

Trust: The Ultimate Grassroots and PAC Motivator

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Motivation is the number one topic of concern to most grassroots and political action committee (PAC) leaders. Just the mention of how to solve the "M" dilemma guarantees rapt attention. While many government affairs professionals are shopping for lightning bolts when it comes to motivational strategies, it's actually a combination of strategies and tactics that motivates within the *context* of your organization. What motivates at one association may not garner attention at another.

Nevertheless, trust--both structural and personal--is a critical factor in any attempt to motivate belief in and action for your cause. "Trust is the ultimate form of human motivation," said Steven Covey. Trust is paramount to motivating paid workers, so you can deduct how critical trust is to motivating those who receive no paycheck at the end of their volunteer tenures.

Trust between your "varsity" advocates and your staff, between your PAC recruiters and staff, and between state chapters and national associations is vital to achieving your goals in the public policy arena.

Essentially, trust means having the other party's interest at heart. Whatever it is that we are asking that individual to do, we must be able to demonstrate that it's in his or her interest, as well as the interest of the association, to cooperate. Genuine trust takes years to build and can suffer serious damage in an instant.

We'll explore the common obstacles to trust and how to overcome them.

Regular grassroots and PAC underperformance

Success motivates. People want to be on a winning team. When successful grassroots leaders are asked why they volunteer so much of their time to their organization's cause, they often respond with the following: "I thought we could win," "I saw our victories and wanted to be on a winning team," or "I heard the organization has a good reputation."

If your organization usually fails to meet its grassroots and PAC goals, your potential volunteers likely won't want to join that team and won't be motivated to act when you need them.

In life and business, it's important to *mind the pattern*. If your PAC or grassroots community has a pattern of sporadic results in recruiting, calls to action, and attendance at meetings, you should seek answers from your volunteers and get outside help to objectively assess your plans and regroup.

Misplaced loyalty

Whether it's defending your advocates to badly behaving legislators or helping advocates navigate internal organizational land mines, we must demonstrate loyalty to engender trust.

Unfortunately, I still hear stories of legislators who treat grassroots advocates worse than their mothers-in-law. Condescending behavior and overt animus have been witnessed by many of us during our Capitol Hill and State House lobby day events.

We can't prevent lousy legislator behavior, but we can defend our advocates when we witness the behavior or when we hear of an offending legislator repeatedly misplacing his or her anger on our well-meaning grassroots volunteers. Though lobbyists may be obligated to placate the offending legislator, grassroots or PAC managers have no

compelling reason to do that. Their loyalty must be to their volunteers.

We must pay attention to this dynamic. My four-year research project with active grassroots and PAC advocates revealed that the number-one reason these individuals disengage from advocacy is "legislators behaving badly." If your organization is luxuriating in an abundance of motivated advocates, don't take my advice. If you want to retain your productive advocates longer, defend and protect them against badly behaving lawmakers.

Jim Lorimer, former vice president of government relations at my grassroots boot camp, Nationwide Insurance, exemplified appropriate loyalty. On a couple of occasions, our state grassroots team captains' immediate supervisors tried to prohibit their attendance at our annual Washington, D.C., Civic Action Program (CAP) Chairperson Conference. Without hesitation, Lorimer would call or write the manager and "bring the situation to the manager's way of understanding." The CAP leaders always made it to D.C.

They knew that we would support them. Out of more than 30 state CAP chairpersons with whom I worked, only one refused to cooperate with action call requests or similar activities. I attribute this to the solid loyalty we exhibited. They trusted us to go to bat for them and they, in turn, advocated for themselves and the company.

We must protect and defend our advocates to surly legislators. It's almost as if we are the co-dependent enablers, aware of the negative interaction, but encouraging people to come back and try again at the next lobby day event. Our advocates are busy people. *Why* would they sign up for that duty?

Direction changes

The insidious impact of direction changes is why it is so important to foster a grassroots and PAC community within an organization. Campaigns definitely have their purpose, but they can reduce motivation in the long term unless community is created from them.

Our advocates will tolerate change, but not ambiguity. I'm thrilled to hear about organizations that are revitalizing their grassroots and PAC communities. However, the fact that they have to "revitalize" means that the original effort stalled. This impacts our ability to motivate our team for future battles.

How do your advocates and PAC leaders know that this "revitalization" isn't just another two-year attempt (or more commonly, an election-year attempt) at political involvement, only to be mired in organizational adminisphere changes when the new department head is named, the merger is completed, and the election is over?

To increase your trust quotient, and thus motivational quotient, develop a sustainable grassroots and PAC community with structure, norms, and social capital.

Failure to trust

Perfectionists have a tough time trusting others. Unfortunately, if they can't trust their volunteer advocacy and PAC leaders with meaningful tasks, the volunteers become disengaged. Because this is so critical to motivation, I asked Glen Caroline, director of the National Rifle Association's Institute for Legislative Action, and Tiffany Adams, vice president of public affairs for the National Association of Manufacturers, to speak at my annual Innovate to Motivate conference.

Caroline's and Adams' organizations give their volunteer leaders responsibility for strategic and tactical assignments. From conducting district voter registration drives and "get out the vote" drives, to reviewing and editing manuals, their volunteer leaders know their skills are valued to the staff and the organization.

Not coincidentally, both the NRA and the NAM consistently appear on *Fortune* magazine's "Power 25" list of the most powerful lobbying groups in the country.

Learning to trust can be a difficult--yet rewarding--task.

In this article, I will review the four remaining trust blockers and the questions you must ask yourself to begin to eliminate them.

Inconsistent messages

If I had a dime for every brochure, PowerPoint presentation, or Web site that passionately extols the value of grassroots and PAC advocates, I would be able to personally pay off the national debt. However, many of us talk the talk but fail to walk the walk.

I am always disturbed when I hear grassroots and PAC professionals talk about *using* their advocates and PAC members. My favorites: "We *use* our retirees for sensitive issues because legislators listen to them more than our average member." "We give advice to each other about the advantages of *using* certain types of volunteers." "Use your senior management to raise PAC funds."

I believe all words have meaning. The time-tested observation, "Out of the heart, the mouth speaks," is true. The "U" word does not inspire trust; *using* your members is exceedingly self-serving and demonstrates that grassroots advocates and PAC members are simply a means to an end. Instead, we need to recognize our members as thinking, aware individuals who need to be cultivated, not coerced.

Another example of an inconsistent message occurs when board members and senior management personnel who *support* grassroots and PAC involvement fail to attend grassroots and PAC events. Even worse is those board members who don't even contribute to the PAC.

Volunteers know by what our management does *not* do whether they are true believers in the value of grassroots and PAC involvement. Canceling regular grassroots training conferences, allowing frontline supervisors to dictate the dissemination of grassroots and PAC communication, and failing to respond to calls to action all communicate a dearth of support for grassroots and PAC efforts. Support means more than just a budget and an office.

Proclaiming, "You can make a difference," and then telling volunteers they have to give political money to be an effective grassroots advocate, sends another inconsistent message. A client told me the disturbing story of a grassroots expert who actually told an advocate audience: "If you haven't given a financial contribution to your legislator, don't expect to get an appointment with him." This spurious conclusion got the audience's attention, but in the worst way. Of course, there are some lawmakers who use financial contributions as a time management model, but most do not. When staff tells their volunteers, "You make a difference," but the expert tells these same

volunteers, "You can't make a difference unless you contribute money," trust is clearly attenuated.

Negative communication

If we are truly grassroots professionals, we should embrace bottom up communication. Many times our messages only ask members to do something for us, or tell them what they should not be doing, saying, thinking, and so forth. It is important to be a carrier of good news. It affects how we are seen in the organization and how much time our advocates will give us in the future.

People attribute negative personal characteristics to those who bring us bad news, regardless of whether they were involved in creating that bad news. We generally don't trust those we don't like.

What is your positive-to-negative communication ratio? Ask your advocates what you can do to help them become more active. Ask for their opinions on your program and recruitment strategies. Ask them if your communication is persuasive. This practice is a habit of the groups who most recently appeared on *Fortune* magazine's "Power 25" list. Successful businesspeople routinely and assiduously seek volunteer feedback.

Lack of expressed gratitude

We must never, ever forget that our advocates and PAC members *volunteer* for duty. Leading a grassroots or PAC program is not part of a traditional employee-supervisor relationship. We *must* take time to thank volunteers for their efforts, time, accomplishments, and progress.

Inappropriate reward systems

Rewards do not motivate behavior; they do, however, set the standard for stellar grassroots and PAC involvement, and help ingrain PAC and grassroots into the organizational culture. There is a plethora of research to support this assertion.

In fact, for people who are intrinsically motivated, research has shown that rewards actually *demotivate* them. I have seen reward programs that are little more than rewards for "the nicest, most reliable, polite person of the year," rather than rewards that recognize true grassroots and PAC avatar behavior.

How can this happen? Incredibly, organizations sometimes supplant another organization's reward system into their program. Alternatively, it is important to determine what *your* desired grassroots outcomes are and then work backward to reward the behaviors associated with those goals. When we reward those who are less than deserving because of misplaced organizational guilt, volunteer tenure, and so forth, we cheapen the efforts of those who persevere toward our goals. Remember, you can establish unique awards for a variety of achievements.

Ask yourself...

To ensure your organization is fostering a trusting, productive environment, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are your messages about the value of grassroots and PAC involvement consistent with your behavior?
- Do you say you value your volunteers, yet *use* them to achieve goals?
- What is your positive-to-negative communication ratio with your volunteers?
- Do you express gratitude freely and frequently?
- Do you have a reward system in place that truly recognizes your avatars?