

"The Power of Lobbying"

A Summary of Peter Faid's remarks to "Interaction '89: Schools and Communities in Partnership"

All too rapidly we have divided our society into two major camps: institutions and individuals. Institutions operate as hierarchical managed systems that control society. What we have lost is our sense of community--the critical link for individuals with their wider society.

Communities are the clubs, civic groups, churches, ethnic and cultural organizations where we join with family and friends. In a community, creative solutions can flower, diversity can have a voice, citizenship can flourish. In community, we see that our fallibility as human beings doesn't limit our creativity. And, it is in communities, that the best ideas and solutions to problems confronting us can so often be found.

Our society will be so much better served if we can encourage individuals and families to participate in their communities and become empowered to deal with institutions. For meaningful participation, communities must have the information and skills required to make their voices heard.

What do we do if the government does not offer programs we believe are essential to meet the needs we have identified? What if we discover that the problems we are dealing with result from existing government programs? What can we do? We can--dare I use the word--lobby. If we are really courageous, we can even advocate. But perhaps it's gentler to think of the skills we need as what one writer called "the art of constructive influence."

Saul Alinski, the great American activist once said that a person "is also poor if he lacks power." Having power starts with understanding the political process and the many players involved.

The formation of any government policy is essentially a political process that reflects value choices and compromises reached according to the balance of power. Consequently, lobbying or advocacy attempts to challenge the status quo and alter this balance of power in some way.

Let's imagine that as a group we believe we must lobby for some major policy changes or for funding for a new program.

First, we need to recognize that we have to generate enough political power to bring about the changes we desire. We need to know that the folks who presently set the rules are those who decide who gets what benefits as well as when and how they get them. So we need to be sensitive to how the political system works. We must know the decision-making process of the political system with which we are dealing, and the informal and formal rules that make the system work.

Knowledge is power with respect to the issues we represent. We must demonstrate that we have researched the issues and that our information neither exaggerates nor misrepresents the facts. We must explain the history of the issue, the numbers affected, the characteristics of those affected, the severity and urgency of the problem, and the societal consequences of not addressing the issue now. We must show that we are in touch with those affected by the problem.

Relationships are power. Cultivate connections with decision makers. These connections give you access and credibility. You know you have some influence and power when important decision makers will return your phone calls!

Positions are power. Recruit people to your cause who have credibility in the community: educators, community leaders, business persons. Get them involved on your behalf.

Numbers are power. Clear evidence that a large number support your cause, especially if they are equally upset, influence policy makers. Try to draw other organizations, especially professional groups, to support your efforts. Numbers give you more credibility and legitimacy.

Unity is power. Speak with a unified voice, and be sure that those who represent your position two decision makers demonstrate this unity. When a decision-maker can spot a difference or discrepancy in your presentation, your credibility is threatened and your chances of success weakened.

Voting is power. Remember that politicians want our support during elections. Emphasize the numbers of people supporting your cause of how they might vote in the next election.

Using the media is power. Policy makers dislike bad publicity and will go out of their way to avoid it. You must be prepared to use the media to get your message across to a wider audience.

Coalitions are power. Even if your original group may be small, you can surely find others who support your cause. We must identify natural allies. Be very clear about your goals so that what unites the potential coalition is evident. Your goals are what you can agree on, while there are areas in which you may continue to disagree.

Gain a clear understanding of the self-interest of any potential coalition members. The pursuit of self-interest is a fundamental principle of effective political action.

Stress the importance of the coalition, what members can gain, the consequences, and the resources you can all bring to bear. Communicating, organizing, developing resources, and encouraging others' involvement takes great effort.

Finally give considerable thought to the appropriate target of lobbying. This target must not only be the right one, it must be the *best* one: the one best able to influence the area of your concern. How you make your approach is critical, too. Face to face communication always is best. Make use of your informal contacts, of "friends of a friend."

There are two popular myths about lobbying: that you always need large numbers to be effective and that you need special training. But most groups start with a small core of people kept involved and well-informed. And grassroots organizers who know and can articulate community wishes often are the most effective. The key to sound community leadership is gaining and keeping the group's trust--which is done by working with the group.

Credibility is the bottom line. You must have a clear focus on what you want to achieve, and how you can broaden your support. If you deal with institutions, show them how what you propose will actually help them meet their own stated goals. Show that you are speaking from the community.