



Engaging the Public Sector

The Ninth Influence of the Horizon Initiative

Chambers of commerce have traditionally focused on networking and connecting, establishing business relationships, encouraging regional economic and business growth, and sharing professional learning. An increasingly important focus of chambers is to influence public policy and government actions to ensure a thriving business environment. To assert this influence, engaging the public sector is a critical dimension of a chamber executive's responsibilities.

Our primary mission is to create an environment where our members can grow and prosper, where citizens become part of the fabric of our community and where people want to move to raise their families. Partnerships are critical to these goals and objectives, and the public sector is one of our most significant partners. Understanding how we can be more effective in engaging the public sector is key to both our careers and the effectiveness of the organizations we represent. High-performing chambers of commerce are change agents, and the speed of change has increased for our members and for our communities.

To successfully engage the public sector, consider the approaches that have worked for many chamber executives. Those who have worked extensively in this area have candidly shared successes and failures so that you can determine what might work when you tackle challenges or seek to take advantage of opportunities. Our hope is the following content will help you to be more effective in your role with the chamber and, by extension, your chamber more effective in your community.

Why Chambers Should Engage the Public Sector

As chamber executives, our jobs require us to work with a wide variety of people to get things done. Traditionally, we think about the ways that we can work with the business community or with our membership. But what happens when we need to look beyond the business community to other partners? What happens when the solution requires a local ordinance change or a rewrite of state legislation? We need to work with our city council or state representatives to make that happen. How do we proceed?

Typically, this kind of work has been left to the government relations professionals in the chamber world. We often rely on lobbying or on our PACs to create the environment for businesses to be successful. However, there's more to engaging the public sector. Being successful in this space requires chamber professionals to focus on the relational aspects of our interactions with elected officials and others in the public sector. This can no longer be left solely to our government relations colleagues. Success requires the entire team's involvement with every chamber executive actively cultivating these relationships and engaging in this space. For chambers without government relations staff, this is even more important.

This document outlines some of the key considerations, skills and approaches for engaging the public sector. Included are some examples, lessons learned and resources for those who are just beginning this work or who may be considering expanding their existing efforts. If you and your chamber are already deeply engaged in this work, please visit the Government Relations Division page on ACCE's website for more traditional information on government relations.

How Should Chamber Executives Approach Public Sector Engagement?

While each opportunity to engage the public sector, including elected and appointed government officials, is unique, there are best practices in many of these situations. The list below summarizes some of the most helpful ways to frame your thinking when engaging the public sector:



Practice empathy and try on the other person's shoes. It is easy to view the world and our circumstances through the lenses of our experiences and current situation. To effectively partner with others, we need to step back to see the world or situation through their lenses. Know the perspectives they have that influence their point of view.



Step out of your comfort zone. It is human nature to surround ourselves with like-minded people and gravitate towards spaces and places that are secure. If we truly want to be able to see the world from another's perspective, we must step out of that circle of comfort. We must be willing to be uncomfortable for long enough to absorb what it is like to be in a different situation. This helps us build a new framework for understanding others' thoughts and perceptions.



Know the process and anticipate the next move. Effectively engaging the public sector requires us to think through multiple moves before acting. This requires knowing the process and the people involved in your current issue. If it is a legislative matter, for example, know what committees are involved and the key members or staff people. It also requires that we keep our eye on the goal so that we don't get bogged down in processes or personalities.



Use the headline test. In building relationships and working with others, it is inevitable that you will be asked for your candid feedback about another person, elected official or action. Carefully consider whether you would be comfortable if you read your words on the front page of the local paper or saw your comments trending on social media. Even when talking to someone you think you can trust, it is a small world, and these comments often filter back. As a rule, avoid negative feedback.



Stick to the issues and your message points. When you stick to the issues and your key reasons for supporting or opposing those issues, it is easier to maintain a good relationship with someone on the opposite side of that issue. When you can discuss issues in a respectful way, it keeps the door open for working with your opponents on other projects where your interests may be aligned.



Don't assume, have a conversation. Assuming we know how someone feels or why they feel that way—or worse, asking someone else how the person in question feels or why they feel that way—leads to communication problems. Instead, have face-to-face conversations to establish relationships that will benefit you and your organization in the future. Even those who are on the opposite side of an issue will appreciate you taking the time to hear them out.



Seek to understand and then to be understood. Active listening is a key tool for engaging the public sector. If you focus first on understanding, rather than convincing, the person you are working with will gain an appreciation of you and your approach. The fact that you are focusing on understanding them and their issue(s) will be a refreshing change.



Respect the constraints of being a public official. Elected officials run for office; we don't. They have challenges that are often hard for us to understand or relate to. Respecting their position and working to allow them to save face is important. While we may not always agree on issues, we need to be able to work together to advance the community, create jobs and enhance the quality of life.



Build important relationships. Don't wait until you have an issue to promote or something that you want to oppose before you build relationships with key elected and appointed officials. Municipal, state and federal elected officials, key government cabinet members, department heads, authority board members and commissioners should be on the list. Remember to include senior staffers of these elected officials, as they may be the driving force behind certain legislation or issues.



Establish credibility. Over time, your approach to working with the public sector will enable you to establish credibility with key people and the media on public policy issues. The use of data and research, a thoughtful and empathetic approach, and the ability to articulate a position succinctly and effectively are all part of establishing credibility. Be intentional about this.

While all these approaches are important, some may be more applicable for specific situations or opportunities to engage the public sector. Look for these symbols throughout this document and pay attention to these approaches when highlighted.

What Skills Will Help Chamber Executives Succeed in Engaging the Public Sector?

Successful public sector engagement requires certain skills to be able to execute a plan. Here are a few of the most important skills that are broadly applicable to public sector engagement:

- Strong communication and interpersonal skills
- An understanding of political processes
- The ability to understand the big picture while connecting the individual dots
- The ability to create, implement and sell a strategy
- Active listening
- Patience and persistence
- A thick skin

Case Study: What Does Success Look Like?

The NBA notified our professional basketball team that, absent a new arena, the league would pull the team out of our city. Conventional political wisdom was that there was no way politically the state would ever provide the public sector financial support needed to build a new venue. Our chamber decided this was an issue where failure was not an option and began organizing the community, the message and the financial options to fund a new arena. We were laughed out of offices, caught in partisan crossfire between local Democrats and out-state Republicans, and largely dismissed as cockeyed optimists by the press and pundits.

Undaunted, we created a broad, community-wide grassroots coalition to raise pressure in support of the new arena. We ensured that the “faces” of this coalition were small business owners, restaurateurs, arena staff and millennials who had great stories on what having an NBA franchise and a first-class sports and entertainment venue meant to them personally and to their businesses financially. At the same time, we deployed our banking and bond issuing members’ expertise to examine creative financing alternatives for lawmakers to consider. Finally, we lobbied aggressively at the local and state level to create a legislative coalition to ultimately pass the financing package to make the new arena a reality in the face of what many initially assumed were unsurmountable odds.

This issue was a multi-year effort where the chamber stepped into a space that no one else—in the political realm or the community—was willing to inhabit initially because of the financial and political volatility of the issue. We delivered... and then backed away to let the team and the politicians take the victory laps.



Our work in engaging the public sector starts with one thing: relationships. Building relationships is a process and requires an investment of time with a good dose of strategy. When we talk about relationships in this work, it is important to consider both how you build strong relationships and who you build those relationships with. When you have an established relationship, your chamber will often be given the benefit of the doubt. If someone says something negative about you or your chamber, you want public sector officials to call you to seek clarification.

Public sector officials are excellent sources of information. As you build relationships, people in the public sector are more likely to reach out to discuss a potential hot topic, because they are confident you are involved in the issue. This is a helpful way to gather important information to establish or defend your position. You also want public sector officials to know you are a resource and an important voice in the community.

Building these relationships is much like building any relationship. Meaningful relationships require an investment of time, patience and shared experiences. Start by being an active listener to absorb as much as you can. People like to talk about themselves and their organizations. If you engage in active listening, you can learn valuable information that can help you strengthen your relationship and accomplish your goals. Remember, though, that people can often spot someone who is just trying to build a relationship to benefit themselves, so it is important to be genuine and sincere.

Too often, people disregard those who don't think the way they do. When we have tough conversations within the confines of a strong existing relationship, we create a safe space to be more empathetic and understanding. Existing relationships allow others to get over our mistakes more easily when we make them. To be successful, we must look for the things that we have in common rather than where we disagree. It is difficult to imagine a person or organization that does not want a better education for their children, better jobs or a more dynamic local economy. Find the common ground to begin the discussion and forge the relationship. You may also need to adjust your approach to each person; it is important to learn how to read a person and modify your approach to what they are most receptive to, while still holding true to your values and goals. Mental nimbleness and adaptability play a significant role in building strategic relationships.

Case Study: Relationships

While working in North Carolina, we commissioned a poll to determine how the public perceived the actions of a recently elected group of city council members. The poll provided an unexpected insight – we were one spark away from some serious racial issues.

I talked my senior leadership into meeting with an activist pastor of a black church to begin a conversation on race relations. We followed up by meeting with the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. We formed a coalition with these groups to host a Building Bridges off-site where we brought together 160 people for three days to talk about race issues in small groups.

This resulted in a new framework for how to discuss issues of race and connecting groups of people who, under normal circumstances, would not have worked together or known one another. The chair, chair-elect, and the chamber all received awards from the NAACP for the program and their efforts to strengthen race relations in the community.

It is also important to anticipate influencers and entities that you need to have a strong relationship with – either now or in the future. One of the traits of a successful chamber executive is the ability to assess the dynamics of a community and to see how the various pieces of the community puzzle can be put together to take advantage of an opportunity or address a challenge. To do this, you must be able to connect the dots and determine the degree of separation between you and the person with whom you need to build a relationship. Then, reach out to that person before you have a direct ask of them. Begin to build the necessary trust before a specific opportunity or challenge tests the bounds of the relationship. Relationships move at the speed of trust, and the more trust there is, the more access you will have to that person. If necessary, set a goal to initially create “artificial harmony,” the ability to work together when you don’t agree. Once you achieve this state, you have established the foundation to take the next step toward collaboration.

Identify those with whom you need to build relationships by brainstorming about people who can be the most helpful or, on the flipside, can do the most damage, and establish relationships with them first. Then, move to the second tier of influencers, the third and so on. This can be challenging because chambers play so many different roles in their respective communities, so do not feel like you must tackle all relationships at the same time. Pick a few key people to start with and set goals to continue expanding your network.

Within your established relationships, it is important to warn people if you are going to take a position in opposition to their priorities. This kind of candor builds trust and allows you the chance to be a resource for that person in the future. Let people know you understand they may have limited options to address the position you are taking. Make it clear that you understand and respect the constraints that they may be under. Conversely, when someone in the public sector supports your position or speaks out in favor of something you are proposing, call to thank them or send a handwritten note. These personal gestures show that you value their relationship.

Finally, it’s important to remember that public sector officials are, at the end of the day, people. Get to know them as people, and take notes to remind yourself of their likes, dislikes, family, etc. They may make mistakes, lose their tempers or say something that they wish they hadn’t. Don’t take momentary lapses personally. In fact, there may be an opportunity to make the best of these moments. Find ways for those in the public sector to recover if they make a mistake or overreact to a situation. In many cases, these officials are savvy enough to realize that you have given them an out when you could have made them look unprofessional or irrational. That can form the foundation of a strong relationship.



A chamber executive's ability to engage effectively in public policy issues and with the public sector can be strengthened or inhibited by the governance structure and rules of engagement of their chamber. You were hired, in part, because of your judgment. Dealing with public policy issues requires a solid understanding of the political issues as well as the positions your chamber leadership and members would support. Remember the rubber band theory. As a leader, constantly monitor how far you can push or stretch the band to avoid creating too much tension that causes the band to snap. It's all about pacing and making sure you don't get too far out ahead. Make adjustments as needed to ensure everyone stays in sync. There are a variety of ways to ensure that you do not get off course with your board or members.

Set organizational priorities and guardrails before engaging on an issue. If you are new to public policy engagement, spend twice as much time on governance and rules of engagement as you do on the actual issues before engaging the public sector. Many chamber governance documents and rules of engagement get written in response to a problem, not to prevent a problem.

When approaching governance structures, it is helpful to have knowledge of structures that are flexible and yet clearly adhere to agreed-upon principles. The purpose of structures should not be to tie your hands, but rather to guide your actions. Surround yourself with strong advisors. Seek practical experience or consultation from those that have engaged different public sector entities, whether from other chambers or other organizations within your community, to help with structure and to understand the culture of engagement at those different entities.

Establish the formal rules of engagement on public policy matters with your governing body in advance. Start the discussion with specific questions. Are you able to act independently under certain circumstances? Should the board have a public policy committee? Do you need approval before taking a public position? How much latitude is the board willing to give you?

Having too much internal process within your chamber on engagement with the public sector can be constraining. Sometimes you need to act or respond quickly. It is awkward, for example, to have to check with your board all the time before speaking to a reporter about a public policy matter.

Just as you have to establish your credibility with elected and appointed leaders, you need to do the same with your chamber leadership. They need to trust your judgment, and you need to find ways to establish this trust. The key to this is communication, both formal (annual priority setting) and informal (a check in phone call or breakfast). One element of judgment is knowing that on the high profile and politically tricky issues, you want your board leadership involved and 100 percent supportive of your position.

Case Study: Governance

We had a legislative issue regarding education. Knowing that some institutions would be against this policy, we were able to rely on our governance structure to guide us through the particulars of the issue. Some of our folks began to weaken as the pushback grew.

However, because our governance structure sets up our core principles for the year months before it begins, we were able to point them back to the foundation that was built during a more peaceful period. Our governance documents helped everyone get back to the topic and avoid the rhetoric swirling around the issue. Ultimately, the Chamber was victorious in their efforts.



Choose your issues. Establish and re-establish your public policy agenda and priorities on an annual basis. Chambers have limited resources, and chamber members have unlimited needs. Chamber leaders need to be able to rationally prioritize issues and allocate resources. Part of this calculus is weighing the risk your chamber faces for supporting a certain issue against the reward of successfully engaging the public sector on that issue. It may be helpful to have a specific strategic planning or agenda-setting session or retreat. When choosing issues on which you will advocate and how you will use your resources, it may be helpful to consider possible issues in three buckets: lead, partner and support.

Lead. Issues that you lead are so aligned with your mission and agenda that, absent your involvement and leadership, they would not get done. Ask yourself questions like, if we weren't doing this, who would? Do we bring a unique perspective or voice to the issue? Are we uniquely situated to move the needle on this issue? These issues receive priority attention and effort.

Partner. Issues that you partner on are aligned with your agenda, but your chamber is not the sole party carrying the load. However, the chamber voice adds significant value to a team effort. Absent your involvement in these issues, others would still carry on the fight, but your presence would be missed. Issues in this bucket receive significant attention and effort.

Support. Issues that you support are aligned with your mission and agenda, but someone else is the prime mover. For these issues, you may choose to provide support through your organization's name and imprimatur, but you likely don't spend a lot of time engaging the public sector on these issues.

Once you have your priorities set, create a clear agenda and distribute it widely. This gives the chamber cover for the issues on which it engages. When members or politicians come with questions or complaints about a chamber position on a piece of legislation, you can justify your position with your agenda. Sometimes it is a multi-step process - "Bill A impacts Condition B, which relates to Agenda Item C" – but, if you can ultimately relate your advocacy position back to your agenda, you will always have cover.

Case Study: Choosing Issues

One significant member of ours is a dental service provider. When the traditional dentistry lobby tried to change state law to create a raft of new regulations to box the DSP out of the market, we engaged to support our DSP members and in defense of the free market.

While our position was justifiable (and we won), we did not consult or notify our traditional dentist members before taking our stand. It made for an awkward public hearing where my own dentist—a chamber member—was testifying opposite me on the issue. Again, the position was justifiable, but since it was a bit of a niche issue that was related to but not self-evident in our agenda, I should have at least spoken with our other dentist members and let them know what we were doing and why.

This is particularly important when choosing an issue that divides your membership or involves choosing the interests of one member over another. When possible, chambers typically avoid pitting one member against another, but when an issue has a direct relationship to an organizational agenda priority, conflicts are unavoidable. Let your members know when you're in a tough position because they all have different interests, and let legislators know too. For these reasons, agendas need to be specific enough to credibly guide positions, but broad enough to accommodate and react to unforeseen pieces of legislation. It is also important that your board members are bought into the agenda and are willing to support it when you are not in the room. At the end of the day, be brutally honest and know, if necessary, what you are willing or not willing to lose.

Make sure that, if your agenda moves forward better or faster when a Republican/Democratic majority is in charge, it is because those legislators are supporting your priorities, not because your agenda is supporting theirs. Stay issue-based instead of partisan-based and let elected officials know your goal is to have every elected official in either party support your issues. Recognize, reward and punish based on the issue, not on the party.

It is also important to recognize wins as they come. Sometimes, the policy that supports your issue may be fully adopted. Sometimes, it might be a step in that direction. Sometimes, preventing action that would be in opposition to your issue is a win, so it can be a victory when nothing changes. This can be challenging to communicate, but your leadership, staff and board should be able to recognize the different types of victories.

Know and understand the public process. The process by which legislation, ordinances and regulations are established varies widely across regions of the country. You must have a broad understanding of your jurisdiction's processes and a more nuanced understanding of how they relate to the issue at hand.

If you do not have direct expertise, it is helpful to seek input from someone who understands how decisions are made. For example, if you are evaluating a state house bill, where does it start and where does it go when it advances? Understanding these processes can help you choose the most effective strategy for dealing with an issue.

You also need to know the key players involved. Who can you approach that is inclined to value your input and be aligned with your position? As discussed before, you should have existing relationships with some of them. Now is not the time to begin the relationship-building process. Don't forget staffers when you are considering the key players. Elected and appointed officials can be juggling many issues at one time and will often assign a piece of legislation or regulation to a staff person to manage. Know who they are, work with them and show them respect. This can be more effective than dealing directly with an elected official.

Finally, work into your strategy a respect for the constraints of being an elected official. Is this an election year? Might the elected official's position be influenced by the campaign? How does the piece of legislation affect his/her district? If your research demonstrates that his/her constituents will benefit, provide the research and data.



Once you have identified your issues, it is important to know what your opponents are going to say about that issue. In the process of gathering research, it is important to keep an open mind. Too often we are so influenced by our experiences that we do not view our opposition's points as relevant. To effectively craft a message and counter the other side's arguments, we need to understand their concerns and be able to address them in a respectful way. Understanding all aspects of an issue is important to formulating an effective strategy.

Information gathering can take a variety of formats, from listening to those who oppose your position on an issue, to reading the works of those who are working on the other side, to spending time reviewing their website or social media posts. Read their documents and know them inside and out. Attend events hosted by traditional opponents. Read letters to the editor in your local newspaper and pay attention to what is trending on social media. Attend or watch recordings of public comment periods for your city or county council or board. Doing this helps you step out of your world, providing valuable insight into the other side's priorities and positions. It is also helpful to find people who have tackled similar issues. They have insights into what you will be facing and can help you anticipate challenges and be more effective in your planning.

Another way of learning about the full scope of issues is by diversifying your own personal and professional network. Join a book club that studies books on current issues. Become a member of diverse civic groups. Attend networking events outside the chamber. Have people over for dinner. Whatever your approach, go beyond your usual suspects to build relationships with and better understand those with different viewpoints than your own. Don't assume that you know why someone has taken a position opposite yours. Instead, take the time to learn more about them and why they have arrived at their position. This is relevant for public sector officials and those on the other side of the issues you support.

When it comes to the facts of the issue, make sure you can support your position with data. Research your points and those of your competition. Have facts to back up your points and information to refute your opponent's points. Make sure that you have vetted your information carefully and haven't taken information from someone else at face value. If you are in a situation where you don't have an answer for a public sector official, admit that you can't answer their question or don't have the information. Telling them that you will have to get back to them or will send them the information later is not a sign of weakness. Providing accurate information is much more important than proving you have every point memorized in the moment.

Case Study: Gathering Research

"Ban the Box" measures, prohibiting employers from asking about an applicant's criminal history, have become a popular tool purported to help get workers with a criminal history back in the workforce. Our chamber, like many others in areas dealing with a serious workforce challenge, began considering advocating for a statewide Ban the Box measure in our state. As we investigated research on the actual impacts of Ban the Box laws, we learned that, in many cases, these measures were leading to more rejection of applicants with criminal records rather than less rejection.

In many cases, employers unable to overtly ask about an applicant's criminal history were simply profiling some applicants and assuming they had criminal records, even when they did not. Instead of making it easier for unskilled or minority individuals to enter or re-enter the workforce, the Ban the Box laws were triggering unconscious biases, making it more difficult to get these individuals off the sidelines and into jobs.

In the light of this research, we changed direction on this aspect of our workforce strategy and shifted to other changes with better records of success, like pardon and criminal record expungement reforms.



Engaging members in the work can be a powerful tool for engaging the public sector. A member or group of members may be more knowledgeable than you or your staff on an issue or how it will affect the conduct of business. If, for example, there is a piece of legislation or local ordinance that would affect workers, employers and human resource professionals can be your best source of information. When you bring many voices in support of your position, you give more weight and credibility to your cause. Where facts tell, stories sell, and hearing stories directly from those impacted by decisions creates a powerful narrative.

Engaging members in this work starts with much of the same approach as building relationships. Engaging members from the start is important to the outcome. Sometimes you may be asking members to act, but other times you may just want to ensure they are given information about why the chamber is taking a certain position. The first step to engaging members is to identify your goal for that engagement. What are you hoping to achieve? How will member engagement help you achieve this goal? How will you articulate this goal to members?

Engaging members centers on asking members for input or involvement and providing them the tools they need. It is our responsibility to identify the compelling reason why people should get involved and to package it into something people will rally behind. It is important to be transparent and clear about why you need them to be involved, the role they will play, the process for their involvement, and the goals or outcomes you are hoping to achieve. This kind of clarity conveys that you have a clear and organized approach to engagement and that you value their time. When possible, it may be helpful to hold in-person meetings to cement the ties between you and your members on this effort.

Be strategic about when to engage members and which members to engage. Depending on the issue, you may consider an inclusive planning process that involves members early in choosing the issues or setting the agenda. Or, you may wish to involve members at a particular point later in the process. No matter when you engage people in the process, it is important to ensure that their participation is meaningful and rewarding. Consider how you will frame what the member will get out of this engagement, including the opportunity for members to build their own relationships with other influential peers and public sector officials.

When it comes to choosing which members to engage, it is helpful to follow many of the same tactics outlined in the relationships section. While you want to identify influential members and those who are key to help with your cause, you also want to make sure that you are engaging those who will be most impacted by the outcome. You may also want to consider how you might empower the group you have chosen and cede some authority to the group.

Lastly, once a specific effort has concluded, make sure to recognize members for their contributions. Even if the outcome was not completely successful, it is important to acknowledge that the members added value to the effort. If the effort was a success, put your members in the spotlight. It is also important to ensure that the results and outcomes are clear and visible to all members who participated in the process. Consider hosting a meeting or event, using your digital communications platforms, or identifying another avenue for keeping everyone apprised of the end results.



There may be occasions when a winning coalition goes beyond your chamber and its members. For some public sector engagement efforts, you may need to partner with other organizations, public sector officials, businesses outside your community, community organizations or others. Having the right skills to successfully build and navigate these groups is critical for success.

If you are going to build a coalition, the first key to success is knowing who is best suited to be a part of that coalition. Some chambers keep a database or list of those who support different issues. Spend time building relationships with grassroots organizations in your community to understand their needs and desires. This will prove helpful when engaging the public sector, but also in building access and support for future chamber initiatives.

In addition to building a database of diverse influencers, it is important to create an external plan (which should include a SWOT analysis) for each city or community within your chamber's geographic representation. This will help chambers "see around corners" and plan. This allows us to get ahead of issues that may require taking a public policy position and can help chamber boards create an agenda to mitigate the issues identified.

Successful chamber executives can identify common interests among diverse groups and inspire them to unite. They identify non-traditional partners and possible outliers or detractors. They also identify unlikely leaders for the coalition. In some cases, while the chamber may take the initiative to build the coalition, it may be best for the face or voice of that coalition to be someone else. Chamber executives need to know when to lead and when to delegate.

Building a coalition requires excellent communication skills. When building a coalition, develop and implement a strong communications plan that reinforces the mission of the coalition, clearly communicates the objective(s) and defines success from the beginning. This will be helpful as you approach potential coalition members. When the situation is fluid, you need to keep the lines of communication open. Information is power, and partnerships will fall apart if a member of the team feels that they are not kept in the loop.

To convince others to join the coalition, we must be willing to share ownership and credit. Perfect the art of leading without being pushy or domineering. Approach coalitions with a collaborative mindset to create harmony within the coalition. That said, it is important to recognize that the coalition will not agree on everything, so model respect for different opinions and foster a collaborative that is accepting of and actively seeks different views and perspectives. This is not to suggest that you should compromise on your key principles, but be willing to be nimble and adjust based on the situation and the information before you.

Building coalitions also requires us to prepare members of the coalition to be the voices of change. One place to start is by developing a compelling story that the whole coalition feels empowered to share. It is also important to coach members of the coalition to share why these partnerships are so critical to the success of the community. When we can tell these stories using simple terms and straightforward language, we actively counteract the rhetoric that success for business always happens at the expense of the taxpayers and general citizenry.

As chamber executives, we may be more used to criticism and backlash than some of our coalition members. Help prepare others so that they remain steady under fire. Sometimes, one of our partners may need cover for one reason or another. As the convener of a coalition, chamber executives need to be willing to take the heat in certain circumstances. When other members of the coalition know that you have their backs, they will be more willing to be vocal in their support.

In the end, it is important to celebrate the role of your partners with your various audiences. Share the limelight and give credit to others. For example, it may be difficult to re-engage an elected official for future coalitions if your profile in the community eclipses theirs. When you are humble and allow others to shine, those who matter take notice and know that you were an integral part of the coalition.

Case Study: Building Coalitions

In Georgia, I spearheaded an effort to address encroachment issues affecting the long-term viability of an Air Force base. The challenge was significant – over 1,800 acres, 200 property owners, and 500 residents.

Our first step was to define the problem to explain how the encroachment was negatively impacting the ability to secure new missions and retain existing missions. We explained the impact the base had on the economies in the region and the State and we identified the cost to fix the problem and defined success. Then we identified a spokesperson and developed the team – the coalition partners.

In the end, many organizations joined together to address the issue. The plan was funded by a blend of federal, local, state and private sector entities. The team overcame residual mistrust from prior relationships and gained the trust of most of the property owners. The skillsets outlined in this document were all critical to crafting the strategy, adjusting to the events that required modifications to the strategy and keeping the partners at the table throughout the process.

Helpful Tips and Tricks

- If you don't have direct experience, hire staff who have worked in politics; surround yourself with very experienced lobbyist and government affairs types, as they are excellent resources.
- Create relationship-building events and opportunities with public officials.
- Get in the habit of reaching out to a new person/group; force yourself to reach out to a new group or person on a regular basis. Plan to make the time and then make it happen.
- Find a mentor. We all need someone we can vent with, confide in and seek counsel from. The nature of what we do means that we cannot have these discussions in our home town. One of the keys to growth and maintaining our sanity is finding someone who can mentor us or a group of colleagues in the region who can serve as our sounding boards.
- Talk to peers. Set up calls with chamber peers who have had success in a specific area, study best practices from other chambers or organizations, or get involved in ACCE Peer Groups.
- Talk to others. Learn from community leaders who are successful coalition builders and political campaign managers.
- Have a solid background in advocacy or attend Institute or ACCE training opportunities before engaging with the public sector.
- Keep board expectations realistic. Educate them that it is possible to do everything right and still lose.
- Utilize available tools like:
 - Legislative tracking services to identify issues proactively rather than reactively and plan strategy around them.
 - Interactive member political engagement tools like VoterVoice, FiscalNote, TrackBill, etc.
 - Legislative scorecards to identify priority votes and transparently hold officials accountable for how they voted. This helps insulate you from claims of favoritism or partisanship when doling out recognition or political support.

Conclusion

The voice of the business community is necessary in solving many of the public policy issues facing our country, our states and our regions. Government cannot solve these complex issues alone, and the business community has stepped up on many occasions to be part of the solution. Chamber executives need to increasingly embrace this role as a leading voice on public policy matters and strategically engage with the public sector for the benefit our members and our entire community. When we share our stories and successes with the public sector, businesses, local media and the community, we strengthen our credibility and create the conditions for continued engagement in the future.

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