



## TIPS FOR EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATING WITH LEGISLATORS



State Assembly Representatives and Senators are always appreciative to hear the concerns of their constituents. They are elected by you and they will listen to you. Key objectives when communicating with legislators are to build a relationship and influence how he or she thinks about a particular issue.

Here are some tips of how to communicate effectively with legislators.

**State legislators are people.** It is important to remain professional but you can still have a normal conversation with them. Most state legislators have full-time jobs in addition to being an elected official and share the same interests and concerns as you. Be honest, friendly and respectful.

**State legislators are generalists.** Like us, state legislators have a limited area of interest or experience. Legislators are consistently inundated with hundreds of issues and concerns. Legislators are usually generalists and rely on their staff, legislative colleagues, state agency experts and constituents like you to provide them greater knowledge to make an informed decision. Don't expect your legislator to understand your issue. Begin with a general explanation of the issue, including necessary background. You have limited time, so be sure to get to the point.

**Credibility is everything - Know your facts.** You only get one chance to make a first impression- so express your talking points accurately. Answer their questions directly and don't provide only half the story. Provide good information and don't overstate. Don't make up statistics and don't make statements that you "think" are true. It is okay to say you don't know and that you will follow-up with them. State Legislators are influenced by facts. Credibility means everything to a lawmaker. Once it is lost you damage both you and your organization's credibility; once lost it will be very difficult and maybe impossible to get back.

**Credibility is everything – Tell the whole truth.** If there is opposition to the issue or stance you are talking about, be sure to let the state legislator know who the opposition is and what their discussion points will be. Always remain respectful of your opposition. Know your opposition and be prepared to rebut opposing viewpoints. Take this opportunity to explain the issue and neutralize opposing discussion points. Like any person, legislators don't want to be surprised by opposition.

**Correct errors immediately.** Mistakes happen and facts can change over time. If you realize bad information has been provided, contact the legislator immediately; identify the error; and, correct with factual information. Again, credibility is everything and once lost it is very difficult to get back.



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**Avoid zealotry.** The more strongly you feel about an issue, the more important to be aware of the danger of zealotry. Zealotry is the enemy of credibility. It is okay to be aggressive in your advocacy, but crossing that line to being perceived as irrational in the face of a rational discussion neither convinces or impresses a state legislator.

**Grow a thick skin.** Don't take things too personally. Try to maintain a sense of humor. The political arena is not always an insulated environment. It is important not to be distracted by petty slights or insults. Don't lose focus of your objective. Those who employ slights and insults as a lobbying tactic are hurting their credibility – becoming a zealot.

**Ask directly for your legislator's support.** There are only three answers to any question: yes, no and I don't know. If you do not get a verbal yes, you should ask for their support directly again. Listening and nodding does not indicate agreement. The rule of thumb is to ask a legislator for support three times to get definitive yes or no answer. Stop pushing after asking three times. It is okay if a legislator does not support your issue. Sometimes building a relationship is more important and can pay dividends in the long run.

**Take notes and be sure to follow up with a thank you note.** Remember you are part of a team working to influence and persuade state legislators to support a particular position. Take notes during the meeting and be sure to send your notes to association staff or the lobbyist via e-mail about the meeting. The information you obtain is valuable to the effort. Be sure to send a handwritten thank you note to the legislator.

**Don't be "that" relative or friend.** You are meeting with your state legislator to build a relationship built on credibility and trust. Don't be that person that only calls when the state legislator is doing something that you feel is wrong or disagree with. When you feel a legislator is doing something right – call them and/or write to let them know. Legislators appreciate positive feedback too.

**Remember to say "thank you."** Be sure to say thank you at the end of the meeting and be sure to send a personal handwritten thank you note to the legislator.