

REMEMBERING THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF SPEAKING WITH LEGISLATORS

1. Thou shall establish a relationship with the legislative assistant.

The legislative assistant has an important job. That person is the gate keeper and controls access to the legislator. Legislators depend on them for information. Don't ignore this person; don't act as though they are unimportant. Be respectful, or you have no chance of getting your message to the legislator.

2. Thou shall know thy message and stay on it.

Develop a couple of main messages. More than that will not keep the attention of the legislator. Simplify to the core issues and stay on those topics.

3. Thou shall know thy audience and tailor thy message to it.

Do your homework in advance. Some legislators are child advocates, some are business people. Tailor messages to the concepts they are familiar with. Package your message according to the person you are speaking with. For example, the child advocate may want to hear how the bill would help children...the business person may be convinced by the same bill increasing revenues by additional jobs in the community. Know your audience and don't make the mistake of trying to convince someone who just voted for the issue! Your message to that person should be "thank you"!

4. Thou shall keep it simple and keep it short.

Keep acronyms to a minimum. Communicate in terms understandable to your audience. Try to have just one topic per meeting, if you are writing a letter, make it one page, maximum. Lengthy white papers look nice, but they are not useful. The closer to the legislative session, the shorter time you will have with a legislator. You may have literally just a minute or two at some times, so fine tune your message.

5. Thou shall not lie.

Your credibility is very important. If you tell a lie and the legislator unknowingly takes that information forward, you will likely never have credibility with that person again...no matter what you do to try to fix the situation.

6. Thou shall tell the whole story.

They will hear both sides anyway, use this as your chance to give your perspective as to why one side of the issue is better than the other. Tell all facets of the story so the legislator will be prepared and informed.

7. Thou shall not threaten, ever.

Be respectful. There will be times when a legislator will vote against your view, perhaps of necessity. Don't burn bridges; you will want to come back another day to speak with that legislator.

8. Thou shall become thy legislator's "expert."

Every legislator has areas they don't know completely about. They depend on people they trust. You will want to be that person. Establish credibility, trust, and a relationship. Begin by bringing local legislators out to see your agency. Let them see what we see... a much needed service for kids and families who depend on us. Get together with other like-minded people or agencies. Numbers do count, consider forming a coalition of TFC agencies or use even a broader base and form a coalition of child welfare advocates from all forms of child serving agencies.

9. Thou shall contribute time and/or money to thy legislator.

If you find someone important to your agency and can support them, it brings another level to the relationship. If your candidate loses an election, begin again by taking the opportunity to introduce yourself, and your agency, to the new person.

10. Thou shall not wait until the last minute.

Contacting a legislator as he is running for a vote is not the time. While they are active in a legislative session you need to understand that a 5 minute meeting equals one hour in a less active time. Legislators work 20 hours a day during active times and simply can't focus on you as well during that time. Use time wisely...begin early.

Thanks to Bill Elwood, Consultant to the Virginia Coalition of Private Provider Associations for these wonderful words of wisdom!