

# Four reasons government relations is a low priority for your organization (and how to fix it)

AGRP November 18, 2015 [Amy Showalter](#)

My first thought when I was asked to write about this topic was that it shouldn't be a topic. After all, the government relations (GR) function provides a service that protects enterprise and member interests, and seeks

opportunities for all other organizational functions, so leaders should embrace government relations initiatives. But alas, it's a reality that GR priorities are not universally folded into the larger organizational mission.

There are many reasons why this occurs, and I have learned that it is highly individualized to an organization's internal culture and leadership. However, in consideration of this article's word limitations, I'll share just a few of the many reasons you probably have *not* considered when pondering why your GR priorities are not included in your organization's overarching initiatives.

### **Failure to Recognize and Employ Upward Influence Tactic**

Many GR professionals make the mistake of thinking that the tactics they use to influence a congressional staffer, association member or colleague will work when trying to advance larger organizational priorities. There is a belief that "If my audience knows what I know, they will think like I think."

Maintain your mental health by halting this thought pattern and accepting that your ideas are considered objectively *and* politically.

Regardless of your title or place in the organizational hierarchy, anytime you want your organization's blessing for an initiative, you are engaged in upward influence. And upward influence is different than management (leading your subordinates), peer influence (lateral persuasion), or, God forbid, coercion. It's a different set of persuasion skills that is not achieved through adherence to the "top 10 ways to get anything you want" mantra popular on magazine covers and in countless self-help books. Influence is contextual. Who you're trying to influence is a huge part of that context. Anytime you are asking for the blessing of your board or executives, you are influencing up.

## Limited History of Success

Organizational leaders will limit the risks they approve until you have a success pattern that is established and respected by the organization. Many good ideas fall by the wayside because top management is not willing to risk implementing them with an individual lacking a successful track record. Approval of significant organizational change usually goes to people who are already seen as successful in their organization—regardless of their subject matter expertise (or lack of it).

Success is not usually built through one resounding accomplishment. It is rooted in a *pattern* of accomplishment, not a flash in the pan. Having a track record as an effective contributor depends on repeated success—being successful *time and time again* over several projects. The political realities of large organizational life often are based on the reputations and perceptions of yesterday's performance rather than today's actions. No matter who built the structure you wish to improve, you will have to live with it until you have established a positive performance pattern that allows you to propose replacing it.

Don't launch an image-rebuilding program for yourself. Instead, use your energy to accomplish something *today*. It's about what you do, not what you say you'll do.

## Falling Prey to the Empathy Gap

Your organization's leaders are paid to anticipate trends and direct actions that address what might happen in the operating environment. They keep their eyes up, and so should you.

Eric Dell, senior vice president of government affairs at the National Automated Merchandising Association, says “It’s always difficult to stay in front of the issues, but we work hard to envision five to 10 years out as to what might arise. Compiling the data on the probability of certain developments and events is challenging, but you have to start gathering evidence sooner rather than later. My advice? Don’t start planning now, start *doing* now.”

You also need to keep your eyes up regarding your leaders’ preferred communications style. Cassi Baker, vice president of government relations at Cardinal Health, advises that GR professionals be attuned to communications preferences. For her, it’s about being succinct. “I have to be quick and concise in my conversations. I have reduced references to and dependence on briefing papers. Ultimately, we have to put our issues in their terms and use their language.”

Ask yourself:

Am I presenting ideas only in ways that help my functional area?

Do my ideas also speak to my leadership’s concerns?

Do I demonstrate that I understand my boss’s world as well as my board chairman’s world?

Do I know the forces acting on them that might be inducing resistance?

Does my idea mean more work for other teams? (If so, people may be reacting to that and not the idea itself.)

Many times your board members and executives have been burned by allocating resources to initiatives that went wrong, and psychologically, negative experiences weigh more than positive ones.

### **No Rational Self-Interest or Resolve**

When facilitating strategy retreats, I usually ask my clients, “What are the consequences for lack of cooperation, or for noncompliance?” If there is stunned silence, the plan probably will not be implemented. So the issue of *resolve* has to be a vital part of the discussion.

Many times planning sessions emphasize a lot of nice language and fancy vision, mission, and goal statements, but there is no thought to what will happen when the meeting adjourns. There must be organizational *resolve*.

Perhaps the ultimate determining factor for adoption of your priorities is *resolve*—a rational self-interest from all affected parties that ensures their cooperation and collaboration.

Regardless of the issue you identify, getting government relations priorities adopted as organizational priorities takes a lot of footwork. You must examine how you position your issues—but also possess the self-awareness and empathy to make these issues resonate with the priorities of senior leadership.

<http://about.bgov.com/blog/four-reasons-government-relations-is-a-low-priority-for-your-organization-and-how-to-fix-it/>