

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Interest Groups and Associations

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INTEREST GROUPS AND ASSOCIATIONS

By Stan Soloway

As a political appointee, you will be faced with making scores of decisions, often on complex, highly charged issues. Needless to say, there are many individuals and groups (both inside and outside of government) who would like to influence your decisions. As such, a key challenge you will face is evaluating the quality of information that will underpin your decisions. After all, seeking, parsing, and synthesizing information into an actionable framework is an integral part of leadership. Think of it as data analytics. Collecting the data is the first, vital step. Then you, as a leader, need to decide what to do with it and what it all means.

It is also axiomatic that your time is precious and information overload is a constant risk. That's where interest groups and associations can be of real value. By definition, their role is to provide perspectives from across one stakeholder community—be it an industry (generally represented by a trade association) or a profession (generally represented by a professional association). As such, they can serve as important resources and can become one-stop shops that enable you to gain valuable insight from a wide range of interests without having to communicate directly with each and every member of that stakeholder community.

Of late, there has been far too much of the opposite behavior. Indeed, over the last decade or so the quality and scope of these communications has generally lessened, primarily for two reasons: fear of the ethics police and/or loathing the opposition. Neither are good excuses. Know the rules of engagement, but don't avoid them. Think what you will of your opposition, but recognize as well that they just might have some valuable input.

Make no mistake about it, as an agency leader you will rapidly be introduced to the alphabet soup of organizations representing your agency's stakeholder community, and all are not equal. Some are very good at providing value in the form of information and context; others are less so. You also set the tone. If your goal is for your agency to move out smartly with new ideas, then the worst thing you could do is to ignore or cut off input from the outside.

To optimize the value of outside interest groups, there are several good rules that you might follow—and insist that your key staff members follow as well.

Rule One: Ask them before they ask you.

Every interest group has its own agenda. As long as you know what its agenda is, don't shy from engaging its members in the process of finding solutions to your toughest problems. Often, the best way to maximize the

benefit of associations is to proactively present them with specific challenges or questions to which you are seeking answers.

The best organizations will respond with thoughtful inputs that reflect real effort on their part to both understand *your* priorities and needs and to provide substantive strategies for you to consider. Whether you agree with their solutions or not, this outreach allows you to quickly separate the doers from the talkers and to recognize those organizations where ongoing and open communications are of real value to you, rather than just a political necessity.

Rule Two: Stakeholder consensus is not always the goal.

While it is helpful to have alignment with key stakeholder groups around important policies and other priorities, there are limits to the possible. Indeed, when it comes to driving change, some external stakeholders will be as resistant as your internal bureaucracy may be. Industries or professions are rarely monolithic, and some have even evolved in ways that mirror your internal bureaucracy.

In addition, different associations representing the same or similar industries sometimes have different points of view. Even within individual associations there may be divisions of opinion. Recognize this reality; don't be afraid to challenge it and, most importantly, don't shy away from asking for those conflicting perspectives.

Rule Three: Make external communications the routine, not the exception.

Never before has broadening the communications aperture been more vital. As noted earlier, that aperture has become dangerously narrowed and the result is more conflict than collaboration—more digging in of the heels than moving toward solutions. Just about every government official and every interest group leader will tell you that the scope and quality of communications is at low ebb.

You can change that within your agency. Know the rules governing communications—when they have to be public, when they are subject to the Federal Advisory Committees Act, when there is an active procurement underway, and so on. But don't let anyone convince you that external communications are either prohibited or somehow unethical. Moreover, set the tone; open the aperture and insist that doing so becomes the rule in your agency.

Outside of government, collaboration and communication is the rule in the business world; the government should be no different.

Rule Four: Be focused and structured in your communications.

Routine communications and dialogue are not the same as open-ended discussions. Informal, open-ended contact can have value; but when it comes

to problem solving, the more focused and structured the communication, the more you will get out of it.

There was always an agenda when I conducted roundtable discussions at the Department of Defense. It was composed of specific questions submitted to me or that I had submitted in advance to the associations participating in the roundtable. These structured discussions were not staged or contrived but ensured we used the time and the opportunity wisely and effectively—and in a manner consistent with my department’s needs.

Rule Five: Be transparent.

Transparency and openness are essential. Communications in government do not exist in a vacuum. Even when you know a group is likely to oppose your policies or initiatives, engage them as early and openly as those who are likely to support you. Picking and choosing which organizations to engage is not an option. The more you openly invite varied perspectives, the more credible you will be as a leader. When it comes to contentious issues, this becomes even more important.

Listening to the “opposition” may give you valuable insights, blunt some criticism, or at least keep the lines of communication open. It can also help to eliminate those “surprises” that so bedevil political leaders. Don’t be afraid to be open about your priorities and don’t be afraid to openly discuss them with all interested parties.

Conclusion

As an agency leader you are, by definition, a change leader. Your role is to successfully implement the President’s vision and agenda. Generally, that vision and that agenda require meaningful change. These rules are common to any successful change management effort. They can help you achieve your goals, help inform your decision making, and enable the kinds of relationships that make our democracy work.

Managing time and information are but two of the most difficult challenges you will face. Interest groups and associations are key to solving those challenges. By effectively integrating them into your process, you can gain the benefit of diverse and numerous voices coming together. You will rarely be surprised and your level of knowledge will be enhanced.

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