



By Shaun Lumachi

On the Advocacy Field, Success Starts With Structure

In the game of baseball, nothing happens until the pitcher throws a ball. But the pitcher is not the only one with responsibility to ensure that the game is played. Umpires are uniquely positioned to make important decisions based on the structure outlined in the rules of baseball. Chamber leaders are uniquely positioned within their communities and regions to make decisions each day based on their best judgment.



Umpires are leaders on the baseball field just like a chamber's chief executive is a leader in the community. Chamber leaders are uniquely positioned within the organization to make decisions each day based on their best judgment at the time. Those decisions are oftentimes made or not made depending on the CEO's confidence in the structure of their organization. Drilling down even further, any leader of an advocacy-oriented chamber of commerce makes important decisions every day that ultimately represent the interests of their business community with government.

Without a structure in place to make necessary decisions, any coach (chairman of the board), teammate (staff), or fan (chamber member) can force your game (advocacy) in any direction, at any time.

There is a big difference between a chamber of commerce that just informs its membership about public policy and a chamber that goes out there and takes a strong position. A chamber of commerce is the most efficient and effective it can be when its leaders develop a clear advocacy plan outlining who has the authority to do what, when and how.

"If you do not have a solid structure in place, you will find yourself being forced to 'shoot from the hip' when reacting to issues," advises **David Kilby, president of the Western Association of Chamber Executives.** "It is essential to



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develop a structure to really be a proactive and influential voice for your business community.”

BUILD AN A-TEAM

Charles F. Kettering, the late inventor and research chief for General Motors Corporation, once quipped: “If you want to kill any idea in the world, get a committee working on it.” However, if I were ever to write a love story about the chamber of commerce industry, the protagonist would be a chamber of commerce committee. We love committees. It is the way we build consensus, get the work done, and create results.

Therefore, the work horse of a chamber’s government affairs efforts is its government affairs committee (GAC). When forming a GAC or even when jump-starting your current committee, I always ask chambers to assess the caliber of the decision-makers who make up their committee. I recommend using a “litmus test” when deciding if the decision-makers are the best: can they invest money; are they politically active and/or are they politically connected; do they understand the issues; are they committed to being proactive; and do they understand what is important to business?

Once the right people have been recruited, your GAC must have what I call “controlled participation” when making decisions. I recommend no fewer than eight voting members and no more than twenty-one. The size of the committee should only be determined based upon demand; if you can secure twenty-one active voting participants, no matter the size of your chamber, then seat twenty-one. However, if you can only get eight, then go with eight. Do not dilute the value of the GAC by opening it up to every person possible. Increase your GAC’s perceived value by limiting the supply of voting seats in order to maintain a demand for participation.

The bottom line: get the best in the room. Do whatever it takes to get them in the room. Keep antagonists out of the room and build a proactive environment. Attract GAC members who sign the front of paychecks, and do not seat elected officials and their representatives as voting members. Finally, your GAC must be the final voice for your advocacy efforts so you all can act smart and fast.

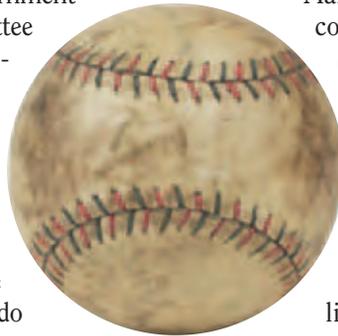
EMPOWER YOUR VOLUNTEERS

Your GAC exists to be effective in representing the interests of business. To be effective, you can’t bog your process down in bureaucracy on every single issue, because your effectiveness is in direct proportion to your efficiency. Therefore, any decision that the GAC makes must end at the GAC, not at

your Board’s executive committee and then the full Board of Directors. The Board, including its leadership, such as your chairman, must empower its GAC to take positions on issues that align with a Board-approved platform of issues.

“Chamber executives need to look over the horizon and empower volunteers to take on the issues that impact our business community most. I am not afraid to push my government affairs volunteers to act and get engaged. That’s my job,” advises **J. David Jameson, president and CEO of the Greater Aiken (SC) Chamber of Commerce.** “In my position, it is expected that I use my bully pulpit.”

Maintaining long-term committee participation is a common challenge chambers face, one that can be addressed by simply asking, “What policy issue have you solved for the business community *recently*?” You must ensure that your GAC meetings are *action*-oriented, not *report*-oriented. Every agenda item must propose taking a position. Simply bringing people together to hear reports from elected officials or reports on the latest and greatest is not enough. The bottom line: you keep people engaged when you give them something to rally behind. Be action-oriented so they understand that each month they are a part of making a decision on issues that impact your business community.



PREPARE THE GAC TO SELECT KEY ISSUES

In any community, there are myriad issues that impact the local economy and quality of life. A chamber of commerce can find itself being pulled in multiple directions to take on every issue possible. Your GAC should select a limited number of issues that demand attention and understand that your Chamber can’t be all things to everyone.

“To get started in defining the issues you’ll take on,” says ACCE president Mick Fleming, “you might want the Board to sign off on a global policy statement such as: ‘It is the intention of this Chamber to take public positions on issues that affect the competitiveness of this community in relation to other communities or regions.’ Or, ‘It is the intention of this Chamber to work for policies that lower the cost of doing business for all employers in this region.’ Such statements can become the broad parameters—the Christmas trees—on which you AND the Board hang your ornaments when determining specific positions.”

It is very important for your GAC to foster discussion based on an agenda that adheres to the “ethic of reciprocity.” Confucius might say it another way: “Never impose a GAC



agenda on others what you would not want for yourself.” I recently received an emailed meeting agenda from a prominent regional government affairs organization. The agenda was sent the day before the meeting and included 22 attachments. Yes, 22 attachments. Do you have the time to read through 22 attachments of information? Who has that kind of time? I don’t. So I deleted the email and never attended the meeting.

“There is a danger associated with throwing too much information at our government affairs volunteers,” says **Paul Jadin, president** of the **Green Bay (WI) Area Chamber of Commerce**. “I make sure our government affairs staff prepares background materials in a concise and clear way so we can understand the issues and then take action quickly.”

The bottom line: every advocacy decision starts with a well-prepared agenda. Combine all of your information into one document and summarize as much as you can. The key here is information management, not information overload.

ANTICIPATING CHALLENGES

It is an important responsibility of those who lead government affairs-oriented chambers of commerce to know how to

PICKING THE ISSUES

If your answer is "yes" for many of the issue-selection criteria below, it probably makes sense to add that issue to your policy agenda.

- Can we define a “win” on this issue?
- Will the help of our organization make a real difference on the outcome?
- Does the issue affect a large number of our members in a significant way?
- Is working on this issue likely to help build the organization?
- Do people feel strongly about the issue?
- Will it be possible for us to adequately learn the technical aspects of this issue?
- Is this the kind of issue that will unite our members? Can we even get consensus?
- Does the issue fit into our larger mission?
- Does the political gain exceed the political pain of getting involved?
- Are the motives of the parties that brought this issue to our attention honorable?
- Are our allies and neighbors likely to take on this issue?
- Is this issue going to be dealt with during the next twelve months, whether we are in the fight or not?
- Do we need to fight this fight to establish or maintain our credibility with members and/or “policy makers”?
- Your own criteria: _____

Excerpt from “Making Your Chamber Make a Difference.” This 100-page guidebook on chamber public policy, by Mick Fleming, is available to download free. Go to www.acce.org and click on “Publications.”

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anticipate challenges. An advocacy effort is an empirical process that takes time to fine-tune. In other words, anticipating challenges gets easier through trial and error over time.

Practically speaking, chambers that successfully navigate through advocacy-related storms do so because they understand the reason why they decided to go down that path in the first place. The GAC might take a position on an unpopular issue that causes some members to cancel their memberships. The chambers that survive this type of membership backlash do so because they also understand the long-term rewards of their unpopular decision.

“We are not afraid to lose members because they disagree with our positions,” says **Randy Gordon, president and CEO of the Long Beach (CA) Area Chamber of Commerce**. “It’s our job as a Chamber to sometimes take the unpopular path and sometimes take that path alone. I always remind our team that we were put on this Earth to fight for business. We must stand by our decisions to the end, so win or lose, we can prove to our members that we are here for them no matter what challenges we face.”

SUCCESS STARTS WITH STRUCTURE

“Picking issues and drafting agendas are really the cornerstones of your advocacy work because for chambers, the mere

articulation of your position on a given issue is a powerful lobbying statement,” says Fleming. “Lawmakers know that you have the strength of hundreds or hundreds of thousands of influential people behind every position you take.”

In the game of baseball, you will never see a batter hit a ball and then run directly up the middle of the infield to second base. If that were to happen, the umpire would immediately call the batter out. As a chamber chief executive, you must have the ability to keep your government affairs program running under a defined and outlined structure. You must hold everyone accountable to a structure so that decisions and key messages can be determined. Ultimately, you must take action and produce results for your members. Success starts with structure. And structure is the difference between winning most of the time or losing all of the time. ☐

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