

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING + LOBBYING = POWER TOOL¹

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The dictionary defines lobbying as seeking “to influence the thinking of legislators or other public officials for or against a specific cause”—by which we mean to influence their *decisions* (since fathoming what they’re thinking can be very swampy). But influencing decisions also sounds a lot like organizing. So, are organizers lobbyists too?

Usually, when people speak of lobbying, they have in mind *argumentation* based on facts and logic to influence government or corporate policy, practice, or product. When they speak of organizing, they have in mind building and using *power* to influence decision-makers. Of course, organizers should use both organizing and lobbying in their day-to-day practice, because campaigns work as more powerful tools when they combine demonstrated power with persuasive arguments.

Here we look at some potentially problematic aspects of both organizing and lobbying, including: choosing coalition partners, setting campaign priorities, targeting decision-makers, strategizing a campaign, pressuring decision-makers, preparing lobbying arguments, assembling a policy brief, motivating decision-makers, planning a traditional media campaign, misusing social media, meeting with decision-makers, and testifying at legislative committee hearings.

Choosing Coalition Partners

Coalitions are vital to grassroots organizing and to lobbying decision-makers in larger arenas, such as metropolitan, state, and federal jurisdictions, and major corporations. It may be tempting when formulating policy to think of ourselves as the “brains” of the policy initiative, since we did the research and analysis to produce the policy proposal—as if the “brawn” will somehow come along to organize the coalition or that it will organize itself. We may believe the issue will be so compelling, that other organizations will want to jump on board. But that kind of thinking can be risky. We can easily end up leading a parade with no followers. It’s possible to alienate potential allies by excluding them from the policymaking. If they don’t own it—if it doesn’t represent their interests in the way they want them represented—they won’t invest in it.

Moreover, when choosing coalition lobbying partners we can’t afford to assume other organizations are “unfriendly” because we have seen them that way in the past. Whoever supports our position now is potentially a coal-

ition partner, enabling us to escalate our power, even if we have disagreements on values, principles, policies, or practices. Winston Churchill promoted this idea during World War II. Referring to the Soviet Union, he asserted that any enemy of Nazi Germany was a friend of Britain, no matter their past political differences (which were substantial between the U.K. and the U.S.S.R.). Such coalitions make it possible to achieve broader objectives, which in turn reach underlying conditions that generate multiple, seemingly irresolvable issues.² Nonetheless, we want to understand the histories, ideologies, and interests of coalition partners. Beyond discerning the potential for common goals, it gives us an idea of their limits on any specific issue—how far we can rely on them—and how other organizations may react to our alliances with them. When building a coalition, we want to keep in mind that every choice of a coalition partner will result in both winning and losing support elsewhere.

Setting Campaign Priorities

Every proposal we regard as positive is negative by others’ ideologies and interests. Taking a position on a policy proposal, like choosing partners in a coalition, leads potentially both to gaining and losing allies. Moreover, politics is about compromise, so even with allies we not only get less than what we want when we “win,” we also get some of what they want. And much of the bargaining over differences goes on within our own organization, coalition, or movement, which is surprising to some inexperienced leaders and organizers.³

There is often tension between alienating the constituencies of individual member-organizations and alienating coalition partners. Successful coalitions balance their various member-organizations’ interests and ideologies to achieve unified leadership and objectives. If we take a position on an issue or action-plan that gives away too much of our organization’s principles or policy preferences to the coalition, we undermine our credibility with our own constituency. If we take a position that gives away too little, we distance ourselves and become a marginal player in the coalition.

The position taken by the member-organization has other implications. On the one hand, hanging on to principle or policy, when the result of caving would create outrage among our own supporters, can stiffen resistance and win new support, energizing the campaign. On the other hand,

giving up something to the preferences of coalition partners can strengthen the coalition. By setting aside our organization's priorities, we encourage our coalition partners' support in the future on issues of special interest to our organization.

Targeting Decision-Makers

In grassroots issue-campaigns, we aim all our actions to influence a decision-maker. The inclination of many organizers and leaders is to target high-level decision-makers who, they may argue, can have the greatest impact on policy decisions. But it's often preferable initially to target officials at the lowest-level of decision-making authorized to implement our proposals. The rationale for this approach may or may not be obvious. The higher we go, the more power we need, because higher officials typically represent larger constituencies. When we start high, the higher officials may ask us if we have tried to work out a solution with lower-level officials, sending us back to do so if we have skipped that step. And, if we're less experienced, it makes sense to learn by targeting lower-level, less sophisticated decision-makers.

We have yet more choices when targeting decision-makers. *Direct* targets are the actual decision-makers. *Intermediate* targets, such as an elected official's staff director, transmit our proposals to the direct targets. *Indirect* targets are individuals and organizations that can influence or control direct targets—for example, business contributors to an elected representative's campaign. The contributors, typically unused to and uncomfortable with public pressure, push the representative to focus on the issue and our proposal.

Strategizing a Campaign

Our default strategy is to prepare for conflict rather than cooperation with targeted decision-makers. Although a rebuttable presumption, it's our initial posture because decision-makers do not ordinarily agree to the first proposals of progressive grassroots social action campaigns. What we can get for asking on the front-end, we have mostly already got. So, our organizations sometimes struggle for years, repeating campaigns, to achieve objectives only won by fighting for them. Decision-makers resist our demands because they require a reallocation of resources away from the donor class⁴ and its enablers, and because we aim to build grassroots power at the expense of institutional power-brokers. Withal, it doesn't take much experience to learn that power-players, regardless of their politics, don't voluntarily relinquish their power.⁵

Accordingly, the strategy of grassroots social action campaigns should follow the first axiom of active conflict: *Take the initiative and hold it, setting and controlling the terms of the conflict. Deny the adversary a moment's pause or peace.*⁶ Specifically, our actions should combine: *surprise*—making the character, timing, and strength of our initiatives unpredictable; *concentration*—bringing to bear all our available power-assets; *speed*—moving fast enough to prevent the opposition from organizing an effective defense; *flexibility*—preparing tactical options to meet unexpected circumstances;⁷ and *audacity*—taking calculated risks to go outside the experience of the opposition.⁸

This strategy, characteristic of military campaigns, can be effective in non-violent conflicts between tenants and landlords, citizens and police commissions, unions and corporations, and the like. But it doesn't lessen the value of Alinsky's rule, "... the real [follow-up] action is in the reaction of the opposition"⁹—which, of course, we want to anticipate and prepare for tactically.

One of the strategic mistakes novices make is to treat tactics as strategies, which we see regularly in the form of one-shot mobilizations not grounded in authentic community and seasoned organization. Commonly called "movements" by the media, these tactics often have little or no organizational history or experienced leadership behind them, no unified objectives or demands, no purposively targeted decision-makers, no staying power, and ultimately no verifiable effect. By contrast, a strategic plan makes it possible for the coalition to become a unified political force, able to capitalize on its strengths while minimizing its weaknesses, to defend against threats and to take advantage of opportunities.

Generating a Strategic Campaign Plan

A strategic campaign plan builds on a projected timeline—the campaign has a beginning, middle, and end—which ties together actions and events, like research and accountability actions and escalating media tactics. The campaign plan guides our monthly, weekly, day-to-day, and hourly decision-making and activity. But the adage about planning still applies: planning is everything, but plans are nothing. So, we test the plan regularly for its relevance, updating it as necessary to accommodate the unexpected.

The strategic plan serves to achieve specific objectives, both "wins" and "builds" in the lingo of organizers. "Wins" describe the *external* objectives we're pursuing, like new policies, practices, or resources from public or private organizations or institutions—which can result, for example, in funding for new low-income housing, establishing a civilian police review board, or creating a jobs-training program. "Builds" describe our *internal* objectives, like increasing the number of our leaders, improving our recruitment of new members, or diversifying our sources of funding.

A strategic plan is based on an assessment of a campaign coalition's internal environment and on the external action field. We want to calculate potential support, indifference, and opposition among the members and leaders of the coalition's member-organizations. So the plan communicates the campaign organization's ideologies and resources, including: (1) a review of campaign history and values; (2) an inventory of strategic assets, including: estimates of potential turnout in public actions, supportive relationships with allied organizations on the main issue(s) of the campaign, and likely responses of third-party organizations (e.g., media, research institutes, public commissions, etc.); and (3) an estimate of access to non-public intelligence on expected opposition. We make a similar assessment of organizations and institutions in our external action field, recognizing that no one ever won a conflict by underestimating the opposition.

Ideally, the plan assesses public awareness of the troublesome *condition* we want to remedy, the demographic makeup of those who define it as a *problem*, and potential

responses to incipient campaign *issues* among the population we want to organize. It's preferable that, rather than trying to agitate interest from scratch, the organizing can at least stimulate and shape unarticulated consciousness, when citizens are aware of a troubling condition but have yet to talk about it with one another.

A strategic plan must identify potential *handles*, predictable times when resources flow or realities shift for a decision-maker. So, for example, we might plan an action or other tactic linked to the timing of an upcoming election. The election can draw into the public's consciousness both the issue and an elected official's position on it immediately before he or she faces the voters, creating pressure to support our issue-position. Or we may calculate the timing of a campaign to take advantage of the approval of an annual budget, deadlines for signing contracts, when legislation becomes law, etc.¹⁰

We develop the campaign's strategic plan during lengthy discussions by the leaders of the campaign organizing committee (COC) and the coalition's organizers, which we guide with a series of analytical questions along the following lines:

- What will arouse the campaign's constituency?
 1. What is the basic *condition* we want to remedy?
 2. How and by whom is the condition identified as a *problem*?
 3. How can we cut our action on the problem as an *issue*?
- Who are our potential allies?
 1. What are their potential stakes?
 2. What resources can they bring to the campaign?
 3. How will this campaign affect our traditional allies?
- Who are our potential adversaries?
 1. What are their potential stakes?
 2. What resources can they bring to oppose us?
 3. How will this campaign affect our traditional adversaries?
- What are the most likely strategies and tactics of our adversaries?
 1. How do we expect them to define the issue?
 2. What action tactics and strategies do we expect them to use?
 3. How do we expect them to approach and conduct negotiations?
- How can we go outside the experience of our adversaries?
 1. How do they expect us to define the issue?
 2. What action tactics and strategies do they expect us to use?
 3. How do they expect us to approach and conduct negotiations?
- Who are the third-party players, such as independent public-interest research organizations, print and electronic media, and nonpartisan voters' leagues?
 1. How will they cut the issue?
 2. Do they have a biased track record on this issue?
 3. Do we have any friends among them?
- What's the proposed campaign's potential gain *and* loss in organizational mileage?
 1. How will this affect our membership?

2. Will it build the leadership?
 3. Does it give us a fundraising handle (to leverage resources)?
- What's our assessment of the strategic resources required to win?
 1. People
 2. Allies
 3. Handles
 4. Intelligence and information
 - What's our assessment of *our* current and potential strategic resources for this issue?
 1. People
 2. Allies
 3. Handles
 4. Intelligence and information
 - Is the timing propitious?
 - What unconsidered options do we have to achieve our objectives?
 - What might be the *unintended* consequences of what we plan to do?

Once in use, we measure a strategic campaign plan against milestones, such as completion of research actions, turnouts for first meetings with decision-makers, accountability actions, voting-commitments on our issue by individual decision-makers, and official introduction and adoption of policy or legislation proposed by our coalition. We know the difference between (1) the *promise* of a decision-maker made under pressure to support our issue-position, (2) the *enabling steps* the decision-maker takes to fulfill that promise, and (3) the decision-maker's *actual implementation* of the promised policy or practice. Elected office-holders learn quickly that political promises often make front-page news, especially when they make them in response to large-scale grassroots actions, while failures to fulfill political promises disappear in a wilderness of mainstream-media indifference. So, as a practical matter, we expect to organize follow-up meetings and actions to *collect* on the "promises" made by decision-makers.

Pressuring Decision-Makers

We recognize that in bringing pressure to bear on decision-makers, *politicians* react mainly to publicity that reflects on their character, *bureaucrats* react mainly to disrupting their agency's services and programs, and *corporations* react mainly to the loss of their product's reputation.¹¹

Pressuring politicians has been the go-to modus operandi of community organizing for decades, so the methods are well-known to experienced organizers. However, unelected bureaucrats typically have civil service protections, and inexperienced leaders and organizers may believe them to be immune to grassroots pressure. But we can successfully pressure bureaucrats by going after their elected bosses on directly related character issues. For example, having targeted the city's code enforcement bureau, we might publicize campaign contributions to a city council member from a ruthless slumlord, whose housing code violations the bureau has overlooked. Or we may disrupt the delivery of services. For example, having targeted a tax assessor whose offices are not open during evening hours to accommodate working people, we might organize an action

to file hundreds of assessment challenges, coupled with high-exposure media coverage, to stop up his operation. Lastly, we may pressure bureaucrats to *fully* live up to their own bureaucratic rules in ways that will prevent them from achieving their mission.¹² The possibilities in this vein are endless.

In any campaign, we should prepare leaders and members—mentally, emotionally, and with know-how—to negotiate. Unconditional capitulation of decision-makers is rare in community organizing campaigns. So, winning the campaign usually means negotiating an outcome that gives us much but not all of what we want. And there is a certain amount of professional and personal maturity in recognizing that neither victory nor defeat is ever perfect or permanent.¹³

Preparing Lobbying Arguments

The essence of *lobbying* is to convince decision-makers to modify their definition of the situation. We evaluate our argument on whether it persuades a specific audience, not on whether we think it represents the truth (which, by itself, is not politically influential).

We assess the position of the decision-maker relative to our issue. Is the decision-maker an *active ally*, whose interest we want to maintain with attention and information? Is the decision-maker an *implacable opponent*, who we're not interested in reaching, because pursuit tends to harden his or her position? Is he or she an *unengaged decision-maker*, who we want to get involved with a limited commitment that we can build into a larger commitment? Or is he or she an *ambivalent decision-maker*, who may initially be an opponent or apathetic, and who we avoid debating while keeping up a stream of information that supports our point of view?

To generate lobbying arguments, we ask ourselves several questions:

- What is the decision-maker's present *policy focus* and what do we want it to be?
- What are the decision-maker's *definitions of reality* and how might we alter them?
- What are the decision-maker's related *value preferences* and what more resonant values can we propose?

Assembling a Policy Brief

A policy brief is a document listing our main contentions and supporting evidence. The brief assembles the arguments and supporting evidence on *both* sides of our policy proposal (for reasons that will become clear momentarily). COC leaders and organizers use the brief in several settings and situations.¹⁴

We structure the brief around the issues that cover all the essentials of the policy proposal. These are not issues in the way we think of them as organizers, but points of contention in an argument.

The brief can include three kinds of arguments:

- *Arguments based on definition*—for example: “shelters for battered women and their children are a good investment” depends on the definition of what one regards as a good investment.
- *Arguments based on cause and effect*—for example: “issuing large numbers of liquor store licenses in low-

income neighborhoods leads to more crime and alcoholism” depends on whether we can prove (i.e., argue effectively) the causal relationship.

- *Arguments for action* must answer four basic questions: Is there a need for change that justifies the action? Will the proposed action meet the need? Is the proposed action feasible? Will the benefits of the proposed action outweigh any harmful consequences?

The brief is a resource we use in a variety of ways, but in its raw form we never give it to the media, the policy-maker, or the public.

The basic outline of the brief includes:

- Need for a change;
- Proposed plan for change;
- Feasibility of the proposed plan;
- Possible positive and negative consequences of the proposed change; and
- Rebuttal to the arguments against the proposed change (which is why our brief includes evidence on both sides of our policy proposal).

Motivating Decision-Makers

It's essential to know a decision-maker's views *before* a first meeting. Obviously, we can discover these from many sources, such as the web site of the decision-maker, archives of the local major daily newspaper (which are usually available online to subscribers), results of Internet searches on the decision-maker's name, campaign contribution reports from the county clerk or secretary of state, the usual legislative voting and speech-making records, and books authored by the decision-maker.

How do we know what *most* influences an official's decision-making? There are many self-reporting studies, but most are unmistakably subjective and rely on the candor of the subject. We certainly shouldn't expect officials to admit, “my political career is more important to me than protecting the environment” or “it's been personally very lucrative doing favors for big real estate and construction companies.”

So, what really motivates decision-makers? We're cautious about relying on generalizations, but we use the following list to sensitize ourselves to the possible motivations of each decision-maker:

- Anything that promotes career advancement;
- Avoiding pain and punishment (e.g., bad publicity);
- Engendering “good will” (with big contributors and the majority-constituency);
- Repaying outstanding political IOUs and acquiring IOUs;
- Acquiring and conserving electoral resources;
- One's own definition of the “public interest”; and
- Others' definitions of the “public interest.”

Decision-makers also favor various institutional roles for themselves, such as:

- Providing direct services by maintaining a competent and committed staff to help constituents resolve problems;
- Voting to support constituent-benefits by always opposing tax increases and service reductions;
- Introducing and supporting adoption of innovative and progressive policies;

- Co-authoring and actively supporting introduction and passage of legislation or bureaucratic rule-making; and
- Power-brokering and deal-making with other action-field players.

The root motivational-key to politicians, as Mark Leibovich has noted, is that “The interests of self-perpetuation drive nearly everything.”¹⁵

Given our thinking about the motivations of a decision-maker, before formally proposing a policy or issue-position we ask ourselves what would be the best *form* to use. For example, should it be a form that we calculate will get media attention and create more public pressure, such as a billboard? Should we present it to the decision-maker in a private, preliminary negotiation? Or, might it be useful late in the campaign to submit our full, detailed proposal in the form of a specific legislative bill? Lawmakers coming to our issue-position may respond more positively to a ready-made bill, saving them and their staff from the demands of authoring legislation they intend to submit and for which they hope to receive praise from their constituents.

Planning Traditional Media Campaigns

Frank Lloyd Wright reckoned that architects should only take a pencil in hand when they have a clear mental picture of every facet of their design. Similarly, one should never write a press release—the keystone in media work—before “cutting” the story. It’s the cut of a story that makes it interesting, exciting, and relevant. Humor and human interest are important elements to play up. Stories that uncover power-inequality, such as attacks on the powerful by an underdog, are always popular; and highlighting the gap between words and actions, especially by the powerful who claim to be public benefactors, is usually newsworthy.

The keys in cutting the story are timing, action, and personality. The story should be breaking or, better yet, about to break; involve action, somebody or something in motion; and there should be a personality (which may also be the organization) demanding attention. Whether an organization has a celebration-picnic to mark the end of a successful campaign for city-subsidized solar panels or, instead, on Valentine’s Day, a “We Love Our Solar-Power-Savings Day,” makes all the difference for news media, particularly on a slow news day. One of our favorite story-cuts was the 1974-75 work of the California Electricity and Gas for People campaign that targeted the massive Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) utility. The leadership conveyed the story-cut in the name of the campaign: Turn PG&E Around—E&GP, Electricity and Gas for People.¹⁶

When cutting the story, we should keep in mind the media for which we’re writing. Ordinarily, organizers subscribe to and consistently read, view, and listen to the media from which they want coverage. Ideally, we produce a press release that mimics the way the targeted media would typically handle the story, because we’re aiming for a news story, not an editorial.

The general guidelines for dealing with the media are:

- Be honest, accurate, and factual.
- Avoid distortions, barbed comments, and veiled threats.
- Don’t talk “off the record” or try to take back past statements.
- Prepare ahead for hostile media questions.
- Assume that reporters and editors covertly record phone conversations.
- Don’t lecture editors or reporters or ever lose your temper with them.
- Never try to recruit journalists to your cause, regardless of how friendly they are (because they may take such overtures as an insult to their professionalism).
- Recognize your interest in building relationships with reporters and editors in which they come to trust *your* professionalism.

Experienced organizers take advantage of media opportunities, reacting with phone calls or other communications to the media when supporting or opposing a story. The ideal is to react quickly when attacked, contacting the media and pushing our side of the story. We work to deliver written statements as soon as possible, and tie an action to our statement if possible. A statement opposing a new police practice, for example, is far more newsworthy if linked to an action that turns out hundreds.

We prepare leaders for unsolicited calls from the media. They need to understand that their role includes:

- Articulating clearly the campaign’s credential;
- Communicating our side of the story to the public *first*;
- Staying cool when questioned by hostile media representatives;
- Not lying, but also not volunteering anything unflattering unless unavoidable;
- Not *arguing* the merits of our campaign;
- Not getting sarcastic with media representatives; and
- Launching a media counter-offensive when feasible.

Finally, when the campaign succeeds, we don’t oppose decision-makers for taking credit in their press releases and media interviews. At the same time, we can take the credit in ours.

Misusing Social Media

Social media have opened an infinite universe of media-campaign possibilities in the last dozen years. It’s clear that social media—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.—can be powerful tools, as confirmed by commercial marketing and partisan political campaigns, including voter-turnout on election day. These campaigns are far more efficient and effective for their purposes than their forerunner, email list-building and mass-broadcasting.¹⁷ Social-media campaigns may be well-suited to *mobilizations* for various purposes. But using these networks for sustained issue-campaigns is a more questionable proposition, affording mixed experience to date.

Winning issue-campaigns usually requires *turnout that is predictable, controlled, and unrelenting*. These characteristics can account for the ironically greater victories of traditional community organizing actions (in which turnouts rarely exceed 10,000) over one-shot mass mobilizations (in which turnouts can exceed hundreds of thousands or millions). Our understanding of the crucial difference between these two approaches is that relationships among members of competent, mature organizations, grounded in long-lived, face-to-face communities, drive community organizing actions. The mass mobilizations, on the other hand, are mostly social media-driven; they originate and continue mostly in transitory cyberspace associations, with the majority of par-

ticipants rarely meeting face-to-face more than once in occasional marches and demonstrations.

Many of the Internet-based, “social action” organizations that rely on social media campaigns are well-known, but it’s difficult to verify their impact on specific policy reforms and resource allocations. The picture is unclear because it’s commonplace when a government or corporation shifts policy in a progressive direction, these organizations, many of which have promoted Internet fundraising on the issue, claim partial or full credit for the “victory.” But there’s rarely any independent verification of their claims, and their limited ability to influence the retrograde policies of the Trump administration suggests they are inflating their “wins.”

More problematic, unofficial online petitions have become the go-to fundraising method for Internet-based, non-partisan political organizations, both progressive and reactionary. It’s not incidental that these petitions have uncertain effects on policy outcomes. They are reminiscent of the petitions widely used by door-to-door “social-action” canvasses of the 1970s and 80s, which the organizations dedicated chiefly to fundraising. Petitions then were a useful tool for door-knocking on multiple issues, but eventually householders discerned and rejected the petition-gambit to raise funds. They recalled the previous canvassing’s inflated rhetoric, grandiose political and economic policy objectives, and visionary promises for community transformation—all or most of which typically remained unfulfilled. Given enough time, even the politically naive came to see that the promised results of the petitions were not forthcoming. When that happened, potential contributors spurned both the fundraising method *and* the canvassing organizations that used it.

Most troubling ultimately, social-media-driven campaigns used for nonpartisan political mobilizations can create the mistaken belief by participants that their “social action”—ordinarily limited to signing a petition, making an online contribution, or attending a march—will demonstrate sufficient power to bring about a victory. It may also lead them to believe that more demanding commitments are not necessary.

Meeting with Decision-Makers

Experienced organizers know that three steps are essential in preparing for meetings with decision-makers. The first is *one-to-one organizer prep-sessions with key campaign leaders*, which are gauged to deepen their understanding of the issue, meeting agenda, process, and discipline. The second is a *planning meeting* in which the COC clarifies and sets the details of the agenda and process. These details include: introductions and credentialing, and who’s going to handle them; questions to the decision-maker, and who’s going to ask them; and much more. The third is a *COC role-play rehearsal* exploring the decision-maker’s possible reactions and how to handle them.

We look at our plans for the meeting with the decision-maker through the decision-maker’s eyes. We want to stay focused on the decision-maker’s interests, which we do by reviewing all the points of our policy presentation from the decision-maker’s perspective. We want to make it clear to

the decision-maker that his or her constituents will welcome the policy-position we’re promoting

We keep in mind that throughout the meeting, our organization and leaders will be sized-up by the decision-maker. So, we pay close attention to what we’re communicating, implicitly or explicitly, about our political savvy and power. This means carefully considering how we articulate our credential. The conversational tone we take with the decision-maker throughout the meeting should be friendly but businesslike. It should never have a hint of apology or fawning. Even our apparel should not be too casual—no shorts, sandals, t-shirts, etc.

Meetings with decision-makers should include members from our organization or coalition prepared to give brief personal testimony about the human pain—the individual injury or injustice—caused by the problem. It’s one thing for a decision-maker, say a city council member, to dismiss or downplay theoretically the need for additional funding for shelters to house battered women and their children who are fleeing from violent partners. It’s quite another thing if several such women are present with their children and relate their experience (without personally attacking the council member).

It pays to take a few minutes at the start of the meeting to introduce all our people to the decision-maker, one by one. Each should mention one “personal” fact that establishes him or her as a constituent of the decision-maker, such as where they live, their interest in the issue, or the faith community of which they are members, which strengthens our credential.

Immediately following introductions, we present our credential, ideally with clarity and without bragging or false modesty about our support. It should easily translate into numbers of voters in the mind of the decision-maker. The credential should include: the number of people represented by our coalition, the numbers and types of organizations participating in the coalition, an accounting of recent successful campaigns and actions that received media coverage, and a listing of allied legitimizers and gate-keepers (e.g., the Catholic bishop, a union president, a well-known corporate CEO, etc.).

A common mistake of novice organizers when planning initial meetings with decision-makers is assuming the goal is to prove early-on, by forceful arguments, that the decision-maker should support their organization’s proposal. A more productive approach is to spend little time talking and trying to persuade on the front-end of the first meeting. It’s preferable to ask challenging questions, the answers to which foster insight, allowing decision-makers to come to our conclusions and to our solution-strategy through their own reasoning.

This approach has us asking the decision-maker the same questions we asked ourselves to reach our policy position. For example, if the policy at issue is whether the legislature should act to decentralize long-term juvenile detention facilities, the approach might be to ask the decision-maker, a state legislator: “What do you think of the comparable *costs* of incarcerating juveniles in large, centralized, prison-like facilities versus small, decentralized, home-like facilities? Are you familiar with the comparable *recidivism* rates between centralized and decentralized facilities?” The

predictable reaction of legislators is: “What are those comparisons?”—which, of course, we’re prepared to describe.

A related principle is that it’s always to our advantage tactically to have the decision-maker pursuing us, for information, support, relief from punishing publicity, or whatever, than for us to be pursuing the decision-maker. Those we pursue tend to run away faster, unless we have a deal to propose that’s in the compelling self-interest of the pursued. In the best of all possible scenarios, decision-makers conclude it’s in their interest to cultivate our support.

Equally or possibly more important at the outset is the value of this approach in building a *relationship* of mutual interest with decision-makers, whose investment in regularly meeting and working with us deepens with every penetrating question we ask that allows them to achieve greater insight into their institutional and professional challenges.

Throughout the meeting, we maintain our discipline to treat the decision-maker with respect and graciousness, despite any disappointment or annoyance we may feel. We never want to give the decision-maker reason to treat our people with anything but equal respect and graciousness, because doing so lets the decision-maker off the hook in responding to our questions. This guideline is easier to say than do, but made possible by pre-meeting role-plays.

In meetings with decision-makers we always ask directly for a commitment: “Will you vote for our bill in committee and if it comes before the full council?” If it’s too early to expect a commitment, we ask for a commitment on *when* the decision-maker will make a commitment: “Our members would like to know when you’ll commit yourself on this issue—for or against.” After our meeting with the decision-maker, we maintain follow-up whenever we have new information, additional coalition partners, etc., and we keep posing the commitment question.

While most lobbying guidelines are flexible, there are some ironclad rules, such as: *Never make threats or slam the door*. Circumstances change, and there is the possibility that an unsupportive decision-maker will rethink his or her policy positions. Regardless of the reception we receive, we always want to be thorough, accurate, and honest in presenting information to decision-makers. While we don’t win the policy issue with good information, we may win the good will of a decision-maker for providing reliable information and insights. So, we may lose the issue but win the relationship for future campaigns.

Our information and arguments to the decision-maker don’t prove we’re right, only that our position is sensible and defensible and in the interests of many voters or other constituents. It helps that we can impose political costs, which incentivize the decision-maker to listen with an open mind to our proposal.

To sum up, a basic agenda for initial meetings with decision-makers should include:

- Introductions and credential
- Brief testimony by people affected personally by the problem
- Research questions to the decision-maker
- Reasons for favoring the policy [from our brief]
- Arguments against our proposal and our rebuttals to them [from our brief]
- Closing questions [asking for commitments]

Testifying at Legislative Hearings

Although the claimed purpose of legislative hearings is to gather information, legislators are usually well-informed through the work of their staff and through information provided to them by lobbyists. The legislative hearing, whether a city council discussion or public hearing by a committee of the state legislature, gives lawmakers the opportunity to hear all sides of an issue and to ask questions and challenge witnesses in a brief span of time. It also gives them media exposure while posing as thoughtful, mature, and well-informed leaders.

There are several basic guidelines for testifying in legislative hearings. We should decide first whether it’s at all useful to testify at a specific hearing. It may not be if we’re only going to be a punching bag for a hostile legislator (unless it’s likely we’ll get sympathetic press coverage). We should find out why the hearing is at the scheduled time, which we may be able to learn from friendly lobbyists and advocacy groups. The timing may suggest handles that afford leverage on the issue. We should also check to see if our representative is on the committee, which increases the likelihood of our organization having an opportunity to testify.

If we’re not allowed to testify, we may submit written testimony, which we can also give to the media, and which may be just as valuable as testifying if media exposure is our main objective. We should stay focused on our *media-campaign* purpose, which is to get our side of the issue out. We should also stay focused on our audience (whether the legislators, the news media, friendly committee members who need ammunition to support our position, etc.). We should make the effort to know who else is testifying at the hearing (the committee chairperson’s staff may be willing to share that information), so that we can know the arguments our opposition will be making.

Another one of those inflexible rules of lobbying is, *never engage in arguments with committee members*. They always have the last word, and you’ll look like a ten-year-old arguing with your parent if you lose your self-control. It’s obviously preferable to maintain your own dignity and allow decision-makers to maintain theirs.

Sometimes committee members try to engage us in debate. We should treat this response to our presentation as legitimate questioning, answering it from our prepared responses to common criticisms of our argument. In some cases, committee members ignore our arguments and instead attack our leaders, trying to make them look bad as individuals. Our prepared response has several points: making sure it’s a personal attack and not a misunderstanding; calmly restating our position, possibly adding an illustration; and, despite ad hominem attacks, treating him or her with respect, maintaining our own dignity. Committee members will occasionally raise issues entirely extraneous to our testimony. We answer briefly, then we get the subject back on track. We may get questions that are friendly, neutral, or hostile, which we cannot answer. We never fake it. We acknowledge that we don’t have the information at hand but will try to get it, and we strive to follow up promptly and thoroughly.

Maximizing the Power Tool

The fundamentals of using the power tool of combining organizing and lobbying include:

- Investing in building a unified coalition;
- Doing a thorough inventory of your own resources and an action-field analysis;
- Knowing all the players, rules, procedures, and deadlines, inside and out;
- Taking the time to generate a winning strategy and strategic plan;
- Considering organizational mileage, and opportunities for both “wins” and “builds”;
- Preparing a complete policy brief, including all your adversary’s arguments;
- Targeting decision-makers commensurate with your actual power;
- Knowing the decision-maker’s position on your proposal *before* meeting;
- Planning and role-playing meetings and actions thoroughly ahead of time;
- Exploiting the timing of events that offer handles on your issue;
- Not short-changing your media campaign or allowing it to peak prematurely;
- Preparing to negotiate at the end of a campaign; and
- Expecting the need for follow-up to collect on opponents’ “promises.”

¹ This article was originally published in two parts as “Organizing + Lobbying = Power Tool” in the Spring and Summer 2018 issues of *Social Policy* in a reorganized version; it has also been updated since its publication.

² The necessity and utility of “boundary crossing” to build powerful coalitions that move beyond localized issues, purposely upgrading the traditional Alinsky organizing model by squarely facing challenges of race and ideology, are explored by Jacob Lesniewski and Marc Doussard in “Crossing Boundaries, Building Power: Chicago Organizers Embrace Race, Ideology, and Coalition,” *Social Service Review*, 91(4):585-620 (December 2017).

³ Regarding the effects of division among progressive forces over a judicial recall campaign, see Julia Ioffe, “When the Punishment Feels Like a Crime,” *Huffpost* (June 1, 2018) [<https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/brock-turner-michele-dauber/>].

⁴ Bob Herbert’s definition of the donor class is a “. . . tiny group—just one-quarter of 1 percent of the population—and it is not representative of the rest of the nation. But its money buys plenty of access.” See: “In America; The Donor Class,” *New York Times* (July 19, 1998). More definitively, see: Spencer A. Overton, “The Donor Class: Campaign Finance, Democracy, and Participation,” *GW Law, Scholarly Commons* (152 U. Pa. L. Rev. 2004) [https://scholarship.law.gwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1928&context=faculty_publications].

⁵ This is simply a variation on the theme that “power concedes nothing without a demand,” articulated by Frederick Douglass in his “West Indian Emancipation” speech at Canandaigua, New York on August 3, 1857.

⁶ See Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971), for his rule that parallels this axiom—to wit: “Keep the pressure on, with different tactics and actions, and utilize all events of the period for your purpose” (p. 128). Alinsky may have taken a page from Lord Fisher, the Admiral of the British Fleet: “Hit first! Hit hard! Keep on hitting!!” See Jackie Fisher, *Memories* (London-New York-Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), p. 274.

⁷ Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke (1800-1891), German Field Marshall and chief of staff of the Prussian Army for 30 years, “. . . insisted that no plan lasted beyond the first encounter. . .” with the opposition. See Daniel J. Hughes, *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (New York: Presidio Press, 1993), pp. 45-47.

⁸ These five characteristics were the heart of U.S. Grant’s successful 1863 battle plan to take Vicksburg, and they were included in 1986 in the Army Operations Field Manual. See Ronald C. White, *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Random House, Kindle edition, 2016), loc. 5843.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁰ For more on handles, see Lee Staples, “Selecting and Cutting the Issue,” in Meredith Minkler, ed., *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health*, 2d. ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 189.

¹¹ Nonetheless, it’s possible to damage the reputation of a product by revealing the immoral practices of its producers. The United Farm Workers 1965-70 grape boycott is a classic example of this strategy; and the recent successful campaign of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers demonstrates its contemporary value.

¹² Alinsky, p. 128, articulates the rule with brevity: “Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules.”

¹³ Rabbi Joseph P. Soloveitchik’s thinking and writing markedly improved our recognition of the incompleteness and impermanence of victory and defeat. For a discussion of this perspective in the context of traditional Judaism, see Rabbi Reuven Zeigler, *Majesty and Humility* (Jerusalem & New York: Urim Publications, 2012), p. 61.

¹⁴ For more on policy briefs, consult The Women’s and Children’s Health Policy Center at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, which has extensive resources available at https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/womens-and-childrens-health-policy-center/de/policy_brief/index.html.

¹⁵ Mark Leibovich, “This Town Melts Down,” *New York Times Magazine* (July 11, 2017).

¹⁶ For more of the details of this campaign and its organizational outcomes, see Mike Miller, “San Francisco Models,” *Social Policy* (Spring 1983), pp. 30-32 [<http://www.organizetrainingcenter.org/writings.html>]. For an example of 1970’s economically oriented community organizing, see Community Ownership Organizing Project, *The Cities’ Wealth, Programs for Community Economic Control in Berkeley, California* (Washington, DC: National Conference on Alternative State and Local Public Policies, 1976), p. 33 [<https://ecommons.cornell.edu/bitstream/handle/1813/40494/CitiesWealth.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>].

¹⁷ Social media platforms have shown themselves to be extraordinarily powerful and perverse means of influencing elections. For some of the ultimate effects, see for example, “Is Social Media Destroying Democracy?” Alternet (March 16, 2018) [https://www.alternet.org/investigations/welcome-info-apocalypse-we-keep-hearing-social-media-destroying-democracy-yet-few]. For the furthest domestic reach of social media misuse, see: Michelle Goldberg, “Trump’s High-Tech Dirty Tricksters,” *New York Times* (March 19, 2018); The Editorial Board, “Facebook Leaves Its Users’ Privacy Vulnerable,” *New York Times* (March 19, 2018); Matthew Rosenberg, “Cambridge Analytica, Trump-Tied Political Firm, Offered to Entrap Politicians,” *New York Times* (March 19, 2018); Kevin Granville, “How Cambridge Analytica Harvested Facebook Data, Triggering a New Outcry,” *New York Times* (March 19, 2018); and Kevin Roose, “How Facebook’s Data Sharing Went From Feature to Bug,” *New York Times* (March 19, 2018). For a detailed review of the extraordinary communal violence driven primarily by Facebook in developing countries, see Amanda Taub and Max Fisher, “Where Countries Are Tinderboxes and Facebook Is a Match,” *New York Times* (April 21, 2018).

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