

● SKILLS

EFFECTIVE MEETINGS WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

Individuals who make the effort to speak in person to elected officials impress them and are likely to influence support for specific issues. Elected officials want to continue to win your vote and will often accommodate a request for a meeting about local issues. Meetings with elected officials let them know that you are serious about certain issues. You also can learn what else needs to be done to win support for your cause.

Preparing for a Meeting

It is important to be prepared and carefully plan a meeting with an elected official. First, write or call to request an appointment.^{1,2} Many federal and state representatives are in their home districts Friday through Monday.³ With most state and federal representatives, you will need to contact an appointment secretary. You can often make an appointment with a local official personally. You may get a meeting with a legislative aide. Meetings with aides are beneficial because aides strongly influence legislator's votes.

When making an appointment, identify yourself, your address, and mention your affiliation with a group, if any. If you will be part of a delegation, state how many will participate in the meeting and where they are from.¹ Confirm the appointment by letter, reiterating the time, duration, and purpose of the visit. Briefly describe your issue.¹

Focusing on one issue is best; you can always make another appointment to discuss a different issue.³ Make sure you identify the legislation or upcoming decision you are discussing.

Find out if the representative is a member of the committees considering



Representative Peter DeFazio meeting with an activist.

the pending legislation.¹ The representatives' biography and voting record is helpful. Be sure you have a copy of the bill and information about its current status.

Find out the elected official's concerns with your issue so you can address them during the meeting.² Prepare a list of questions you want to ask¹ and an information packet that can be left with the representative. Include the bill and supporting information. Factual arguments, a list of community organizations that support the cause, newspaper editorials or articles, or letters from members of the community are useful.

During the Meeting

When meeting with your elected official, consider basic etiquette. Be on time, and dress appropriately in standard business attire. Do not become hostile if you and your representative do not see eye to eye.³ Most importantly, be polite.³

Introduce yourself and others attending with you.¹ Provide business cards or information about your organization.¹

Begin on a positive note by briefly commenting favorably on something your representative has done recently. Then describe the issue you want the elected official to support. Provide two to four persuasive arguments. Use a personal ex-

ample from your community.² Then begin asking the questions you have prepared.¹ Ask the elected official what you and your organization can do to assist him or her in making a decision.¹

At least half of the talking needs to be done by the elected official. Listen carefully to what the person says in order to address his or her concerns with counter arguments.² Your goal is to seek a commitment. Politely ask your representative if you have his or her support.²

If the reply is favorable, thank the representative and let him or her know that you will inform people in the district. If you want to offer volunteer assistance, this will provide for an even stronger relationship.² If the reply is no or if they are unsure, ask what you can do to gain his or her support. You can offer to speak to his or her colleagues to generate support for the issue.

Meetings usually don't last more than fifteen minutes.¹ At the end of the meeting, thank the official and invite him or her to visit your organization.¹ Leave your information packet and be on your way.

Meeting Follow-up

Send a letter thanking the elected official for his or her time.¹ Restate your position, and if support was given, acknowledge this. If the representative expressed uncertainty, provide information which addresses his or her concerns.

Your initial meeting should be the beginning of a long-term relationship. Continue to meet with your elected official to provide the latest on your issue. Get on your elected official's mailing list and keep up to date on his or her actions.

Knowing how to conduct an effective meeting is an essential skill to gain support for an issue you care about deeply.

— Evyn Wedgle

1. Rebuild America Coalition. Undated. A guide to legislative lobbying. www.rebuildamerica.org/reports/lobby.htm.
2. Alderson, G. and E. Sentman. 1979. *How you can influence Congress: The complete handbook for the citizen lobbyist*. New York NY: E.P. Dutton. Pp 90-108.
3. National Audubon Society. 1991. Meeting with elected officials. June *Audubon Activist* (June): 187-188.

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