



Empowering the Leaders of Tomorrow

# BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH DECISION-MAKERS

## Outreach

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Building relationships with decision-makers is essential to move change forward. Decision-makers are people who directly impact your cause through their decision making ability. As examples, they can be the school board, student government, and elected officials at various levels of government. Once you decide who you wish to build a relationship with, find a way to connect with them.

Make a connection in one of the following three ways:

- 1) Reach out via phone, online or email
- 2) Have a friend or colleague who knows the decision-maker introduce you
- 3) Go to an event the leader will attend to speak with them

The best way to make a lasting impression is to meet in person, share what you are interested in or concerned about, and assure the decision maker that you will follow up. You do not have to have all of the answers when you meet—leave opportunity for more discussions in the future.

Sometimes members of the decision-maker's staff will be available on their behalf. Reaching out to them can be just as important and productive as connecting with the influencer themselves, as they are usually the person's most trusted allies.

## Strategy

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- Figure out what value and perspective you can bring to the relationship.
- Explore how exactly the leader can help in their role or scope of influence.
  - Be as specific and measurable as possible and use data, personal experience, and reliable research to back you up.
  - E.g. We are hoping that you would be able to help our group submit our written proposal and help us increase the funding for and number of family-focused events in our community by the end of the year.
- Recruit friends, family, or other community members to get involved and decide roles they can play—more people shows strength to decision-makers.
- Know the issues, bills, and policies that they support and which they oppose.
  - Try to maintain objectivity and thoroughly understand the topic.

## Messaging Fundamentals

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Do your research, learning how communities that had similar problems approached them. Look for data and evidence to support your experiences, stances, and recommendations.



Next, create three clear, catchy, and consistent key messages that you aim to spread. These messages should tell your personal story and use your personal experiences. Sharing your background, experiences, and personal interests are ways for others to understand you from an emotional standpoint. They will also help make your message stick and be more persuasive.

Clear, catchy, and consistent messages are:

- 1) **Compelling**—connecting people to your thoughts and feelings
- 2) **Specific**—explaining the problem using specific incidents and details that effectively show the point you are trying to make
- 3) **Actionable**—giving people something to do. Make them examine their perceptions (what they thought was true) and actions, and create policy that makes sense.

## Promote Your Messages

Create materials, such as facts sheets, that explain your messages and approach. Ideally keep your fact sheets and other materials to one page, double-sided, so it is easy to get necessary information.

Use social media, like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, to spread your messages and materials. Create hashtags to promote your messages. Post about and publicize your messages on your account and on decision-makers' accounts, as well as on groups and pages. Also follow people and pages that align with your messages and approach, so you can connect and learn from them.

## Connecting with Decision-Makers: Key Rules to Follow

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Building a relationship always starts with a conversation. The most effective way to get to know decision-makers is to meet with them in person.

- Schedule an in-person meeting
- Create a meeting agenda with your main points so the person can prepare
- Make eye contact, shake hands and be sure to politely greet the influencer
- Introduce yourself and the community you are from
- Drive the flow of the conversation, asking more questions than you answer, so you can learn
  - However, keep your time talking short, aiming for 30% talking and 70% active listening, showing the person in power that you hear and understand what they are saying
- At the end of the meeting, come to an agreement with the decision-maker about the topic, decide together on a clear next step(s)
- Say thank you at the end of the meeting and send a thank you note (email or card) — at most — One day after the meeting, and express your intention to meet again, if necessary
- You do not have to have all the answers. Offering to research and get information back to a key person can strengthen the relationship. The key is to keep the conversation going.