



growing up GLOBAL

ADVOCACY TIPS FOR GETTING THE SUPPORT OF OPINION LEADERS AND POLICYMAKERS

Advocacy takes place any time opinions are shared. The most effective advocacy efforts determine which policymakers or opinion leaders should be convinced to support the issue and offers exactly what they should do to show their support.

Use these tips when seeking their support.

Set goals and objectives. The goal should be a broad statement that provides a vision of the advocacy efforts' anticipated accomplishments. Objectives should have a clear time frame, and be measurable and realistic.

Target efforts. Assess which opinion leaders' agreement and support will be necessary for the advocacy campaign to reach its goals. Decide whom to approach and in what order. Start with people who are very supportive and move on to those who are somewhat supportive or undecided in their views. Be sensitive to any opinion leaders who should be approached very early in the campaign.

Be gracious and respectful. Always begin by thanking the opinion leader for his or her time. Opinion leaders who support adolescent reproductive health may be taking a controversial and difficult position in the community. Sincere thanks will be greatly appreciated.

Be professional. Be professional in both dress and manner. Avoid criticizing other leaders, public figures, or organizations.

Be focused. Talk only about one subject in the visit or letter. Advocates frequently feel they have to share as much information as possible with a leader, but too much information will only confuse the message and dilute the point, especially if the opinion leader's time is limited.

Be prepared. As a part of preparation, try to determine the opinion leader's position on the issue. The position can be discerned through comments he or she has made, the kind of events the leader attends, his/her political affiliation, and past policy decisions. Working within a network helps with this research, because at least one organization will be likely to have had some contact with the opinion leader. Explore the opinion leader's personal connections with youth: is he or she a parent, uncle, aunt, or grandparent of adolescents? Design a persuasive approach that is based on knowledge about the leader's followers, views, background, and interests. Different arguments compel and move different people. Role playing what to say at the meeting and how to respond to possible comments will help in preparations.

Make a personal connection. Let the opinion leader know about friends, relatives and colleagues in common. A personal connection may make the difference in the effectiveness of the visit. Leaders are often more likely to remember and think favorably about a visit that had some personal connection to them.

Be an information source. Some opinion leaders have so much to think about that they cannot focus too long on any one issue. They may not be as informed as they would like to be, so fill the information gap. Encourage leaders to ask questions about the issue. Do not imply that the leader is not intelligent or knowledgeable. Instead, be helpful and informed.

Tell the truth. There is no faster way to lose credibility than to give false or misleading information to an opinion leader.

Know who else supports the issue. Opinion leaders like to know which other leaders and organizations support the position. Providing this information illustrates support and may provide the opinion leader with additional reasons to support the position. When possible, bring community members—including young people—on visits to leaders.

Know who disagrees with the issue. The opinion leader may be faced with a difficult decision if another powerful institution or individual opposes the issue. Anticipate who the opposition will be and what their positions are. Discuss with the opinion leader the potential arguments of the opposition, and why the leader should not support that position. When there is opposition, the ability to anticipate criticism and defend the issue will make a difference.

Acknowledge when more information is needed. If an opinion leader wants information that is not available, or asks something not known, admit a lack of knowledge. Then, offer to get the information he or she is looking for and do so as quickly as possible after the meeting.

Make a specific request. Walk in knowing exactly what the opinion leader will be asked to do in support of the issue. For example, advocates might request that

Adapted from: A. Penn, *Advocating for Adolescent Reproductive Health in Eastern Europe and Central Asia* (Washington, DC: Advocates for Youth, 2004).

the leader put his or her name on a letter, change a school policy, answer a question, make a public endorsement, or support increased funding for youth programs. Ask directly and attempt to get a direct answer.

Follow up. Find out if the opinion leader did what he or she committed to doing. Send a letter of thanks after the conversation, and restate the position. Thank the leader for

any supportive actions. Politely ask for an explanation if he or she has failed to follow up on promises.

Do not create enemies. It is easy to get emotional over strongly felt issues. Be sure to leave the relationship with the opinion leader on good terms to permit working with him or her again. Do not argue heatedly, and never threaten a leader. Even if he or she opposes this issue, the opinion leader could be a strong supporter on another!

STRENGTHEN ADVOCACY EFFORTS BY WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Many NGOs seek to involve young people in the design, implementation, and evaluation of youth-serving programs. Youth involvement provides the organization with valuable insight into the needs of adolescents.

Youth involvement is equally important in the development and implementation of an advocacy campaign. Young people can provide accurate insights into the effects of various policies, or lack of policies, on their peers, and can help an advocacy network better define its goals, objectives, and strategies. The presence of youth in all network events and activities serves as a reminder of the issues which bring the members together.

However, youth involvement is more than just young people being present at a meeting or serving as spokespeople. Young people should play as important roles in the network as do adult members, and they should participate in decisionmaking, planning, and implementation of activities.

Here are tips for working with young people and involving them meaningfully in advocacy efforts.

- If the network or organization does not have direct access to adolescents, contact other youth serving organizations in the community. **Invite young people** who work with those programs to come and speak informally about their efforts.
- **Discuss youth involvement with other organizations** and identify those which are successful at involving youth in their activities. Seek information and materials that will encourage youth involvement in the advocacy campaign.
- **Find locations and times for meetings that are acceptable for both young people and adults.** Young people, too, should be kept informed about plans and meeting times.
- **Begin with activities that will help build communication between youth and adults.** Young people may need time to become comfortable before speaking up in front of adults. Adults may also need to examine their beliefs about adolescents and adolescent sexuality before they are prepared to listen to young people's opinions on the topic.
- It may take time and effort to get young people to participate fully in the network. **Work to help young people feel comfortable.** Do not assume that, if a young person is not speaking, that he or she has no opinion. Ask youth to contribute during meetings and discussions. Be open and nonjudgmental about young people's insights and suggestions. Let them know that their involvement is important and valued.
- **Provide training and mentorship to build the skills and confidence of young people.** Young people may need information about adolescent health, the political situation, or reproductive health programs. Young people may also need training to become effective communicators and to feel comfortable speaking with the media or with policymakers.
- **Obtain agreement of all network members that young people are equals.** Youth should participate as much as possible in the decision making and should have the right to vote and hold leadership positions.
- **Use the expertise of youth.** Do not discredit young people's contributions as "idealistic." Young people are much more likely to contribute when their contributions are taken seriously.
- **Be realistic in setting expectations.** Some adults may be frustrated by the time and effort needed to integrate young people fully into the network. Be honest about your expectations for the project, the young people's contributions, and the network's benefit from youth participation. Trying to do too much at once may disappoint or frustrate everyone.
- **Be prepared to offer support.** Consider what is needed to involve a broad variety of community members, including youth, in the project. Support may include financial assistance, transportation, training, and information.
- **Make the work interactive and fun.** Like adults, young people are more likely to become and remain active in projects that are interesting and fulfilling.
- **Do not make assumptions about any individuals, including youth.**