CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Interest Groups and Associations

Government Accountability Office Citizens
Interagency Collaborators White House
Office of Personnel Management
Congress Interagency Councils State and Local
Governments Unions Inspectors General

Stan Soloway Professional Services Council

INTEREST GROUPS AND ASSOCIATIONS

By Stan Soloway

As an agency head, you will be faced with making scores of decisions, often on complex, highly charged issues. Needless to say, there are many individuals and groups (both inside and outside of government) who would like to influence your decision. As such, a key challenge you will face is evaluating the quality of information that will underpin your decisions. After all, seeking, parsing, and synthesizing information into an actionable framework is an integral part of leadership. The best leaders I've seen throughout my career are those who seek out information and input from diverse sources, and who know how to ask the tough questions of any and all who provide it.

It is also axiomatic that your time is precious and information overload is a constant risk. That's where interest groups and associations can be of real value. By definition, their role is to provide perspectives from across one stakeholder community—be it an industry (generally represented by a trade association) or a profession (generally represented by a professional association). As such, they can serve as important resources and can become "one stop shops" that enable you to gain valuable insight from a wide range of interests without having to communicate directly with each and every member of that stakeholder community.

Make no mistake about it; as an agency leader, you will rapidly be introduced to the alphabet soup of organizations representing your agency's stakeholder community. To optimize their value to you, there are several good rules that you might follow—and insist that your key advisors follow as well.

Rule One: Ask them before they ask you.

Every interest group, whether a trade or professional association or labor union, has its own agenda. As long as you know what their agenda is, don't shy from engaging them in the process of finding solutions to your toughest problems. Often, the best way to maximize the benefit of associations is to proactively present them with specific challenges or questions to which you are seeking answers.

The best organizations will respond with thoughtful inputs that reflect real effort on their part to both understand *your* priorities and needs, as well as to provide substantive strategies for you to consider. Whether you agree with their solutions or not, this outreach allows you to quickly separate the "doers" from the "talkers" and to recognize those organizations where ongoing and open communications are of real value to you, rather than just a political necessity.

Rule Two: Stakeholder consensus cannot always be your goal.

While it is helpful to have alignment with key stakeholder groups around important policy and other priorities, there are limits to the possible. Indeed, when it comes to driving change, some external stakeholders will be as resistant to change as your internal bureaucracy may be. Industries or professions are rarely monolithic, and some have even evolved in ways that mirror your internal bureaucracy.

For example, within the government contractor industry, different associations sometimes have different points of view. In addition, even within individual associations there may be divisions of opinions. As such, every industry and every organization representing elements of that industry will occasionally have difficulty finding consensus on complex issues that affect different elements of their membership differently. Recognize this reality; don't be afraid to challenge it and, most importantly, don't shy away from asking for those conflicting perspectives.

Rule Three: Make external communications a routine, not an exception.

You should ensure a regular flow of two-way communications exists between your office and key associations. Ongoing dialogue is far more effective and useful than episodic meetings driven by immediate crises. These routine communications can significantly aid both sides. Without them, the communications might well be conducted in other more public venues, like the media or on Capitol Hill. The more frequent the dialogue, the less likely you will be surprised about positions or have an unpleasant public debate that might have been avoidable.

Rule Four: Be focused and structured in your communications.

Routine communications and dialogue are not the same as open-ended discussions. Informal, open-ended contact can have value; but when it comes to problem solving, the more focused and structured the communications, the more you will get out of it.

When I conducted roundtable discussions at the Department of Defense, there was always an agenda, composed of specific questions submitted to me or that I had submitted in advance to the associations participating in the roundtable. These structured discussions were not staged or contrived but ensured we used the time and the opportunity wisely and effectively.

Rule Five: Be transparent.

Transparency and openness are essential. Engaging with interest groups and associations and professional organizations is often very valuable. But such communications do not exist in a vacuum. Even when you know a

group is likely to oppose your policies or initiatives, engage them as early and openly as those who are likely to support you. Picking and choosing which organizations to engage is not an option.

Listening to the possible opposition may give you valuable insights, blunt any criticism, or at least keep the lines of communication open. The best associations do their homework and offer substantive input and are essential to the policy process. Moreover, communications with stakeholders across the board is part and parcel of a sound democratic process. Trouble arises most often when government leaders try to avoid communication or talk to only one portion of a stakeholder community.

As an agency leader, you are, by definition, a "change leader." Your role is to successfully implement the new president's vision and agenda. Indeed, these basic rules reflect the fundamental tenets of effective change management as practiced in the most successful institutions. Following them will help you achieve that change and your goals, and provide many valuable insights to help inform your decision making. Moreover, they can help to enhance your agency's credibility—another crucial component of success.

Managing time and information are but two of the most difficult challenges you will face. Interest groups and associations are key to solving those challenges. By effectively integrating them into your process, you can gain the benefit of diverse and numerous voices coming together.

Stan Soloway is President and Chief Executive Officer of the Professional Services Council, the national trade association of the government professional and technical services industry. He previously served in the Clinton administration as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense and Director of the Defense Reform Initiative.