



Lobbying Office Holders 2: Seeing Things From Their Side

BY RICHARD P. BURKE

UP YOUR LOBBYING GAME: PUT YOURSELF IN THEIR SHOES

For any grassroots organization or individual activist who wants to be politically effective over time, it is important to learn how to effectively lobby public office holders. If you can persuade them to introduce, support, oppose, or amend proposed legislation, you will be able to move policy. For those who wish to be taken seriously by elected officials, it is important to learn how to see things from their perspectives and try to see things through their eyes – not just yours.

1 BE POLITICALLY REALISTIC

It is important to remember that public officials, contrary to public opinion, are actually human beings with all of the egos, hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses everyone else has. Remember that when lawmakers commit to taking strong positions on any issue you care passionately about, they will likely invest a lot of resources and take big risks to their positions in society, their careers, and political futures. Generally speaking, the more difficult the issue, the higher the risk.

Even more to the point, **failure always exacts a political cost**, and often personal and professional costs too. Here is an example:

Supporting a issue to reign in excessive public pensions can make a legislator look weak if he or she cannot advance the issue, and a perception of weakness held by other legislators can make it harder for him/her to advance other important issues. If the bill runs counter to the position of the company he or she works for when the legislature is not in session, support of the bill can compromise his or her career outside the legislature. And, don't forget, things might get cold at home if his or her spouse has a relative living on a public employee pension.

Perhaps, ideologically, none of these issues should matter. Ideally, an office holder will act solely on principle. Unfortunately, other motivations often determine what an office holder will do. Remember that many office holders are able to get elected because they are skilled in working out the consequences of decisions they make – they're not going to stop making political calculations once they are elected. As frustrating as this can be to passionate activists, this dynamic can be overcome by showing them how supporting you will help them to secure and build their political position, reputation, influence, and prestige.

2 EVEN THE GOOD ONES WON'T WANT TO TILT AT WINDMILLS

There are good office holders out there willing to do the right thing on principle even in the face of political, professional, or social risks. But even these officials will rarely stick their necks out for you unless there is a realistic chance of success. Put yourself in their shoes: If you ask lawmakers to risk their political, professional, and personal lives for causes that have no chance, they will not take you seriously and your credibility as a serious citizen lobbyist could be seriously compromised. Make sure what you ask for is “politically do-able.” Pick your battles carefully.

3 LET THEM KNOW YOU'VE GOT THEIR BACK

Those who take strong principled stands usually come under fierce attack by their ideological opponents. They will be attacked on the blogs and in Letters to the Editor, and on social media. Legislation they care about might be killed or “gut and stuffed” by political opponents. They might get kicked off of committees which hear on important bills (I've seen this happen first-hand). Back home their opponents might spend a lot of money to sully their names in order to unseat them in the next election. Politics can be a very tough game. It has been said that if one wants friends in politics they should “buy a dog.”

If you ask lawmakers to take tough stands that could invoke this kind of wrath, your chances of getting them to say “YES” are much better if you show them that you've got their backs. Show them that you are organized and are prepared to defend them on the blogs, in the newspaper, in your neighborhoods, in public venues, on social media, or anywhere else their opponents may try to sully their name. If you do, the lawmakers you lobby will know they will not be out there twisting in the wind. Once you demonstrate your loyalty, will also have a very strong ally.

PRESTIGE IS POWER: PROTECT THE STATUS OF YOUR FRIENDS

In politics, perception often becomes reality. If someone is perceived to be effective, they become effective. If they are perceived to be ineffective, they become ineffective. Strange, but that's the way it is.

Sometimes reputations are deserved, sometimes not. Over time the truth usually comes out, but frequently not in time to prevent political damage or save (or kill) a specific proposal. Either way, the reputations elected officials earn can have a real impact on their ability to do what you want them to do. This is a reality of politics.

After all, public officials must often influence other officials to pass or stop any controversial piece of legislation. He or she will need to share frank opinions in confidence behind closed doors and handle sensitive information carefully. He or she will have to find common ground when common ground is hard to find. To handle these challenges successfully, it helps if the public official you are working with has an intact reputation among other officials.

Bear this in mind when you lobby elected officials. Work to point out ways in which supporting your position could raise a lawmaker's stature among other lawmakers, lobbyists, reporters, and the people back home. Sometimes, one has to make the hard choice. But where possible, avoid asking public officials to do things that might undermine their reputation among others.

1 FORM A LOBBYING TEAM

It is often effective to form a three person lobbying team when preparing to meet with legislators or other public officials. Unless the public official you plan to meet with objects, all three of you should meet with the office holder at the same time. Unless the public official requests it or otherwise agrees in advance, don't bring additional people as this can sometimes make office holders feel like they are being "ganged" up on. According to your own judgment, you might want a lot of people to come with you to the meeting, but only your three person lobbying team should meet privately with the public office holder.

Your lobbying team would do well to meet prior to your appointment in order to plan your lobbying trip. All three members of the lobbying team should assist in research and developing lines of persuasion and discussion. Don't just research your issues – research the political, professional, and personal background of the public officials you will meet.

One member of your team should be selected to be the leader; the one who will take point in speaking with the legislators and fielding questions. A second member, an assistant, should be there to provide opinions and make comments which support and reinforce the leader. This person can also interject to break tension that might develop as the leader speaks with the office holder. A third team member should serve the function of a secretary; he or she should carry and have at hand any information that is needed, be able to pull up any information or research your team brings along, keep an eye on the time, take notes, and occasionally interject in a way that supports the leader.

2 FOCUS ON THE BENEFITS

Any experienced sales person will be quick to provide you with the following quote: "People always buy benefits, not features." The same is true here; you are essentially selling a position you want public officials to adopt. Office holders will respond favorably to benefits you can outline in the positions you want them to adopt.

3 THEY MIGHT NOT EAT THE WHOLE BANANA

Some or even all of the office holders you talk to may insist that the plan is too bold to be passed in one session or with a liberal governor in office. They may say that the proposal is unrealistic. If you think this could happen, organize your request in a way that can be taken up by the officials you are lobbying in whole or in part. This will increase the number of ways you and the office holders you are lobbying can find common cause.

If an office holder is adamantly opposed to your positions, ask he or she if there are any portions of your positions that he or she likes. This may make it possible to convince an office holder to take up at least a part of your idea. Assuming your agenda is not totally crazy, good public officials can usually find common ground to work with you on. If he or she cannot identify at least one idea in your proposal or position that he or she can support, that office holder may not be dealing with you honestly or may not have any interest in your success.

4 KEEP YOUR COOL - STAY PROFESSIONAL

If you become frustrated, keep your cool. If any member of your lobbying team loses his or her temper, word will get around and the credibility of your lobbying team may be compromised. More immediately, your appointment will collapse and you will leave without having accomplished anything while burning a bridge behind you. At the very least, find ways to part that facilitate mutual respect even if you cannot agree. If you do not burn bridges, an opponent today could be an ally tomorrow when you are working on a different issue.

5 STICK WITH IT AND YOU WILL BE SUCCESSFUL

Over time, if you lobby public office holders while bearing in mind the tips outlined in this document, you will eventually meet with legislative success. Stick with it and you WILL become an effective citizen lobbyist and successfully advance your political agenda! ✓