

Here's how the Founding Father's became history's most successful grassroots lobbyists

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Bloomberg Government regularly publishes insights, opinions and best practices from our community of senior leaders and decision-makers. This column is written by Amy Showalter, a national authority on government relations best practices, grassroots and PAC influence.

I am not a Revolutionary War expert, but I am moved by how the Founders and the Continental Army, the decided underdogs and grassroots revolutionaries, changed the world forever. Although divine providence and an enemy who underestimated them certainly fueled their success, there are lessons for grassroots leadership and influence that we can all learn from the Founders. They employed inviolable grassroots influence and leadership behaviors. I think you'll read that many of the strategies and tactics that worked then can (and should) work now, whether your team or cause is the underdog or not.

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Public Commitment

There is a considerable amount of research which shows that public commitments are honored more than private commitments. The 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence agreed to the greatest public commitment (in some of history's greatest language):

“For the support of this declaration, with firm reliance of the protection of the divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other, our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

They were not just signers, they were doers. Eleven signers had their homes and property destroyed. Seventeen fought in the Revolution. Five were captured by the British.

Take the Founders' Test: Are you encouraging your advocates, particularly your leaders, to publicly commit to your cause? Are you leading by example, or using “position papers” and “talking points” to communicate the importance of your cause?

The Gritty Leader

We know that the Continental Army and the founders were all underdog influencers. And we also know that successful underdog influencers—lacking the resources of their opponents—must have grit to succeed. General Washington understood the need for grit and repeated his admonition over and over.

Prior to crossing the Delaware River, Washington wrote a phrase on small pieces of paper that was to serve as the password for the surprise attack. They were inserted into each officer's hat to distinguish them: “Victory or death.” The troops were also told to remain absolutely silent during the campaign, and “no man to quit his ranks on pain of death.” That's some grit.

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He had to, like you, manage apathy among his volunteer troops. In one correspondence, he stated that “never had he seen such a dearth of public spirit and want of virtue” among the Yankee soldiers. However, he is also quoted in letters to congress and to his officers referring repeatedly to grit: for “patience and perseverance,” for “unremitting courage and perseverance,” for “perseverance and spirit.”

Take the Founder’s Test: Do you understand, and more importantly, teach the importance of grit and how to maintain it to your stakeholders? “Instant influence” is a myth. Grit is required to win.

The Suffering, Sacrificial Leader

We imbue credibility and trust on those who suffer for their beliefs. General Washington offered to serve without pay. That’s one example of his commitment and positive example. Upon taking command of the Continental Army, he was retired from military life for over a decade. He certainly could have continued his life as a Virginia planter. Sacrificial leadership is highly motivational and influential.

Take the Founder’s Test: What have you or your organization sacrificed while leading your grassroots? How have you demonstrated that you have “skin in the game”? What about your grassroots leaders? What have they sacrificed? Make that a part of your organizational story.

Recognize Your Stars

Washington didn’t have any authority to offer increased monetary compensation to his troops. But he offered a bounty of \$10 for anyone who would stay another six months after their enlistment expired. That was quite an amount for soldiers whose pay was \$6 a month. He knew that to persevere, engaged troops were required. He told Congress later, “I feel the inconvenience of this advance, but what was to be done?” To another, he said more bluntly, “I thought it no time to stand on trifle.”

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Take the Founder's Test: Are you letting bureaucracy get in the way of recognizing your grassroots and PAC stars? Your team is your greatest resource, and they will determine your legacy. Recognize accordingly.