc.) and human. Both are needed in order to run an effective campaign. Are there enough people who agree with the goal, issue or position, willing to actively work on it? Are there individuals who can communicate the message? Often there are enough people to work but little in the way of money.

Money should not be a discouraging factor but may affect the allocation of resources. It undoubtedly will affect strategy. Are there contacts with the media, legislative representatives, the business community, local elected boards and commissions, and any one whose voice or influence can be helpful? How much will it cost (in time, money and manpower) to reach them?

Who Are Potential Allies?

There are very few victories without the support of others. Look around for someone else working toward the same or similar goals. Who are these people — veterans' organizations, unions, associations, civic organizations, business groups?

What Is the Timetable?

Answering the *when* question determines how fast the plan must be started. Every campaign must have some time parameters, otherwise individuals may become frustrated and the campaign will become disorganized. The timetable should be carefully calculated but also should be flexible enough to allow for adjustments. The length of the campaign probably will depend on the strength of the opposition and the timeliness of the campaign, but it could involve actions necessitated by the timing of the public-policy process. Will the legislature adjourn? Is the committee about to clear the bill? The degree of opposition varies from issue to issue, and the sooner organization and action occur the better it is.

Determining a Course of Action

There is more to any issue campaign than just jumping in and flailing away. It is a contest for people's minds. It starts with a plan or strategy. Once the questions outlined in the previous section are answered, concentrate on single strategy and course of action. The strategy should be based on the available resources, including the resources of allies, and the strength of the opposition. The strategy is similar to a road map — what is the destination, how to get there, and how long will it take? Concentrate on the goals and objectives.

It also is wise to have a fall-back or alternative strategy should unanticipated roadblocks or detours arise. Needless to say, this type of planning accepts and demands flexibility.

The strategy defines the campaign elements. Tactics include organization, special events, letter writing, personal contacts, etc. Keep in mind the ultimate outcome may be somewhere between the opponent's position and the position set in the campaign goal. Choose the course wisely and be persistent.

Action Elements

The essence of successful action is choosing appropriate methods of accomplishing the goals — methods capable of zeroing in on the target or goal. As an artillery sergeant may request, "I like to know what direction to point my cannon." There are many methods of attacking problems. The following are some proven examples of proven tactics or courses of action:

Building Coalitions

Campaigns are rarely successful without the support of other organizations. Solo actions on an individual's or group's part are obviously self-seeking; therefore, the wholehearted support of other organizations is important. Identify potential allies. Look around for others working toward the same or similar goals. Likely there already exist partnerships for other purposes. Examine whether these partnerships also can serve the target goal. Should communication be pursued with other organizations that may have similar goals?

Don't be satisfied with finding one campaign partner. The more members in a coalition, the stronger the partnership will be. There also is strength in variety. The broader the alliance, the more power it projects toward goal accomplishment. It is simply not necessary or even rational to restrict partnerships to like organizations. It is prudent to look beyond the traditional linkages to other organizations and associations. This can create a powerful alliance sending a common message that the goal is important to a vast and diverse number of people. Identifying and publicizing such support compels legislators to support requests for action.

CAUTION: If unable to identify common allies, perhaps it is time to reconsider whether to attempt a campaign that no one else supports. The lack of allies may be an indicator that the position has to be restated to be understood by or appeal to a broader coalition — in other words, put it in their language, avoid "buzzwords" or jargon.

Public Relations

Positive public relations is essential to any successful issue campaign. Success will, in fact, depend as much on how the campaign is perceived by other people as it does on actual performance. Public relations consists primarily of the information distributed about the issue, including basic background on the sponsoring organization(s). This includes issue briefs, position papers, public-policy statements, etc. Public relations also is the impression made when visiting legislators and administrative officials or working with the public and the media.

Media Campaigns

Important to success in dealing with the news media will be the rapport established with the media representatives at each news outlet in a geographic area. Media campaigning goes beyond news releases; it is a courtship. Contact all news outlets — newspapers, news bureaus, radio stations and television stations that may have an interest in the issue. Make an effort to meet editors, managers, news directors and reporters at each of these outlets. Where it is a broader issue, it is often valuable to meet with the paper's or station's entire Editorial Board. They often are looking for such meetings to get themselves informed about the issues. Be prepared to state positions in a clear and concise manner. Leave them with concise and easy-to-follow information about the issue and the supporting organizations.

Follow up on the contacts. Get to know all of these people, especially the reporters. Remember the press needs stories and insights into public-policy issues just as badly as the campaign needs positive press. But it must appeal to their interest with good stories, good quotes, etc. In that light, don't forget the "lifestyle" or feature section in the newspaper where human-interest stories are printed. They often are positive and can leave a good impression about the quality people who work in the system and the important jobs they perform for the overall good of the community. Promote the successes achieved by students.

Remember to treat media contacts with the utmost respect. They are professionals and deserve to be treated as such. Tell the truth. Answer all questions. If the answer isn't known, say so, but volunteer to help find the answer and follow up. This establishes credibility, which can be shattered if a request is left unanswered. Avoid talking "off the record," because it is difficult to set clear rules for how the non-attributed information can or will be used. Treat all news outlets impartially. Don't play favorites. Always compliment, never criticize.

News Releases

The news (or media) release is a time-honored method of contacting the media. It should be a record of action — an event that has just happened, is happening or is about to happen. The news release should be viewed as an invitation for media contact, a starting point for the news outlet.

The news release should be short and to the point, with the "lead" (opening paragraph) containing the essential facts. The release should contain the following information:

- Who is involved?
- What happened or is going to happen?
- When will it (or did it) happen?
- Why is it of news value to readers or listeners?
- How will it (or did it) happen, and how will it influence the public?

Feature stories are close cousins of news releases. They are generally human interest stories and may deal with successful placement or learning activities, community projects, special events, accomplishments, etc.

Advertising

The term advertising is not commonly associated with career and technical education. Schools and educational programs seldom place ads in newspapers or purchase commercial time on radio or television. If thought of in generic terms, however, advertising is simply to "make publicly and generally known." Taken in that context, everyone is constantly in the business of advertising. Don't be afraid to use these marketing tools in the campaign if the finances exist and the message will be effectively distributed through advertising.

Legislators are not closed to facts. They are there to be educated. Show off skills and accomplishments.

Dealing with Legislators

Letter Campaigns

Letters are a good way to inform legislators about issues and provide details on positions. Letters (sent by regular mail, fax or e-mail) make a difference to legislators. A legislator's mail represents a major listening post. Letters are also a method of asking the legislator his or her view on issues. It is a method to encourage legislators to respond to questions and concerns. Don't be afraid to ask what their position is on an issue and why. Here are a few tips.

- Use personal or business stationery with a correct return address. Envelopes are discarded.
- Keep the letter brief with one issue; use one page, if possible.
- State the purpose clearly in the first paragraph.
- Use your own words. DO NOT send copied letters.
- Letters don't have to be literary or polished; weight is given to sincerity.

Contacting Legislators

Members of Congress and state legislators are your representatives, but they cannot represent you if they do not know your views. Contact your representatives. Visit with them. One-on-one contact is the most effective form of communication. A face-to-face meeting is the best way to show sincere interest in an issue. This may not be possible with U.S. senators and representatives, but it is possible with members of the Kentucky General Assembly. They love to hear from constituents. They value meeting with educators and students. They want photos of them posing with students published in local newspapers.

Keep these points in mind when meeting with legislators:

- Plan the visit.
- Make an appointment.
- Be on time and be prepared to wait (they have busy schedules, and unexpected things occur; don't take it personally).
- Provide written materials.
- Ask for the legislator's support.

Don't forget the legislator's personal or committee staff. These are the people having the most influence with the legislator. Work with them even when you the legislator is known personally. They are there to serve the legislator and the constituents. Use them. And don't forget to offer to help them. Become a contact point and resource for them about the public-policy issues important to the overall goal — the ideal is to become a trusted resource for the legislator and staff.

Hosting an Open House

Consider opening the school to the news media and members of the legislature. Schedule an event to showcase the school and what happens on a daily basis. The objective is to convince people what takes place is essential for society and the economy. It is done better there than anywhere else. An open house can bring people together and can provide an emotional uplift for everyone.

There is no need for this to be a gala event. The purpose is simply to show off the good points in an everyday environment. Many may not show up, but that should not be discouraging. Those that do will be favorably impressed.

Summary

Local grassroots action is vital to successful, proactive legislative campaigns. It is essential to believe firmly in developed goals and to adhere to the absolute truth. Define the issue and analyze the problem. What is to be accomplished? Plan the strategy and action around available resources, allies and the strength of the opposition. Know the destination and how to get there. But remember to be flexible; alternative strategies or worthwhile compromises also are winning milestones. (There may be detours in the road map, but that is okay as long as the detour or compromise is valuable or worthwhile, moving the issue toward the goal.) The ability to influence legislative decisions is directly proportional to the effort put forth. A single voice counts, and individuals do have the ability to affect legislation.