

Fall 2018 Leadership Council Convening
Advocacy Menu Breakout Group Notes

Topic: Crafting talking points for public testimony

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Objectives:

- participants learn about why and how to apply an advocacy skill
- participants practice an advocacy skill
- participants leave with a concrete action they can take

Introductions:

Group members shared their experiences & tools, what to do at local public comment, city council, Board of Supervisors meeting, or at legislative visits.

Our hope is that this meeting today helps us all to think more about being at local city council meetings and before elected officials to give testimony on behalf of some of our policy issues. Even local non-profits can make a huge impact at a local level and our hope, especially as organizers in the community with families, is that we can have more of that support from non-profits, because often times, local service providers and organizations add another level of expertise that just layers onto the expertise of the lived expertises of the the families.

There is a useful framework to prepare our talking points:

You want to show up prepared & aware of time limit. Usually for public comments, they issue you 3 minutes. Our best practices is that you always prepare for less than what they are giving you, especially if it is a hot topic. What we found is that the Mayor or the Chair of the Board, can limit the public comment to 2 minutes or at some instances, limit to 1 minute.

The format is VPSA (Value, Problem, Solution, Action) frame. This format is considered a communication tool, not necessary for only public comment.

VALUE:

what are our shared values? Consider your audience and what do they value, their agenda/ voting records. Value help your audiences hear your messages more than dry facts and data. It helps you to connect. For example, healthy communities, all children have a home, all parks are safe, families are kept together, every voice should be counted, all children can see a doctor when sick, etc.

You can use this format at any circumstance. For example, if you are in the elevator with a local legislator, you can use this format in 90 seconds to communicate with that official. You can also use it for families in grass root organization. When you find yourself at the park with a mom, you can use this format to elaborate your message. It is also a good format if you find yourself public speaking to your Board or any families that you are serving.

The reason behind the value piece is that most time before you say anything, people want to know where you are coming from. Who are you? Are you someone that I can connect with?

The purpose of the value is to connect. Ideally, you want to find things that you think that are universal and connect. Start with a blanket statement that hopefully brings you together. For example, if you are going to talk about housing, you may want to say, “we know that we all value that children live in safe and affordable homes. We all agree that families should have adequate shelters.”

Another way to do that is to state your organization’s mission statement because that also speaks to your values. For example, “I am here to talk on behalf of the (your organization) because we know that all people deserve to have access to food (or what your organization offers) and be fed.”

If you find yourself doing repeated public comments, it is good to know what is the latest thing that they have focused on so that you can connect and add to the value that they have been addressing. Or even the recent narrative of the issue. This is where your research comes in handy.

Sometimes it is a good idea to state the value in the form of a questions. Some people open up a public comment with a question. “What is it that we value here at the city of Concord? Are we not a city that says we puts the families first? I know we value that!”

Problem:

How is the problem a threat to our vision and values? Frame problems as a threat to our vision and values. Tell a personal story to illustrate problem. Use statistics/ facts likely to resonate with the target audience. Where possible, include the cause of the problem, as well as who is responsible for fixing it. Share facts in manageable pieces and always connect to values. For example, 50% of Concord renters live with pests including rats, mice, cockroaches and bedbugs; 75% fear eviction; rents have grown by 61%; children facing housing insecurity are at risk of educational delays, mental health issues, low birth weight and health problems such as asthma.

The problem piece is importance of the story. This is the opportunity to focus on the issue. The two pieces that are important in this section are data and story. It is important to illustrate from heart and paint a true picture of how this problem effect people. For example, “we all value importance of all children live in a safe homes and have adequate shelter. The problem is that right now 50% of Concord residents are afraid of eviction and 90% of those families live with young children.” Remember, not to overload with data because it may have negative effect and they may start questioning the facts and it will lead to deviation from your original point. You also want to ground that this is not an isolated incident. It is not just me, I am part of a big group of people experiencing this. Problem should include data and story to be effective. Problem is where you illustrate how it is that these values being challenged.

Out of all 4 points, you will spend most of your talking points on Problem.

Elected officials are faced with hearing a lot of problems but that is where it ends. It is as important to offer some solution and action afterward to give them something to think about and work on. Thus, the next two steps are as important as the first two.

Solution:

What is a positive solution that leaves people with choices, ideas, and motivation? Positive solutions to fit the problem you have posed. Paint an inspiring picture that motivates. Assign responsibility; who can enact this solution? Examples: Elected leaders/ You can help ensure

Concord children live in safe buildings and homes; Bay Point children have safe, quality parks; parents can access services without repercussions.

This format allows you to be a little more helpful by saying a solution. The solution is global (general statement) and the action is more specific (here is how we can do it). For example, the solution is that all children in all families in Concord should be housed. The solution is more of a broad statement.

Action:

What can this specific target audience do to help you reach your goal? Always present an opportunity to do good together. Give a concrete action to put solution into action. Steer clear of vague, "learn more" messages. Examples: Vote tonight in favor of just cause legislation: Direct staff to bring forward a proposal; Place this item on the next meeting agenda for discussion; write a letter in favor of state/ national legislation to Assembly member or Senator.

The Action is where you become more specific to what you want them to do that evening. When you talk about the value and problem, you may put them into defense mode and make them uncomfortable and give them an urge to want to respond to you. This is where you give them a broad idea of what needs to be done and draw them back to connect. Then, we get more specific and give them our requested action. And we add a little value to it. "But we know that we have a role here, we can fix this. We know that all children can be housed. We know that all children can have food security, quality child care, etc. But what we ask you today is just please vote yes to to pass just cause legislation, please put this into next agenda next month, please vote to fund this program, etc."

What we find is the ask changes but the solution stays the same and global. Your action is more specific. Here is what you can do tonight to help resolve this problem. You hope that the action would connect what you laid down in the problem and the data may shift. Personal testimony will stay the same. The data may shift to relate to what is the ask at the end. For example, if you are asking for yes on a certain bill, you want to make sure that the problem does not just globally talk about food insecurity but talks about specific problem that the bill is going to address. For example, the problem is how not having fresh produce impacting children (show specific impact = lack of fresh produce, instead of global problem=food insecurity). Or it can be rhetorical question (how can we fix this?) and this is how we can do it. Sometimes people end their public comment with a question (so, what are you going to do tonight?) This tool works better because you don't want to only talk about global solution, let them know what they can do specificity to make it happen Ending the conversation with a question is more effective in public comments rather than the legislation visits. In public comment, you can't have a conversation. You will get your 2-3 minutes and that is it. In legislation visits, there is more room for dialogue and conversation.

What is the value of the action step? The elected official always want to know what is your suggestion in solving the problem. They can't solve the "housing crisis" but what do you want me to do today. The action leaves them with the specific piece. It is also an opportunity to have a positive and unifying way to end your message. Try to start with a spirit of partnership (I know that we all care about the kids, I know that we are all in this together. Here is what I am requesting.)

If you are specific about your message, you can hold them accountable. So for example, if you are asking to put an item on the next meeting agenda, and then, you wait and don't see

it on the agenda, you have a way to follow up. It can also be used as a mobilizing tool. If they are not responding to you at the end of the meeting, then you can ask at the next public comment and you can say that we came here last month and asked for this and you never answered.

This framework can be used for public comment, speeches, presentations, mobilizing, etc. How you do it? The framework is the same but your style may be different. If you use it in one-on-one, use it as a conversation, you may ask more questions. “ tell me what makes Contra Costa County better for your children? (This is giving the values.) then, give the problem by saying something like: yes, that is a problem for me too. I live in Contra Costa and I really care about having safe and healthy environment for healthy and safe kids too. The problem is that (then you build on what they said and establish the problem) only the parks in good neighborhoods are nice but the parks in low-income neighborhoods are not! But that is what we need in low income neighborhoods (and shift the conversation to solution) but all kids should have access to nice parks. I am a member of this group that works with neighborhoods to help to improve these issues. Do you think you might be interested to join me and sign this petition (action) or come to our meeting.