Leadership, Lobbying, Management

Why your government relations team will fail in 2016 (and what to do about it)

December 30, 2015 Amy Showalter

Your strategic planning retreat is over and your government relations team has set its 2016 goals. Great! But here's the thing you already know: Many of your goals won't be met in 2016.

Why? Well, it won't be because "the Republicans control Congress," "That governor is a Democrat," "Our opponents have more PAC funds" or the litany of other factors you assign to falling short. It will be because of three

common points failure, each within your power to manage, revolving around process and people—not external forces.

Brett Weisel, Director of Advocacy for Feeding America, has won awards for quantifying the impact of his organization's grassroots advocacy. According to Weisel, the difference between success and failure in modern government relations shops hinges on having streamlined structures and procedures that allow for speed, team resolve and efficiency.

"I've come to the conclusion that all the innovation is happening in the area of process, operations and organizational structure," Weisel recently told me. "In other words, what you can do in terms of advocacy is fairly limited (actions, activities, tactics, etc.), but developing the process and procedures to do it more effectively and efficiently is not."

To ensure your government relations team's success this year, avoid these three traps:

1. Not agreeing as a team on what you will STOP doing

Most teams think only in terms of what they will do, rather than what they need to *stop doing*. Inversion is a very effective model not only for productivity, but for difficult challenges. This allows you to think not only forward, but backward on problems. It requires you to *think of what you will stop doing*...and stop doing it.

Steve Jobs said, "People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on, but that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the 100 other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully. I'm actually as

proud of the many things we haven't done as the things we have done." That's inversion.

Warren Buffet agrees: "You've got to keep control of your time. You can't unless you say no. You can't let people set your agenda in life, but this is what we often do. When we're not setting our own agenda consciously, we're letting other people set that agenda for us."

*Ask yourself. . . .*What should you or your team stop doing?

Are you going to (gasp) stop sending "action calls" every month to show your grassroots that you are "doing stuff," and instead spend time equipping them to be compelling grassroots messengers for the battles that *really*matter?

Will you stop allowing "urgent" requests from legislators or their staff *who you know are not going to use your information or help advance your cause*become "urgent" to your staff?

Are you going to stop capitulating to board members and/or staff leaders who ask that you give PAC funds to candidates who clearly *do not support your legislative agenda?*

When will you stop financially contributing to every coalition because "everyone's doing it" and instead ask for *results and accountability* before contributing?

If you are stuck determining how to prioritize, invert, always invert.

2. Lack of team cohesion and resolve

Many strategic plans fail because there is no organizational resolve—teams aren't at stake and personally accountable. More often than not, there are no personal consequences for a lack of team cooperation and performance. The required result of any strategic planning process is not necessarily analytical insight, but greater *resolve.* Everyone should be aligned, aware of and committed to both personal and team expectations.

*Ask yourself…*do you have processes that respond to *each instance* when the organization/team fails to stick with your purpose, mission or values?

Can you define what you are willing to be unyielding about?

Do individuals know what they are personally accountable for? Do they know what the team is accountable for?

Having clear operating procedures, regularly articulated values and agreed upon expectations sets standards and increases organizational resolve in the face of setbacks and failure.

3. Having no clue what motivates your stakeholders

As I often tell audiences, whatever you want, whether it is legislative success, a large PAC bank account, or more fervent grassroots advocates, it all comes through other people.

And it all starts with engaging your stakeholders. What motivates them? What are they committed to? Many government relations teams have no idea how emotionally invested their stakeholders are with the organization and its goals.

*Ask yourself…*do you know your stakeholder's level of emotional allegiance to the organization or the organization's ideals? If not, how do you know what messages influence them to take action, to contribute to your PAC, to engage?

What is preventing you from finding out?

Tapping into the emotional motivations of your stakeholders and looking at the world from their perspective is absolutely essential. Make sure your team is in constant communication with those you serve.

As 2016 gets underway, your success is inextricably tied to being more effective at managing the things you can control. These common traps are all in your power to avoid. If you and your team can do that, I predict a year from now you won't be focused on the external forces that held you back—but rather on how you can ensure you repeat your successes in 2017.

http://about.bgov.com/blog/why-your-government-relations-team-will-fail-in-2016-and-what-to-do-about-it/