

Legislative Leaders and the Media

***State Legislative Leaders Foundation**

The media play important roles in two of the most important responsibilities of legislative leaders: representing the legislature to the outside world and helping Members do their jobs well. The ideas that follow here are press relations suggestions for working both of these paths, plus six core concepts, with the hope that they will contribute to more effective press relations for leaders and members as one of the means of increasing the legislature's credibility and power in democratic governance.

Effectively Representing the Legislature to the Outside World

Every legislative leader wants to leave the institution stronger and more credible than when he or she assumed the role. It is axiomatic to say that the media have a significant influence on how the legislature is regarded. Therefore, enhancing the quality of coverage of the institution as a whole is an important responsibility of the leader, the successful fulfillment of which can enhance the image and stature of the institution and all its members, as well as that of the leaders themselves.

Encourage Media Coverage of the Legislature

The media is the best vehicle for informing the public about the legislature as an institution, the issues under consideration, and the activities of its members. To help the media keep the public adequately informed, do everything possible to encourage press coverage of the legislature. Seating should be set aside for reporters in the chambers and in committee meeting rooms. Journalists should be provided with reasonable workspace in the Capitol or legislative building; and, if possible, a high-tech and otherwise suitable room should be made available for press conferences. Reporters expect (and appreciate) advance notice of the legislative schedule. While the legislature cannot and should not be expected to set its schedule according to media deadline requirements, the surest way of getting desired media coverage of a floor session, committee meeting, public hearing, or press conference is to be as accommodating as possible to those deadlines.

Show Respect for the Role of the Media and its Representatives

It is important to let reporters who cover the legislature know that they are respected, both as fellow professionals in the public affairs arena and for the essential role that they play in the democratic process. Acknowledge first, that you appreciate the difficulty of their job, and second, just as legislators feel subjected to a myriad of conflicting pressures (from leaders, fellow legislators, party leaders, constituents, the governor) reporters also are subject to pressure from their editors to meet deadlines and file interesting, timely, and informative stories that will sell newspapers and attract television viewers and radio listeners.

Cultivate Relationships with Reporters

Make an effort to develop a cordial personal relationship with every reporter assigned to cover the

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legislature, editorial writers who cover state issues, and political editors of the major metropolitan daily newspapers. Legislative reporters know that they are largely dependent on legislators for the news and information that they report. This is particularly true regarding leaders, who are likely to have the best and most accurate information that the legislative reporters need. So, they will want to be friendly. It is necessary only to return the friendliness. Taking time to stop in the halls of the Capitol for an informal conversation with a reporter--even a conversation totally unrelated to the business of the legislature--can go a long way toward establishing a cordial working relationship with that reporter. Provide opportunities, both formal, and especially informal, for legislators to get to know you and the members of your caucus. Reporters appreciate invitations to visit legislators in their private offices.

Be mindful not to confuse a journalist's friendliness with friendship. Good journalists and reporters will want to be friendly with the members of the legislature because this will make it easier for them to approach the legislators with questions or for information. But the very different and often conflicting and sometimes adversarial responsibilities and roles of the legislature and the media make it unwise to develop close personal friendships with state house reporters. Going to a ball game with the state house bureau chief for the leading daily newspaper in the state is work-time, not downtime.

Help Journalists and Reporters to Understand the Legislature

The legislative process is one of the most complex and least understood aspects of American Democracy. Reporters assigned to cover the legislature will have varying degrees of understanding of how it works. They may well see the inherent slow pace of the legislative process as indicating inefficiency and ineffectiveness; and they may view legislators' willingness to move toward resolution and consensus through compromise as selling out. Take the time to explain to reporters the principled reasons why things happen, why it was deemed necessary to make a significant change in a piece of proposed legislation, how a compromise was struck to break a stalemate, or why it was not possible to get Members to support the party leadership on a crucial vote. Educate them about how the place works and what is really going on, but without being condescending or offensive. Anticipate likely action, so that they are not surprised and you seem prescient.

Use Alternatives to the Mainstream Media and Help Members do so as Well

While newspapers, television, and radio are the primary means for communication with the public, it is neither necessary nor advisable for you or your Members to rely exclusively on them. There are number of effective means that should be utilized to get messages and information directly to the public and to selected publics. Newsletters mailed to constituents are a very effective means of direct communication. District-wide newsletters that go to every registered voter in the district are usually beyond the financial means of most legislators unless it is the policy of the legislature to pick up the cost. But newsletters selectively mailed to a targeted audience can be a highly effective and viable alternative. Leaders can help Members by providing assistance in the form of copy, editing, a leaders' column, reproduction cost, photographs and the like.

For an increasing number of state legislators, one of the most popular and effective means of direct communication with the public is through a personal internet website. A website is relatively inexpensive to set up or maintain, and it is possible to have complete control over its content. In terms of gauging public interest and concern, a personal website has an added benefit of being able

to track how often the site is accessed and what specific parts of it generate the greatest interest. Every legislature should have a website, every leader should have one, and leaders can assist Members in setting up their own.

Other effective low-cost means of alternative communication with constituents include: a periodic newspaper column, especially desirable in weekly newspapers, reporting on legislative activities; op-ed newspaper columns; local access television programs; district office hours (for legislators who do not have district offices, office hours might be held at the town hall); columns and articles in organizational newsletters and constituent meetings or hearings in the district (either open-ended in subject-matter or focused on a specific matters or issues).

Provide Journalists and Reporters with as Much Information as Possible

The best chance for receiving desired reportage on an issue is to provide a reporter with as much information as possible on the matter. For presiding officers, it may mean giving as much advance notice as possible of exactly when during a floor session it can expect the final vote on a major bill.

It may mean providing an interested reporter with detailed explanatory documents about a bill. Or, it may involve a committee chairman providing a reporter with an advance agenda and discussing expectations for an upcoming meeting or hearing, and then making sure that sufficient copies of all documents presented to the committee at the session are available for the media. Lack of cooperation from a legislator will never deter an enterprising reporter from undertaking the required research for a story that he or she is pursuing. Providing the press with as much information and assistance as possible will not mean that a good journalist will not still carefully review and examine every document and every statement provided by a helpful legislator. But reporters always appreciate assistance that makes their job easier by enabling them to avoid having to undertake time-consuming efforts to gather information.

Preparing Your Members for the Media

There is one simple rule for maintaining your position of leader: get more votes than whoever else wants the job! The best way to do that is to make sure that your Members are content and your caucus successful. Assisting your members in utilizing and responding to the modern media will assure their success and yours.

Create Opportunities for your Members to Shine

It is important that you get positive media coverage. As a leader, however, it may be even more important that you create opportunities for your members to get positive media coverage. Indeed, it may be more important than positive coverage for yourself, because if they look good and get re-elected, you stay in leadership. Share the credit and the spotlight. You can do this in several ways, including making sure that your vulnerable members have “positive” legislation to carry, referring journalists to members with a particular expertise or interest and supporting press conferences held by your members (your presence will increase the media attention). Members who receive positive media coverage are more likely to be re-elected and more likely to re-elect you to leadership and support the party, leadership and caucus positions.

Take a Bullet for your Members when Necessary

While it is important to give your Members an opportunity to shine and have their moment in the spotlight, there are times that spotlight might be too hot for the Member to handle. As their leader, you may need to intercept a reporter or journalist or get between them and your Member. Part of leadership is taking some of the heat for the troops. This may be particularly true with young, inexperienced members. If your member has cast a questionable vote, introduced a marginal bill or appears to have acted in a manner that is inappropriate, you may need to be their first line of defense. You may be better informed and most clearly will be more capable and experienced at responding to the press. Obviously, you cannot protect them forever, nor should you. However, your response may buy them some time to prepare and will most likely frame the context in which they respond. Further, if you have built up some good will with the media, your support may well alter their approach to the issue and the Member. You can rest assured that the Member will thank you for that!

Provide Media Training for Members

Most victorious candidates enter the legislature with no significant experience dealing with the media outside the “test by fire” of the campaign, and that is often local coverage that does not prepare them for the battle-tested state house press corps. However good campaign lessons might be, they are not enough. Coverage of candidates is quite different from coverage of legislators. For most successful candidates, effectiveness with the media means avoiding negative coverage. For young legislators, the same objective holds true (they still need to avoid negative press), but the more difficult challenge may be getting any coverage at all. Young legislators are seldom high on the list of sources of stories for most journalists. It is up to you to help them learn how to get media attention and deal with it once they get it. Every new member orientation, whether for caucus members or all legislators, should include media relations training. Explain the objectives and schedules that motivate journalists and what legislators can do to help journalists get a story that benefits them and the legislator. Bring in some senior capitol journalists to meet with the legislators and in-house media experts. Provide your members with tips on working with journalists and even give them some opportunities to practice their skills by videotaping them.

Support the Communications Efforts of your Members

It is not enough to give lip service and “attaboys” (although such encouragement can’t hurt) to efforts of your members to work effectively with the media. You must, if at all possible, provide them with the tools, both financial and structural to take advantage of opportunities to get their message out. Such support can range from a little money for one or two district newsletters to the development of a fully equipped and supported multimedia studio. Other options might include providing each member a webpage and someone to help monitor and manage it, providing laptops for members to use, equipping a room for press conferences and media interviews and providing staff to help them write speeches or develop effective “talking points.” Effective support staff is critical if members are to make the best and most effective use of the media outlets available to them.

Six Core Concepts for Successful Media Relations

Treat Each Reporter as an Individual

Reporters have a degree of latitude in choosing what events or activities to cover and what to report about them. Bear in mind that each reporter assigned to cover the legislature is an individual with personal thoughts, feelings, ideas, perspectives, and responsibilities; and that the most important of those responsibilities usually involves employment by a newspaper or television or radio station that may have specific issues or matters on which it will want the reporter to focus.

Good reporters know that the more they learn about individual legislators, the more effectively they will be able to question them and analyze their actions. The reverse is just as true. The more that a legislator can learn about individual reporters assigned to the legislature, the more effectively the legislator will be able to interact with and respond to those reporters when subjected to questioning by them. Just as importantly, the more familiar a legislator is with the personal interests and views of individual reporters and the news organizations that they represent, the more certain the legislator will be of which reporters to approach to secure coverage on a matter or issue of concern.

Consider Being a “Source”

Reporters love exclusive stories. Further, they recognize that leaders are likely to be the best and most reliable sources for such stories. By providing information to a reporter, you both help reporters do their job well and increase your influence over the nature and flow of the story. Such information is critical to the success of journalists. Two words of caution here: 1) don't become a source exclusively for one reporter- that will alienate and anger others (nobody wants an angry reporter); 2) being the source of information that is harmful to the institution or to colleagues can come back to haunt you.

Assume that Everything Said to a Reporter is “On The Record”

Most journalists can be trusted to not quote or attribute a statement to you if you first tell them that the comment is not for quotation or attribution. But good reporters never forget anything you say to them that might be useful in a story. If you don't want it in print or to be broadcast, don't say it.

Stick to the Message

When it is clear to you what you want to say to a reporter about a subject or a question, that and only that is what should be said. Stay strictly on that message. Resist efforts by journalists and reporters to divert you. Repeat your first answer rather than give the reporter another one to choose from. If the reporter's question doesn't directly address the issue or point that you want to make, find a way to segue to your preferred response. The more quickly and the more tactfully the shift can be made to the intended message, the greater the likelihood that it will find its way into the printed or broadcast report.

Think Before You Speak

Before answering any question posed by a member of the media, you should train yourself to ask: “How will what I am planning to say look in tomorrow's newspaper or sound on tonight's television or radio news?” If you do not feel comfortable with how the statement would read or sound, don't say it, change it before you speak, or graciously decline to say anything. Choose words with special

care when responding to questions posed by television or radio reporters because television and radio reports are so brief. What is seen or heard or reported on a television or radio broadcast will likely be only be a few sentences; the more you say, the more choices you give the reporter about what to broadcast and the less likely it is that what is broadcast will be what you would have chosen. If you want to be quoted, talk in interesting and provocative sounds bites.

Do Not Overreact to a Critical or Unfavorable Story

Before reacting with a strong response to a negative or critical news story, weigh the long-range costs and benefits of such action. Thoughtful reflection may show that it will be better to say nothing. A press release, a letter to the editor, or a follow-up television or radio interview in response to a negative story will bring the story to the attention of more citizens and will assure that the story remains in the public spotlight. In addition, such responses, when printed or broadcast, will almost always be accompanied by a new description of the original story that has triggered the response. If a public response had been avoided, the reporter who wrote or broadcast the story would likely have moved on to another issue, there would have been no follow-up stories, and the matter would have disappeared from the news much more quickly.

If a news story is seen as so inaccurate, unfair, and personally damaging as to require a response, the most beneficial way to so may be to quietly and politely approach the author of the story and show that individual where the story was inaccurate and why it was unfair. If this fails and it is felt that facts that refute or contradict the story are being ignored, consider approaching the management of the newspaper or television or radio station and presenting it with the documentation. If shown a persuasive and well-documented case that demonstrates the inaccuracy of a story, most media managers will feel a journalistic obligation to print or broadcast a retraction or clarification along with an apology.

Conclusion: Creating a Win-Win-Win Situation

While we most often think of the relationship between politicians and journalists as adversarial at best, where one side wins and the other loses, we believe this does not have to be reality. With conscientious effort on your part to understand the world of journalists and act in accordance with that understanding, to develop professional relationships with reporters, take time and educate reporters about the legislative process and adequately prepare yourself and your Members to work effectively with the media, there can be three winners and no losers. First, you win, because you are able to get your message out and more effectively lead your institution, chamber and caucus. Second, the journalists win because they can get accurate and informed stories in accordance with their demands and deadlines. Finally, and most importantly, the public wins because they get a better understanding of the legislature.