

In the Beginning There Was a Good Idea...

HOW ONE LOBBYIST WAS BORN: JUDY MEREDITH'S STORY

I started, like many women in this business, as a volunteer. I belonged to an adoptive parent group, and we had decided to “do something” about an existing law that forbade the adoption of children across religious lines. Through our parent support network we had learned that more than a thousand children, legally free for adoption, were “stuck” in foster care. While many of these kids were considered hard to place because they were older, handicapped, mixed-race, or part of a sibling group, the main stumbling block seemed to be the adoption agencies’ unwillingness to place a child in a home where the religion was different from that of the birth mother. It was against the law, we were told.

Even though we did not believe that the religious background of the birth mother should have such a disproportionate weight in placement decisions, for a time we tried to recruit families with the correct credentials. It soon became painfully apparent that eager families with minority, mixed, or no religious backgrounds could never even be considered for the waiting children. If only the law could be changed!

Of course the law could be changed. I remember raising my hand to volunteer to chair the new legislative committee and got lucky on three counts. My own state representative was willing to help us meet with the religious community and draft legislation acceptable to them. He briefed me on the how-a-bill-becomes-law process and schedule, and advised me on what needed to be done and when over the course of the year. Secondly, armed with my group’s membership list and a phone I was able to organize an enthusiastic network of folks who would talk to their own



legislators in the district. Finally, the organization raised money to pay for phones, postage and child care so that some of us could set up a communications network and spend some time at the State House.

We asked the parents to organize a delegation of local parents with their kids and meet with their legislators in their district office or invite them to their houses. Here was our message:

“Did you know there are almost 2,000 kids stuck in foster care waiting for adoption because of a stupid out-of-date state law? Would you be willing to help us fix it by supporting this bill that is being pushed by our adoptive parent group and a coalition of child welfare agencies? Here's a copy of the existing law. Here's a copy of our amendment. Here's a list of child welfare specialists and adoption agencies that support our bill. Here are some stories and pictures of individual kids awaiting adoption. And here's the list of local folks who support the bill.”

Well, much to our surprise, not a single legislator had any idea that 2,000 kids were stuck in foster care because of a stupid law, never mind that there was a small band of adoptive parents in their district trying to amend the law to fix it. They were so happy to talk to anybody who came to them with a sympathetic compelling problem AND an achievable solution that they almost cried. Imagine, getting an opportunity to *do good and look good* to a bunch of constituents at the same time! Turned out that many of them had some personal story to tell about adoption themselves – they were adopted children, they had adopted children, or their neighbors or cousins were waiting to adopt. Meetings in the district on home turf were fun and rewarding.

Still, it was frightening and frustrating moving around the State House with all those important and powerful looking people, but we kept bumping methodically from step to step. Eventually we won, and the sweetness of that victory is just as fresh today as it was in 1972. We had actually changed a bad law and enabled hundreds of children to be freed for adoption. We felt good. And powerful!

During that effort, we were given booklets and charts usually entitled, “How a Bill Becomes Law,” describing the three-reading process in Massachusetts. But I yearned to find the *real* book, one with the title, *How the State House Really Works*. Such a publication would reveal the secrets I suspected were shared only by the legislators, lobbyists and staff who seemed to be forever huddling and whispering to each other in the corridors.

Years later, after participating in thousands of corridor conferences convened by boredom and dominated by idle gossip, a fellow lobbyist

told me what he had said to a staff person as they had watched me walk by during that first campaign.

“What do you hear?”

“Not much.”

“Who’s that woman over there with the kids? She’s been around a lot lately.”

“Something to do with kids stuck in foster care. She’s got a bill in Ways and Means.”

“Any chance?”

“I dunno, we got some letters. With pictures! This family in the district has a houseful. My guy’s sold.”

“Do you think I could get him if I sent in some pictures of cute bankers?”

“As long as they’re not mug shots.”

I stopped looking for the *How the State House Really Works* book when I finally figured out that there were no secrets – only a long list of planning and organizing activities, all adding up to what is called a lobbying campaign.



Here's Judy Meredith in 1971, seventh adult from the left, after signing in the adoption reform bill.

THE BASICS

What is a Public Policy Campaign?

Unfortunately, these days the word 'campaign' often has negative connotations. Maybe when you think of this word, you think of a lone, self-serving politician trying to get him or herself elected into office. You are correct to use the word 'campaign' in this context. However, we'd also like to have you step back and think more broadly. Like we mentioned in the story you just read, for us –

A **Public Policy Campaign** is a long list of planning and organizing activities that help you achieve your goal of

What are some examples? It could be organizing an apartment-wide petition to have management provide recycling bins for each apartment, even if this means more hassle for them. That's a campaign. It could be recruiting your whole family into looking into car rentals, hotel reservations, locations and drafting an itinerary so that everyone can finally enjoy that

much-needed vacation. That's a campaign. It could be organizing a fundraiser for your church so that they can get a new van to provide transportation for the college students. That's a campaign, too.

When do you need a public policy campaign? You might find that after doing all this good work at the local level, that you may actually need to orchestrate change on the state or county levels, for one or two reasons:

- One, your problem cannot ultimately be fixed at the local level – the solution actually requires your state or county to change the way it funds or manages a specific program, or to create a new one. Or, it may require the reinterpretation of already-existing laws.
- Two, you may need to figure out how to keep your community programs strong, and the infrastructure for these programs may be controlled on the state or county levels.

Now that we've talked about what a campaign is, let's learn a few more basic terms that will help you lay the groundwork for your own public policy campaign.

THE BASICS

The Hero Opportunity

One of the basic operating assumptions of Real Clout is that of the “Hero Opportunity.” Elected and appointed public officials are actually pretty ordinary people. Like most of us, they are smart in some ways, and dumb in others. They just happen to hold down highly visible public jobs that don’t pay as much as the private sector and demand long hours of endless meetings with various public constituencies, who, for the most part view them as politicians rather than policymakers. And as we all know, most ordinary citizens have a pretty dim view of politicians, thanks in large measure to a long list of unsavory local, state and national scandals that have exposed some as personally greedy and morally corrupt.

**Hero Opportunity (n):
A compelling problem or crisis that provides policymakers with public occasions to propose and champion a solution that brings a measurable difference in the lives of a critical mass of constituents, as in “desperate for hero opportunities.”**

As human beings, most elected or appointed policymakers got into the business because they wanted the power to make good public policy. The logic is sound: make policy that will make a measurable positive difference in the lives of your constituents and you will get re-elected or re-appointed and be able to make even more public policy.

Being human, most elected or appointed policymakers love their jobs and are often ambitious to move up. They love the excitement of being in middle of the political action in a capital city. They love being able to really make a difference in the lives of their neighbors and friends by exercising their power and influence. They love the satisfaction of being and feeling important, of knowing they have been key players in important policy changes that have improved the lives of thousands of people – most of whom never give the state capital, county seat or city hall a second thought. And, that’s why as politicians they are especially responsive to a critical mass of constituents offering them a “hero opportunity.” They are always eager to champion a public policy initiative that will win them respect and gratitude.

THE BASICS

Your job at the grassroots level is to help organize a local coalition of important constituents that will offer a true “hero opportunity” to your local public policymakers.

THE BASICS

The First Rule of Influencing Public Policy

Elected and appointed decision makers make different decisions when watched by the affected constituency.

You might ask, “OK, what exactly is ‘public policy’ anyway, and how and when is it ‘made’”? Real Clout defines public policy as a set of rules (policies) that people (the public) must abide by. Making public policy decisions is what governments do. In our

representative democracy each branch of government has a decision-making process, guided by our federal and state constitutions.

The administrative branch – the governor and their appointees – issue executive orders, new regulations, and make public policy on a daily basis referring to their interpretations of existing laws and regulations.

The legislative branch meets regularly in each state, chooses leaders, sets a schedule and some rules, takes up proposals to change existing laws, debates and decides by votes until they have run out of proposals or time.

The judicial branch makes rulings based on the constitution and existing law and is officially only influenced by the facts and the law as practiced by attorneys, who have their own Workbooks.

Ordinary citizens and community activists have enough to do managing their own lives, and few of us know what policymakers are doing from day to day. Policymakers have enough to do trying to keep track of hundreds of issues, thousands of proposed bills, committee hearings and budget debates. Few of them know what their constituents think about a current or pending decision – until they hear from them offering a hero opportunity. And then, as you have learned from the preceding pages, they do pay attention.

Your job at the grassroots level during the whole of any campaign is to make sure your local policymakers know that you are asking for their support and watching them decide on a particular policy proposal.

THE BASICS

The Second Rule for Influencing Public Policy

**Get the Right Information
to the Right Person
at the Right Time.**

In other words, get accurate, compelling, sympathetic, and completely factual information about your hero opportunity to the appropriate policymaker before they make a decision about your policy initiative.

Right Information: Completely factual information includes: how the policy problem affects constituents; how the proposed policy solution will help; how much it will cost the taxpayers; who else supports it and why; and who is against it and why. You will get this information from the state campaign committee, and we guarantee you there will be times when you find yourself buried in fact sheets and fancy reports muttering that you already know more than the policymakers themselves.

Right Person: This is the specific key policymaker with the authority to change the particular policy. If the policy change can be made by the governor – simply transferring money or announcing a new policy initiative – then the governor and their closest advisors are the key policymakers. If a law must be amended or a new line item inserted in the budget, the key policymakers will be among the leadership or the rank and file members of the legislature.

Right Time: This is just before a specific policy is to be considered by key policymakers. You will get a “just before” schedule from your state campaign committee throughout the campaign. Typically, after you have received a training and briefing on the issue, you will be asked to participate in an introductory meeting with local policymakers to educate them about the problem and the options for solution. You will receive further instructions about when to follow up and what you should say in various updates.

Your job at the grassroots level is to make sure you are getting regular briefings and updates and following the instructions cheerfully...or at least willingly.

THE BASICS

The Third Rule of Influencing Public Policy

**Public policymakers
weigh opinion
equal to fact.**

Attention all readers rolling your eyes about public officials making sloppy decisions – consider these two facts:

Fact #1: Public policymakers don't have enough time, staff or technical expertise to make a fully-informed decision about every policy issue before them. When forced to vote on an issue on which they have limited information, they need to make judgments that are based largely on personal values and experience. On some issues – say abortion or capital punishment – the facts may not weigh very much at all, which is fine with some folks and disgusting to others. This depends, of course, on their opinion on the issue.

Fact #2: Ordinary folks like you and me make private policy decisions the same way. We make family policy about body piercing for teenagers. We make office policy and deny benefits to same-sex couples. We make church policy and decide to offer the pastor's job to a woman. On some private policies like the ones above, the facts weigh very little, which is fine for those who agree but disgusting to those who don't.

Actually this decision-making dynamic, however irrational it may seem to trained scientists and lawyers, is a critical component of our democracy. Elected policymakers are forced to make their decisions based not only on the objective facts, but our subjective opinions as well. And of course, that might be great for us, but disgusting for the opponents. Your job at the grassroots level is to confidently express *your* informed opinion to your policymakers and hope to inform their opinions.

THE BASICS



THE MESSAGE

Fill-in-the-Blanks Rap Sheet

1. Two thousand kids are in crisis because an existing law prevents them from being placed with families of a different religious background.
2. **You should care because** a) you have an adopted child, b) there are many families who would like to adopt these children in your district and c) you want to save taxpayer dollars by getting kids out of foster care.
3. **We know that** amending the law so that barrier isn't there **would begin to fix it.**

This is what we call "the message" or "the elevator speech."

Think about some particularly unfair public policies that ought to be corrected. Think about the stupid public policy that you want to change.

Now, pretend you are riding in an elevator with your state senator and have their full attention for a short while.



You can find a blank Rap Sheet in Appendix I, p. 1.

Use the Rap Sheet to compose a 45-second speech.

For now, the first and second lines are the most important ones. They are the ones that challenge you to define your public policy problem in such a compelling and sympathetic way that your state senator will hop out of the elevator and immediately get to work on fixing your problem for you.

Professional campaign operatives routinely invest tens of thousands of dollars on polls and focus groups because they want to test which words

and phrases resonate best with various audiences and help to motivate public officials to action.

In Appendix I, you will find a blank faces book chart to complete. Fill it out for each of your local policymakers - those who are elected to the legislature and those who have been appointed to serve as

Your job at grassroots level during the whole of a campaign will be to work with your statewide coordinators and help them develop and modify a message to motivate your policymakers into helping your campaign on the way to victory.

THE STRATEGY

Making “The Policy Faces Book”

Your job at this point in the campaign is to begin to collect as much information as you can about your local public policymakers in a way that can be shared easily with the people in the community you are trying to organize.

In Appendix III you will find a resource for locating state websites, which will start you on the way to finding the pictures, names and office numbers of all your elected officials in your geographical area. You may also want to check with your local city hall or town offices to make sure you’ve identified everybody.

The rest of the information can be gathered in interviews with them or their staff and by asking if anyone in your local coalition knows about them. Don’t be surprised if you find you have a public official’s cousin, neighbor, former classmate, paramour or spouse’s best friend in your group. And they may know a lot of information about the official, some of which should never be put on the chart.

The state website will also include information on some of the top administration officials – the governor and their staff, the secretaries and deputy secretaries, commissioners and assistant commissioners and perhaps the regional directors. You can find the names and contact information about regional and local directors by calling the appropriate commissioner’s office. Much of the issue-related information can be gathered in interviews with the public official or their staff. Again, don’t be surprised to find out that many of your colleagues in the local coalition know some regional managers very well.

The Policy Faces Book		
	Information	Notes
Official Title	<i>Senator Bill R.</i>	<i>Republican - conservative</i>
Length of Time Served	<i>6 yrs</i>	<i>Old family</i>
Official's Personal Policy Priority I	<i>Anti snob zoning</i>	<i>2 consecutive losing tries to repeal</i>
Official's Position on Our Issue	<i>In favor</i>	<i>Knows 3 families in district</i>

THE STRATEGY

Building a Local Coalition

Sometimes we think we think we're powerless to make policy change because we're such a small group of people and nobody else cares. But we're wrong on both counts.

While it is true that the smaller the group of affected constituents, the harder it is to find the time and resources to win a policy change campaign, *but we are never, ever too powerless to make our voices heard.*

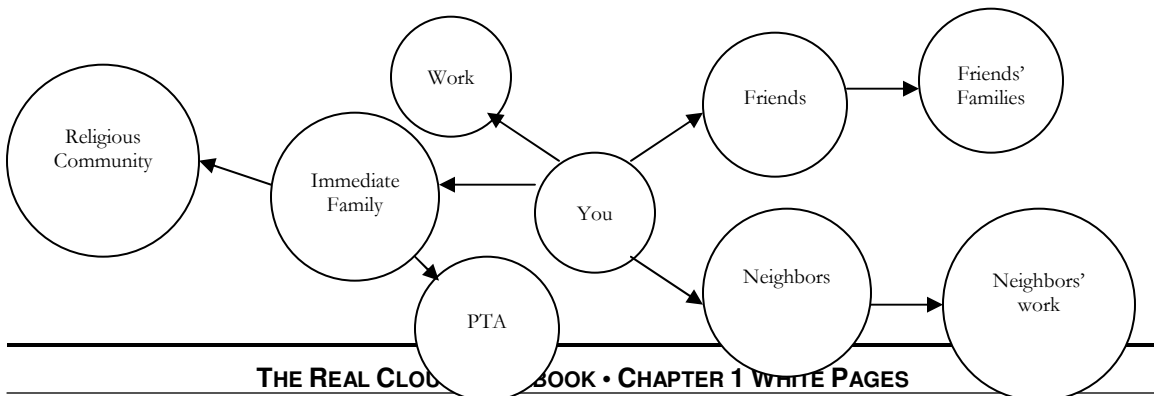
We have all seen a tiny group of two or three feisty, determined folks raise enough of a ruckus to get their story in the local paper, speak up at a local candidates' night, or get a meeting with a high-level public official. Sometimes their efforts impress the right-thinking policymaker at the right time and the small group succeeds in pushing forward a policy change.

While we should all be prepared for what luck may bring us, start now to reach out to other individuals in your community and members of like-minded organizations that might care very much about your problem. In fact, these people might have a direct self-interest in helping you fix it. Later, the state campaign coordinators will help you identify local representatives of statewide consumer groups, provider associations, faith-based organizations, business associations, unions, and others who have been identified as potential policy partners at the state level.

Meanwhile you should be on the lookout for other community leaders, including elected officials who might have a very personal interest in your policy problem because it affects them or their family.

* During our adoption law campaign, we simply started with a list of immediate family and friends. Then we built a list of anyone we knew who had been adopted or was waiting to adopt and THEIR immediate family and friends. Just by doing this, we found a host of interesting individuals who we

So just start. The next chapter will tell you what to do next.



TOUGH QUESTIONS AND EASY ANSWERS

On Non-Profit Lobbying

Q: I'm a volunteer board member of a non-profit agency, and the state has run out of money to fund our rape crisis center. We are trying to figure out if we can get involved in a campaign to convince the governor to find the money elsewhere or submit a supplemental budget to the legislature. Our lawyer warned us that if we, as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, got involved in any lobbying we could lose our non-profit status and all of our funding from foundations and individual contributors.

A: *Find another lawyer or accountant who has read and understands the IRS regulations governing public charities. Your 501(c)(3) organization is a public charity. The IRS regulations do impose limitations on lobbying, but do not forbid it. In Appendix III, we have listed a number of national resource centers that publish materials telling non-profits exactly how they can lobby. The biggest and most conservative foundations in the country fund these resource centers, and one of the best is the Alliance for Justice (www.afj.org). In the Alliance materials, the limitations on how much of a non-profit's budget (e.g., staff time and material resources) may be spent on lobbying activities is spelled out very clearly. Meanwhile please know that as a volunteer board member you can do all the lobbying you want as long as you avoid threats of bodily harm and bribes.*

On Working with Nontraditional Partners

Q: I'm a member of a state association of parents of profoundly disabled children. We're supposed to build a local coalition of people to support our bill to create a parent support network linked to the local Departments of Public Health. I'm supposed to reach out to the local chapter of social workers, the teachers' union, the nurses' association, the medical society, the local hospital and health center and local churches and synagogues. I'm really nervous that the parents' voices will get drowned in a coalition with all these smart professionals who are used to telling us what we should do and how we should think.

A: *You're right to be protective of the parents' roles. However, organizing and running a diverse local coalition is a great opportunity for parents like you to develop leadership skills and confidence. It will be easier than you think because the professional groups you have listed are already quite used to being solicited to join a coalition to support another group's policy campaign. If you can persuade them to get involved (a good time*

to practice with the fill-in-the-blanks rap sheet), and they determine that your campaign is in their direct self-interest, they will be happy to yield the leadership of your campaign to you. They are already involved in their own priority policy campaigns and are pretty busy pushing their own stuff.

On Communications and the Media

Q: I'm a reporter for a suburban newspaper and one of my assignments is covering the news at the state capital. I get called all the time by the staff of local politicians, and sometimes even the governor's office, trying to claim credit for some new program. They all want me to write about what a powerful politician they are, which is their staff's job, I guess. However I rarely get the name of a local person who was directly helped by the new program to interview. Whose job is it to help me write a good human interest story that will make the public understand that at least some of their tax dollars go to help people and not promote a politician's career?

A: Behind every politician bragging about the creation of a new program is a lobbying campaign run by a single organization or a coalition. It's the campaign's job to identify and train affected constituents and connect them to smart reporters like you. Meanwhile, the next time a politician calls to take credit for about a new program, ask him or her which organizations were involved in lobbying for the program and then call the organizations for the names of local constituents who can give you your human interest story.