

Influencing a hostile opponent in Washington

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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.

Trust is the currency of leadership. And lately its been in short supply in Washington. The rancor of the election has given way to the amplified rancor of the transition. Now is an important time for organizations and leaders of every stripe to think about trust—specifically their trust quotient (or TQ).

Recently, I introduced a [framework](#) to help you and your organization assess your TQ in relation to those with whom you don't agree. Now, more than ever, it's critical to assess your TQ. New legislators bring with them new influence challenges—and trust is the differentiator in how power dynamics rebalance.

For the most part, we trust people we've known a long time, people who share our values. That's not particularly comforting to an advocacy group on the "right" that has to work with new lawmakers on the "left" and vice versa. How does an individual or organization quickly build trust with newly-elected legislators?

Trust, quite simply, is established by looking out for the other person's self-interest, and at the expense of one's own. Reflect on that last phrase—"at the expense of one's own." That's an extremely difficult and counterintuitive approach, but it's that level of engagement that's necessary when we want to build trust with those whom we do not share values or philosophies. Let's examine various elements required to build trust with the most difficult influence prospect – the hostile opponent.

My colleague Dr. Kelton Rhoads recently said, "Most tactics that are able to quickly establish trustworthiness work by *disconfirming an expectation* on the part of the listener. In particular, legislators expect that lobbyists and advocates will argue for their own self-interests, or the interests of their group. *Disconfirming* that expectation in a variety of ways can rapidly establish trustworthiness."

Traditionally, interest groups dispatch volunteers and staff to campaign for their "champion" legislators. ("Champion" meaning those who probably vote with the organization 90 percent or more of the time.) That's a good practice.

The provision of campaign volunteers proved to be one of the key variables that moved a legislator to vote with their position. It's an example of disconfirmation, because candidates expect help from groups who they vote with 90 percent of the time; they do not expect it from organizations with which they have a 50 percent voting record.

PAC Contributions as Disconfirmation

We also found that there were five advocacy tactics and / or conditions that predicted whether a lawmaker would change his or her mind and vote with an organization. One of the predictors was a "maximum PAC contribution." Remember, our research examined successful influence tactics with legislators who were undecided or opposed to the organization's position.

These organizations were maxing out their PAC contribution to a current or potential legislative opponent. Again, it's an example of doing the unexpected.

I experienced a bit of concern over this research finding, because I firmly believe that PAC contributions should be allocated based on a candidate's consistent support of an organization's legislative priorities. I still believe that, but this research presented a learning moment for me. Despite legislator's protestations to the contrary, (which are usually presented via poor research methodology) when research is conducted with proper methodology it reveals that PACs are still an important influence tool, and can be utilized to challenge a candidates' beliefs about an organization.

In part three of this topic, I'll share why arguing against your organization's or your personal self-interest and why "hurting yourself" leads to increased trust.