

Guide to Careers in Government Relations, Communications, and Advocacy



The Advocacy Association

Guide to Careers in Government Relations, Communications, and Advocacy

This ebook is the 2nd in a series.

Brought to you by



advocacyassociation.org

Edited by Joe Franco, Mike Fulton, and Joshua Habursky
Design, Formatting and Production by Erin R Holland

Government Relations and Advocacy Leadership: Leading Your Boss, Your Advocates & Yourself

Amy Showalter

Situations, the timing of events and who you work for will largely determine your success in the government relations/advocacy profession. You must remember, however, to focus on the common denominator—yourself, your work product, and the situations that you can control. Many developments will be out of your control, and some may seem unfair, and at the worst, unjust. The key to maintaining your sanity is knowing what you can control and what you can't control and acting on what you can control. You *can* control your leadership capacity and practices.

As you seek mentors and role models in this profession, it's important to know what people have done rather than getting abstract advice. You are not going to learn much by copying the surface, not the cause, of their success. For example, what time does the person wake up? Do they have a kale smoothie for breakfast or eggs? Do they use an Apple or Android phone? None of those things matter. Looking at surface characteristics such as habits, quirks, or beliefs a person you admire holds doesn't open the window to their success. You have to look at what drives their results. What skills did they master? What assets have they built? What projects did they cultivate? Those are the questions to ask and have answered. I have done some of that work for you, so please read on.

Throughout this article I have included advice from friends and

clients (and one from yours truly) who started in entry level government relations positions and are now in association CEO and/or government relations officer roles in corporations or associations.¹

The Dilemma

In many state capitals, and Washington, D.C., there is a typical profile of the government relations professional—he or she has likely worked in all or either: the state capital, Capitol Hill, a political campaign(s), or at the national or state party headquarters. They also usually have an advanced degree. Everyone and their housecat has the same work background. However, on the topic of work background, do your best to be selective and seek out employers with sterling reputations.

Who you work for matters—“Just as important are the people who gave me a chance to grow professionally. I had two bosses in particular who were wonderful mentors and opened so many doors for me. I will be forever grateful to them.”

Barbara Benton, CAE
Vice President, Government Relations
Ohio Society of CPAs

What will make you distinct from others with a similar history is your ability to communicate, influence, and lead at an uncommon level. Leading your boss, yourself, and your advocates are three priority areas of leadership mastery.

¹ Not all granted permission for attribution. If a name is not associated with a quote, that individual gave me permission to use their comment, but not to provide attribution.

And before we continue, let's define "professional," because that term is casted about a lot. It's a quality we know when we see it, but let's attempt a definition. To me, a professional is someone who can keep working at a high level of effort, ethics and quality no matter the storm around them. They show up, play hurt, have perspective, and express gratitude.

Leading Your Boss

Although we hear the common desire from employees that they want more of a voice in their workplace, almost all of my consulting and / or coaching clients have shared with me at least once a situation when they needed more leadership from their senior team members.

Fair or unfair, many organization leaders don't have a high "leadership lid." They have a leadership title, but they are really more like "leadership enthusiasts." You need to lead them via honing your upward influence skills. Upward influence is not management, it's not leadership, and it's not peer to peer influence. It's harder than those situations. It has nuances that are largely ignored in favor of the generic advice contained in articles with titles like "Top Ten Ways to Get What You Want from Anyone, Anytime," and other nonsense. To be successful, you will need to accept and practice upward persuasion which requires skills different from other contexts.

Expose leaders to the process—"It's always easier to influence up when others have skin in the game. So, whenever possible I try to expose volunteers and internal leaders to policy makers

in the process, so they can see how it really works, and more importantly, they can tell others about the experience. Having an ‘insiders’ perspective gives a sense of inclusion and appreciation for the process.”

Peter Calcara, Vice President, Government Relations
Pennsylvania Institute of CPAs

Be pleasantly persistent—I am pleasantly persistent. But with that, I also strive to go above and beyond for our clients in terms of attention to detail and anticipating future needs. This goes a long way, but I’ve found it makes a world of difference in influencing up and getting the attention of your superiors.”

Brittany Thune Lindberg
Vice President of Development
The Council of Insurance Agents and Brokers

Be an excellent communicator—“I have had the great privilege to be in the position of hiring people and importantly - government affairs professionals. I always looked for folks who were excellent communicators. I would require a writing sample and for them to show me a Power Point or other presentation they’ve previously given. Showing versatility and skill along with an eagerness and positive attitude would win me over even beyond their pedigree or previous employment.”

Steve Stevens, CCE, IOM
Chief Executive Officer
Kentucky REALTORS®

Take the initiative—“My tip for leading and influencing up is to show initiative. I will never forget my first day here, a colleague told me I needed to push myself to become involved in as many projects as I can. Our organization values independence and a strong work ethic. A part of that is demonstrating clarity in communications. Never be afraid to ask questions to make sure you and your team are on the same page. Asking questions not only ensures you are meeting expectations, but also proves your genuine desire to succeed in your role. It’s significant to always be in sync with your government relations team because it’s such a social role and your team needs to be on the same page with their messaging.”

Gracie Gerlach
Associate General Counsel
The Council of Insurance Agents and Brokers

Leading Advocates

I refer to advocates as those who are or should be engaged in your cause or legislative issues. A challenge that many advocacy leaders encounter is due to their previous work history.

When you work for a Member of Congress, the state legislature, your Governor or a statewide office holder, it’s pretty easy to get emails and phone calls returned quickly. And let’s be honest, that’s not because of who you are, it’s because of who you work for. Fast forward to your new role leading advocates, association members, or corporate employees who are

voluntarily engaging in your particular legislative issue. . .you have to earn their attention and allegiance. As best-selling leadership author John Maxwell reminds us, “You never know what kind of a leader you are until you have to lead volunteers.”

This requires exceedingly different communications and leadership skills than your work in a previous governmental body. Now you have to earn and inspire respect and allegiance. Assuming the respect conferred to you when working for elected official will automatically transfer to your new position is a common mistake. You have to earn the engagement and allegiance of your stakeholders.

Develop your communications and inspiration skills—“As a part of my work, I do a lot of speaking both inside and outside of the organization. It takes practice and lots of preparation to do it well, and I have been encouraged by the acknowledgement of having done a great job of communicating information, but also motivating people to act. When I get introduced at meetings with our stakeholders they refer to my presentation as the ‘favorite part of the agenda,’ and I think that’s because I work hard to bring a lot of energy into the room.”

Chief Public Affairs Officer
Fortune 500 corporation

Show gratitude—“Hardly anything in life comes from the efforts of an individual. Teamwork is everything and being able

to recognize others who helped in the success is required. Work hard. Be generous. Celebrate and share successes as a group. Be sure to thank everyone and anyone who might have done anything that contributed to the success of the effort. If you do this, you will go far.”

Steve Stevens, CCE, IOM
Chief Executive Officer
Kentucky REALTORS®

Help others—“More than anything else, I’m a ‘connector’ at heart. I love opportunities to bring people with shared interests or complementary goals together, and seeing the fruit of successful collaborations that come from those connections is rewarding in and of itself for me. The trick to being a successful connector comes in knowing the right connections to make. That requires getting to know as wide a range of people as possible, taking the time to learn about them, remembering what they tell you, and almost subconsciously matching it up with what you’ve heard from others in the past.”

Mike Bober
President and CEO
Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council

Leading Yourself

Your aspirations will and should change throughout your career. After all, change is mandatory. Through that change, you must lead yourself rather than relying on your boss, your best friends, your partner or spouse, etc. to guide you. Seek and

welcome that help and mentorship, but do not rely on it.

Steal the time—Scheduling effort and energy is essential. There are more books unwritten because they were left for “When I have time,” than for any other reason. Jealously guard your time and energy. People complain of not having time, yet scroll Facebook with all the ease of a cat watching dust particles. There will never be enough time, you have to steal it. Stepping up means putting something else down.”

Amy Showalter

Look the part—“It’s still true, you have to look the part of a leader. Make the investments to come off as a polished professional.”

Chief Public Affairs Officer
Fortune 500 corporation

If you want to be a leader, you have to lead ----now more than ever, people want real leadership. This is not a time for dilettantes.

Amy Showalter is a national authority on government relations best practices, grassroots, and PAC influence. She is the author of “The Underdog Edge” (Morgan James) www.underdogedge.com, “The Art and Science of the BFF: 105 Ways to Build Relationships on The Hill, at the State House, and in City Hall,” and “From Activity to Achievement: Next Level Metrics that Matter.” Amy’s insights have been featured in over 900 media outlets. The Showalter Group’s clients include many of the

nation's most prominent corporations, including International Paper, Bayer, and Cardinal Health, as well as leading national organizations such as the National Association of REALTORS © and the American Society of Civil Engineers.

www.showaltergroup.com

Twitter: @amyshowalter