

Evaluating Your Nonprofit's Lobbyist

By Bob Smucker's

Organizations are asking with increasing frequency how to evaluate the performance of a nonprofit lobbyist. There is no one set of performance guidelines that provides certainty regarding such evaluation. However, there are a number of performance clues related to a lobbyist's activities that can help you judge how well your lobbyist is serving your organization. Some might assume that it should be easy to judge performance based on whether the legislature acted favorably on a given legislative initiative. For the most part, whether legislation has passed or failed isn't a sound basis on which to judge performance. There are always a number of forces influencing the direction of major legislation over which a single organization or coalition has little control. Therefore, to judge performance solely on legislative outcome misses the mark.

As David Cohen, a veteran public interest lobbyist, has said, "Some policies take more than a lifetime to achieve. Some of my lobbying mentors worked for causes all their lives and never completed their work." He went on to say that those public interest lobbyists viewed their work as not to complete the task but to start it and find ways to bring their visions alive, both in the minds of the public and policymakers.

While final legislative outcome is not a sound criterion against which to judge performance, some critically important legislation-related activities and required attributes can assist your group in evaluating the performance of your lobbyist:

1. The essence of lobbying is **relationships** – with constituents, policymakers, coalition partners and other staff in your organization. The ability to establish and maintain strong relationships is a top priority to look for in the performance of your public interest lobbyist. No one person can achieve an important policy change. You must have the ability to develop strong relationships with people both within and outside your organization.
2. **Perseverance** is basic. Legislation usually takes years to enact and your lobbyist must have the capacity to stay with the process day by day, over the long haul.
3. Skill in **organizing the grassroots** to participate in your initiative is very important. Getting constituents of legislators you are trying to influence to be in touch with those legislators is absolutely basic to accomplishing legislative change. Being able to develop this kind of network and to use it effectively is of fundamental importance.
4. **Coalition building** is absolutely essential. Enactment of major legislation almost always requires building a coalition with a strong leader to build trust, openness, honesty and "no surprises" for the rest of the coalition.

Your lobbyist's understanding of the value of coalitions and ability to build them is indispensable.

5. It's important for your lobbyist to have the ability to help your organization understand much of what will have to be involved in the effort to achieve a legislative goal while at the same time helping the group recognize that no legislative process is very predictable. Related to this is the ability to **motivate** the Board, membership and grassroots to become enthusiastically engaged in the legislative initiative.
6. Your lobbyist should be able to **communicate** effectively with people outside your immediate world. The lobbyist must have ability to demystify the policymaking process, which allows people distant from that process to learn how to affect it.
7. Understanding how to use communication **technology** including audio, video, email and faxes is also fundamentally important.
8. Your lobbyist also needs to know the basics about the **legislative process** and the key committee members or other legislators who have either jurisdiction or influence over your legislation and can affect its movement; the details of **the bill** you are supporting and why its provisions are important to the legislators' constituents and to your organization; and, the **organizational structure** of your group and how it communicates with its members.

Obviously, no lobbyist is going to have all these skills and attributes and each organization will have to judge for itself what it needs most. Over time, the lobbyist will no doubt be able to develop much of what is needed and will be able to help the organization fill in any gaps by tapping resources either inside or outside the organization. One approach to conducting the evaluation would be to ask the evaluators to rank how the lobbyist scores, from one to five (strong to weak) on a grid on each of the activities and attributes listed above. The lobbyist might also be asked to score himself or herself and then compare the differences in a discussion with the evaluators. If your lobbyist was hired to carry out some, but not all of the tasks outlined above the lobbyist would be evaluated accordingly.

A related approach to evaluation that calls for a more specific, short-term review includes evaluating your lobbyist's progress, perhaps on a quarterly basis. The lobbyist should, in close cooperation with key staff and volunteers, set clear goals such as recruitment of sponsors for your legislation, developing a coalition, and organizing grassroots contacts. The goals might be included on a grid that names each goal being addressed, its level of importance, how you are measuring achievement toward the goal, related target dates for meeting those achievements, and the current status of progress toward achieving the goal.

It's important to have the evaluation of your lobbyist carried out by those who are acquainted with how a legislature works and who know the most effective ways to organize a nonprofit's resources in support of legislation. The evaluation might, on occasion, include legislative staff persons who have worked with your lobbyist and who were recommended by your lobbyist as having knowledge of the lobbyist's work. It probably goes without saying that the evaluation should be conducted with sensitivity so it's important to take the path that will be least disruptive of your relationship with your lobbyist.