

# Building Relationships: Allies, Coalitions, and Government

Besides being connected to the public and the people you are serving, strong relationships with experts, allies, and policymakers is the key to effective public interest advocacy. In public interest advocacy and lobbying, it is impossible to imagine successful lobbying for the public interest without careful collaboration with **allies** from different walks of life playing different, but essential roles in advocacy.

In advocacy your allies are those individuals and organizations that have similar goals or interests that relate to your mission.

It's easy to build relationships with the people and public interest organizations who work directly on your issue (issue experts), but a truly dynamic advocate will reach out to individuals and groups who may not have a shared focus, are indirectly impacted by the issue, or have been traditionally excluded from the conversation. Some unlikely partners for public interest include rural advocates, human rights organizations, start-ups, racial/ethnic/religious identity-based groups, trade associations, think tanks, and even large

industry. Here are general tips for building relationships:

- Be the person that people want to work with: Strike a balance between **tactfulness** and **likeability**, because no matter how intelligent you are, if you're not trustworthy and easy to work with, you won't be invited into the conversation.
- The best relationships are built with **personal relationships**, trust, favors, and lending expertise when needed. At the same time, don't let professional

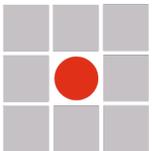
relationships impact your personal relationships and vice versa.

- **Understand everyone's motives:** Figure out the underlying motives of your allies, opponents, and everyone between that you work with or who your work impacts. Structure your arguments and partnerships accordingly.
- **Recognize different paths to the same destination:** Everyone, including allies, may come at your issue with different motives and ideas for tactics in mind, so be willing to work on finding overlap in the most comprehensive way possible. While doing so, be conscious of your own agenda, and be sure to not give up more than you can get.

## >>> COALITION BUILDING

Once you've mapped out your goals, begun to develop a strategic plan, and have built relationships with diverse allies, a powerful way to incite action is through coalitions. A **coalition** is a group of individuals and/or organizations that hold a common interest and partner together to work towards certain goals. Often times, individuals and organizations create coalitions in order to build up expertise, power, and resource for an issue, as well as split costs, tasks, and research between multiple people or groups. You won't always need, or even want, a coalition, but here are some guiding tips for deciding whether you want to join or start a coalition:

- Are you or your organization well established? Are other coalition members well established (funding, resources, staff, positive success record, clear mission, etc)
- Will the coalition help better address the issue(s) you care about? How so (be specific)?



- What resources will the coalition provide that you need and do not have? What resources can you provide?
- What kind of coalition is this? Formal vs. informal? Temporary or long lasting? Single issued focus? Will it be transparent to the public or more closed door? Can individuals join or do you have to be a part of a recognized organization?
- Do you have common goals in comparison to other members or potential members? What are the goals for the coalition?
- What form(s) of advocacy will the coalition focus on? Lobbying is an example.
- How will leadership/membership be determined

Once you've decided to join or build a coalition, you should also decide on the following:

- Recruitment strategies for getting founding members
- Funding and budgeting needs
- Best form of and frequency of communication with members;
- Recruitment strategies and qualifications for new members (also, how to shake off "founder member syndrome" when adding new partners)
- Strategies for maintaining interest from members and sustaining relevance
- Public outreach about your coalition

## >>> WORKING WITH POLICYMAKERS

You will inevitably have to work with policymakers to push through changes in law and public policy. To learn more about the details of working with policymakers, see our resources on *Navigating the FCC*, *Navigating Capitol Hill*, and *Advocacy Tactics!* While you should apply the general tips for advocacy to policy makers, here are a few other considerations worth noting!

- **Be “the expert”:** With the exception of regulators or politicians who specialize in your issue, a majority of the policy makers (or their staff) that you interact with are not experts on your issue, so you should be!
- **Be patient - Government bureaucrats and lawyers are not risk-takers:** Policymakers and politicians are often hesitant to take a firm stance on an issue, and when they do, there are endless negotiations. While this can be frustrating or exhausting, it is important to stay engaged, level headed, and available with new ideas. You must be willing to work at the pace and expertise level of the government actors you’re working with. Take your time, get your materials and case in order, and be thorough in mounting arguments. Presenting incorrect/inaccurate information can severely diminish your credibility, even if you present better data later.
- **Take care before critiquing powerful policymakers:** Before going public with criticisms of powerful chairpersons or other policymakers, weigh the pros and cons and think carefully about the long-term consequences. Like elephants, they never forget, and their power could change or increase when you most need it.
- **Plan ahead for administration departures and big political shifts:** Once you’ve built strong relationships with policymakers, try to stay up to speed on expected and unexpected departures such as the end of an administration or retirement. Transitions of power are not always smooth, but even when they are you don’t wait to make your big pushes for policy changes during these times!
- **Understand the cycle of Congress.** If it’s a presidential election year, it could be very hard to get anything done because most are focusing on elections, whether it’s their own or members of their party. Midterm election years are generally less productive because candidates want to avoid controversy. The most productive years in Congress are usually the first and third years of an administration.
- **You may need to prepare for secrecy:** It’s not as easy as you think to be involved in the conversation. FCC is subject to sunshine laws that require meetings and documents to be open to the public with advanced notice, and the Department of Justice is subject to confidentiality requirements.
- **Understand an agency’s legal mandate:** Understand how an agency’s legal authority has been interpreted by the courts and don’t ask a government body to exceed its authority.
  - For example, courts have been more lenient on vertical mergers. Horizontal mergers have become easier to challenge.
  - FTC v. FCC: one agency may be preferable to another for your industry or issue