

**Building  
Relationships  
With the**

# **Big Dogs**

*When it's time for lawmakers to make their decisions, they turn to the people they know and trust. Several "underdog" advocates at associations have found that developing long-term relationships with lawmakers, sometimes years in advance, can make the difference in tipping the next big decision in their favor.*

**By Amy Showalter**

## Often when we think of the “little guy” or the “underdog”

who wins over the powers that be, we think of a dramatic, intrepid, hair-on-fire character. In reality, successful influencers are nothing like that. They are methodical. They are humble. They are patient. They know achieving their goals is a long-term process, so their methodology includes building long-term relationships with their adversaries. As you’ll see, several of the underdogs featured here took years to build relationships, and they enjoyed a payoff.

This is where underdogs are so markedly different from 90 percent of the population who want to change the mind of someone in power. They have little trepidation, and they seek, in the midst of the influence effort, to build a relationship with the authorities they must influence.

Three key factors are at play to make this technique work. First, successful influencers know that the problems they need help with won’t get solved overnight, so they adroitly match long-term challenges with long-term solutions. Second, they know that forming relationships will help them in the future and that, even in defeat, they can win by maintaining key relationships. Third, according to thousands of sincere grassroots influencers I talked with nationwide, these people are just plain nice.

### “May I Help You?”

One technique for building relationships is to find ways to help the “big dog” you want to influence. Joel Ulland, who represents the Minnesota Chapter of the Multiple Sclerosis Society before the Minnesota state legislature, built a relationship with an unlikely person of power long before he needed the relationship.

Ulland is a member of several coalitions for Minnesotans with disabilities. In the spring of 2005, Minnesota was reeling through three years of budget cuts. Ulland knew this meant tough times for people with disabilities.

“The state was facing a deficit for the third straight year, and the Republican

governor refused to raise taxes. The question became not if the state would make cuts in state programs, but where the cuts would be made and when they would take effect,” Ulland says. “As someone who advocates for healthcare programs for people with disabilities, I knew we had a target on our backs.”

Ulland’s team prepared the facts and figures to influence decision makers, but they still needed a champion. Many members of the Democratic Party were supportive, and Senator Becky Lourey, a senate leader, agreed to be the chief senate sponsor.

Ulland took a different approach in the Minnesota House. He started to build a relationship with Representative Tim Wilkin, an ultraconservative Republican who didn’t have a reputation for increasing taxes, spending, or even healthcare advocacy.

“I thought that with his controversial reputation, his sponsorship of the bill would gain attention. That’s exactly what happened,” Ulland says.

Ulland and his team began building the relationship with Wilkin in 2003. In 2005, they asked Wilkin to be the chief sponsor of legislation that would prevent cuts in disability funding and reform the county case-management system for people with disabilities.

If you are keeping track, he committed to two years of preparation, two years of trying to help Wilkin. Then he took the next step toward relationship-building: finding commonality and offering help.

Ulland had done his homework. He regularly watched the TV show that featured the Minnesota state legislature in action, complete with committee hearings, floor debates, and roll-call votes—the “car-chase scene” of the democratic system. This task wasn’t without suffering. “My colleagues thought I was a dork to keep watching, but it helped me get to know the players better,” Ulland recalls.

In particular, he watched Wilkin. “I listened to his public comments on how he felt government money should be used for healthcare. And I thought, ‘We can work with this guy.’” Ulland

perceived they had common ground—that is, a desire for the disabled to be given the means to get to work, to have access to workplace assistance, and to help themselves.

While glued to the screen, Ulland learned that Wilkin had been given more responsibility for the state budget negotiations. He saw an opening to make Wilkin’s life easier by helping him decipher the nuances of the various programs. Ulland gave him both sides of all disability issues. In fact, Ulland was so unbiased in his advice that the chair of the Health and Human Services Committee asked a colleague, “Is Joel a Republican or Democrat? I can’t tell.”

In addition, Ulland learned from others exactly what not to do to build this relationship. “Representative Wilkin knew that we were willing to work with him and not call him wild-and-crazy names in the media. Groups who lambasted legislators in the midst of budget negotiations got cut; they got treated worse. By contrast, we weren’t ‘pains in the butt’ to deal with. Being nice allowed us to be a part of the conversation, to be at the table.”

When it was time to make the request, Ulland and his team prepared themselves for a brush-off. “But he was quite engaged and read through each of our position papers. He really read them. Then he was upfront with what he could and couldn’t support in our proposal. He did take a lot of hits because he’s frugal by nature, but he saw this as an opportunity to challenge his Democrat colleagues.”

Ultimately, Ulland says, Wilkin agreed to sponsor the bill and “was constantly in touch with us over the 15 to 20 changes to the bill to make sure that we had what we needed.”

Ulland’s long-term strategy paid off. And he still finds himself inexplicably drawn to the TV broadcasts of the Minnesota state legislature in action.

### Befriend the Gatekeeper

So how do you start to build a relationship with someone you actively oppose? First, you have to get out and about.

Many sincere grassroots influencers want to remain comfortable. That's a problem, because you can't build the kind of relationships that powerful people require from behind your computer. They want to see you in person.

Bob Bonifas, an Aurora, Illinois, owner of an alarm and locksmith company, has been involved in politics for 20 years. As a member of the National Federation of Independent Business, he made friends with a member of Congress years before that person became the most powerful legislator in Washington, DC. It was an early friendship that paid dividends later.

Bonifas's goal was to change the mind of a powerful member of Congress in 1996 when Congress passed the Telecommunications Act. The alarm industry wanted to include a five-year prohibition on phone companies going into the alarm business. Many interest groups had a stake in the bill, which took several years to pass.

"Think about what happens when families move into their new homes," Bonifas says. "They get phone service, and then the phone people say, 'Hey, what about alarm service?' The telephone monopoly could easily be used to presell alarm services."

A business behemoth, Ameritech, was lobbying against the prohibition. Bonifas says he and others representing alarm companies heard people whisper in the hallways about the hubris of the alarm company businesses owners who thought they could take on Ameritech.

So Bonifas decided to develop a relationship with the "gatekeeper," the person who manages the access to the decision maker—in this case, Representative Dennis "Denny" Hastert, Bonifas's member of Congress and a Republican. The gatekeeper was Scott Palmer, a prominent Hastert staffer. Bonifas visited Hastert's aide often, flying to Washington, DC, as many as 20 times in one year, despite the fact that Palmer gave him little encouragement. "When I met with Scott, I usually got evasive answers," Bonifas recalls. "Sure, he was always very nice, but told us there was 'nothing more we could do.'"

Wisely, like many of our other underdogs, Bonifas knew when to persuade and when to keep silent. He met Palmer at local events, strictly social gatherings, and on those occasions did not talk about the issue. As he says, "You have to stay in front of people so they know who you are when it's time to ask for help. You have to become known ... earn a seat at the table. You just can't come in when you have a problem."

So what happened? The Telecommunications Act included a five-year prohibition on telephone companies being able to enter the alarm market, giving Bonifas and other alarm company owners time to address the situation.

About two years later Bonifas attended an event in Washington honoring Hastert, who had become Speaker of the House in 1999. He was approached by Ameritech's vice president of government affairs, who said, "I know who you are. You're from Aurora. We kept trying to get to Hastert, but they kept telling us they had this guy in the alarm business back home who kept educating them on this issue. So you are the one."

That observation underscored this underdog's victory. "At that point, I felt that I was really successful. The opposition had acknowledged my effectiveness," Bonifas says.

### **Invest in Political Careers**

Chip Thayer, a well-known antismoking advocate and volunteer for the American Cancer Society in Massachusetts, turned heads with his advocacy success.

Thayer persuaded a conservative Republican state legislator to vote for a bill that would ban smoking in the workplace in 2004. In fact, state Senator Scott Brown had voted against the smoking ban when he served in the Massachusetts House of Representatives. That gave Thayer the tough challenge of asking Brown to change his vote, a request reserved for only the most intrepid underdogs.

To make it even more difficult, Brown had run in a special election to become a state senator and won by a narrow

margin. Lawmakers who narrowly win their seats are typically averse to controversy and intent on ticking off the fewest number of voters possible. One way for elected officials to draw unfavorable attention is to change their minds, which was exactly what Thayer was asking Brown to do.

Thayer was not a constituent of Brown's, so he couldn't even vote for him, but he was able to lay the groundwork for this future request. As a town captain working on Mitt Romney's gubernatorial campaign, Thayer met Greg Casey, the person who became Brown's chief of staff. Casey invited Thayer to work on Brown's campaign, and he did despite not being able to vote for him. As Thayer recalls, "I knew Senator Brown because I had worked on his campaign. I'm a well-known antismoking activist who had spoken out publicly about my battle with lung cancer. I had smoked for 30 years. I got a meeting with Senator Brown on my first try. He listened because I worked on his campaign."

Casey reinforced the importance of their relationship in changing Brown's mind. "The senator trusts Chip. He likes him. Chip worked hard for him in the election. When it came to talking about something he felt passionate about, the senator wanted to talk to him.

"It's all about personal relationships," Casey says. "We get a hundred calls a day on different issues. We have to distinguish which ones to become active with. That's when a personal relationship stands out."

Thayer helped Brown by investing in his political career.

### **Avoid the Issue**

When they meet with the big dogs, smart underdogs don't always talk about their causes. In July 2005, the Wisconsin Supreme Court overturned a 10-year cap on noneconomic damages in medical liability cases (also known as "pain-and-suffering" awards). The Wisconsin Hospital Association (WHA) began an intensive lobbying and grassroots campaign to get the cap restored.

Brad Neet, the chief operating officer of St. Michael's Hospital in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, identified not one but two state lawmakers on record against WHA's position: Senator Julie Lassa and Representative Louis Molepske. He describes how not talking about the issue directly with them worked for him. "It's important to get to know these individuals as people before you talk issues, before you make any request. We always said hello, asked about family, and made sure that we had a great relationship first.

"I didn't try and change their minds as much as listen for their concerns," Neet says. "Then I'd determine an approach that would mitigate those concerns and provide feedback to alleviate them, often using personal stories from our recruitment department and other past experiences."

Neet then ramped up his involve-

ected officials are voted into office by "regular" people and thus are imbued with position power. Then, their job is to stay in office by upsetting the fewest amount of people possible. Legislators long to be consistent with their public statements. Once they have put their flags in the ground, it's risky for them to change direction.

These association victories were possible because the grassroots operatives were strategic. They took time to develop long-term relationships with the right people, they made themselves useful to the elected officials—before and after they were elected—and, perhaps most important, association members, whenever possible, were the ones to deliver their messages. Elected officials almost always prefer to hear from their constituents when they are grappling with an issue.

You might as well learn from those

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ment after WHA asked members to step up. Even though he holds an influential position in WHA, the legislators he had to persuade weren't predisposed to his point of view. In fact, the political party of these lawmakers decried attempts to limit caps on pain-and-suffering awards.

Despite their party's opposition to removing the limit on medical damages, Lassa and Molepske agreed with Neet and voted to retain the cap. Since then, Neet has continued to foster the relationship. "Honestly, I worry more about keeping the relationship positive than the legislative outcome itself," he says.

### **Foster Your Advocates' Relationships With Lawmakers**

These examples illustrate government relations professionals or association members who are at the top of their game. They were able to change minds—a tall task, to be sure. Why? Because

who have achieved results in the most challenging environments and lived to tell about it. We need to pay attention to what they are doing. I'm always leaning forward in my seat taking notes. **an**

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