



Amy Showalter March 14th, 2013

From Tension to Trust: Building Relationships Across the Aisle, Part I

Perhaps you have enjoyed good relationships with legislators, volunteers, and colleagues for many years — but those legislators aren't in power anymore. Your most reliable volunteers are burned out. Your cooperative colleagues in other departments who you relied on to help with your government relations projects have moved on. Now what are you going to do? You know that successful influence requires relationships that are built on credibility. And a key element of credibility is trust. But there are nuances to building trust with individuals who are new to your environment.

The science of influence and one of its key elements, trusting relationships, isn't new. It's been dissected by the social sciences (especially my colleague Dr. Kelton Rhoads) since the 1940s, and has been my playground as it relates to grassroots and PAC productivity since the early 2000's. Ever since my colleague Dr. Kelton Rhoads' enlightened me to its power, it has become [a topic of special interest \(www.underdogedge.com\)](http://www.underdogedge.com) and enthusiasm for me.

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I think what is new are the nuances of building next-level relationships. I define the "next level" as trusting relationships with those whose values you don't share, those who you don't always cooperate with, and individuals you don't particularly like.

The Danger in Breathing Your Own Exhaust

Many organizations spend their time developing and enhancing relationships with legislators who already philosophically agree with their public policy positions. And why not? It's easier, takes less time to build trust, and there is instant comfort in the similarity of shared beliefs.

The same challenge applies to your workplace. You tend to favor those who "get it" relative to the government relations function (and especially those who "get" the PAC, right?) and include them on your special task forces and working groups. And you also spend more time with the volunteers who are reliable, enthusiastic, and tell your team how wonderful you are.

Working on building even more trust with your fans is never a bad thing, but it may not be where you should spend a majority of your relationship capitol. They already share your value system, so many of your requests will be agreed to because you are on the same mission. In my workshops I often refer to this as "breathing your own

exhaust.” The influence challenge is not in building positive relationships with friendly lawmakers, cooperative co-workers and adoring volunteers, but with those who historically have viewed your organization with skepticism at best, and outright hostility at the worst.

Many advocacy groups now find themselves in a quandary. They need to be loyal to those who have helped them in the past, but they also must recognize the changed environment and build new relationships. But, how can you do this when your organization has been apathetic about building relationships with those who don't agree with your positions, or worse, you have publicly denigrated your opponents?

How Do We Build Trust?

One of the key relationship drivers is trust, one of three vital ingredients in the credibility formula. Trust, quite simply, is established by looking out for the other person's self-interest, and at the expense of one's own. Trust is the greatest of all human behavioral motivators. But how does one build trust quickly, or yet, how does one engender trust with someone who has been ignored for the last ten years?

For the most part, we trust people we've known a long time, people who share our values. That's not particularly comforting to an advocate on the “right,” who's looking at a new member of Congress on the “left.” However, there are several “quick route” tactics to establishing trustworthiness that have been verified by the social sciences.

The Power of Disconfirmation

According to Dr. Rhoads, “Most tactics that are able to quickly establish trustworthiness work by disconfirming an expectation on the part of the listener. In particular, legislators expect that lobbyists and advocates will argue for their own self-interests, or the interests of their group. Disconfirming that expectation in a variety of ways can rapidly establish trustworthiness.”

Disconfirmation can be demonstrated in behavioral examples. Interestingly, our research with Fortune's “Power 25” about how they successfully influence undecided legislators showed that they practice this when it comes to campaign volunteers. Traditionally, interest groups will dispatch their volunteers and staff to the campaign trail for their favored legislators. “Favored” meaning those who probably vote with the organization 90 percent or more of the time.

However, the Fortune “Power 25” commonly facilitates campaign volunteer efforts on behalf of legislators who were routinely neutral or undecided on their issues. This proved to be one of the key variables that influenced a legislator to vote with their position. It's an example of disconfirmation, because candidates expect help from groups who they vote with 90 percent of the time; they do not expect it from organizations with which they have a 50 percent voting record.

In my next post, we'll look at two additional ways to exhibit disconfirmation: the argument against self-interest, and evidence of suffering.

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