

TOOL

DIALOGUE WITH DECISION MAKERS

WHY

If you want to influence a decision maker or someone else in power, the best way is often a face-to-face meeting. Meetings may be part of our everyday lives in our associations and work – and often advocates don't invest sufficient time to prepare for a meeting to get the most out of the opportunity.

A successful meeting or dialogue with a decision maker can help you to;

Gather information to develop your advocacy strategy

Influence the person you are meeting

WHEN

A single meeting is often not enough for achieving your advocacy objective even if it is a meeting with a key decision maker. Normally, it takes a series of meetings to develop a relationship and understanding with the person or group which can help you achieve your goal.

HOW

Influencing depends on developing a relationship and building mutual understanding, trust and good communication. It is like strengthening a bridge over a river – the stronger the bridge, the more it can carry. The better mutual understanding you have in a relationship with someone, the more you can ask of them - their views, the problems they see or the reservations they have.

Sometimes when advocates are too focused on their cause and what they want to say themselves, they fail to establish a good relationship and understanding with the person, whom they are meeting.

Good tips for building a good relationship with someone

- Invest time in researching about the person you are meeting in advance so that you can think about how you can best put across your message.
- Be alert in the meeting and note where the person is interested and engaged in what you are saying and where they appear disinterested and bored. You may find that some people are really interested in facts and statistics – while others light up when you tell stories and case examples. Some are interested in small talk at

the start of the meeting and others want to get straight to the issue.

- It is often easier for people to connect if they have something in common. Listen carefully, ask open questions and find common ground. It can sometimes be easier for people who are of the same age, come from the same area or have studied at the same university to connect. The easier it is to connect and establish an understanding the more likely it is to be listened to.
- People often appreciate if you are able to comment on their recent activities (I saw your speech, I read your report) and remember what you discussed (work related or personal) during the previous meeting.
- Be clear to give the decision maker credit where it is due – acknowledge any efforts they have made to address the issue.

Trust is a key ingredient

It is very important to build a trustful relationship if you are asking a person to make difficult choices or take a political risk for you. Trust takes time to establish and it can be lost easily. Do not betray a persons' confidence or share information that they have given you without permission.

Likewise it is important to live up to your own commitments. Also, if you are going to take any actions (e.g. publish a report, do a radio show, host a public meeting) it can be useful to let your decision maker know, so they don't feel surprised or ambushed.

»» Remember first impressions count

How you dress will have an effect. If you are meeting with a youth group it will probably help build understanding if you are casually dressed, while it might be offensive to show up to a meeting with a village leader in shorts and sandals. Your appearance should help you connect with people, not create a barrier.

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Small things matter. Remember to reply to e-mails and phone calls in a timely way, don't be late for meetings – even little things can undermine or reinforce perceptions of your trustworthiness. You want to establish yourself as a trusted and professional source of knowledge and advice in relation to your issue.

Key questions to consider before approaching a decision maker:

Before asking for a meeting, think through the following questions

- **Why do you want to speak to the person?** It is a good idea to explain why your issue is linked to their power and responsibilities and what you want to talk to them about specifically. If the decision maker has made recent public statements on your issue or if they are participating in a policy process you can also refer to these to show you are knowledgeable.
- **When and where do you want to meet them?** At their office, at your office, with the local youth group – there are pros and cons. Consider how you can best get to talk to them about your issue. You can also consider to invite them for an event – or if there are important or interesting people visiting your organization.

- **Why should they want to talk to you?** Explain why it is relevant for them to speak to you on this issue. Who is your organization, what is your knowledge, expertise and legitimacy to speak on this issue?
- **What do you want? What do you offer? What's in it for them?** Decision makers are often busy people. They don't want to just be briefed on issues – they want to know what you expect to get out of the meeting and why that outcome would benefit them (as well as your issue). Very few decision makers are going to take time out of a busy schedule to fit in a meeting when they don't know what the point is – or if they think the organization will just be complaining.

When you have a meeting scheduled, go through the meeting beforehand

- **Plan and rehearse your introductory statement.** You have the opportunity in the first few minutes that you get to speak to set the tone of the meeting and to set out what you would like to get out of the meeting. Its best to be clear about this from the start – otherwise you may end up spending a lot of time discussing what the decision makers wants you to know about the issue and not what you really want to know.



Dialogue with decision maker.

➤➤ Use the tool: Know, Feel, Do to be clear about what you want to achieve from the meeting. Know, Feel, Do builds on the idea that you want to influence people to both be informed, feel a need to act and act for change.

➤➤ Make sure you know as much as possible about the people who will be attending the meeting. What position do they hold, what power do they have, what are their interests and priorities and if possible any information about their personal style and approach. The more you know about them, the better you can tailor your message and establish understanding.

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»» Sometimes it can be easier to get a meeting if more organizations with similar views get together, as it shows that many people are interested in the issue. Be aware that you may have less control of the meeting and the message if you share a meeting with others.

»» It is useful to analyze who is most likely to influence the decision maker you are meeting with (for instance through your stakeholder analysis). Maybe the decision maker cares more about the opinion of the local church leader than your organization. In your meeting you may want to refer to these people and their support for your issue (or even invite them along).

- **Know what you want out of the meeting** and think through questions you would like to ask – and questions that you may be asked.
- **Prepare a short written brief** to leave at the end of the meeting. There may be a note taker at the meeting – but by leaving a brief, you can ensure that your key messages are passed on.

During the meeting

- Be polite, respectful, professional, concise
- Be propositional, not oppositional – as much as possible. Try to present your cause in a way that is solution oriented and interesting to the person you are meeting with.
- Listen, ask questions and try to build a relationship and mutual understanding
- Summarize the meeting at the end – maybe leave a brief, so that they can remember you and your core message.

»» Influencing political decision makers

When influencing politicians and political decision making processes, it is a good idea to:

- Get to know the political system and the decision making processes
- Get to know the key actors and build and maintain relationships
- Get to know the mandate of key decision makers, understand their agendas and interests
- Present your cause in a way that is interesting and solution oriented

This tool paper is inspired by material developed by INTRAC