

# **Seven Steps to becoming a Citizen Activist** By Nick Licata

Despite who is elected as President or elected to Congress or City Hall, each citizen has the ability and the tools to influence whether good or bad things happen. But you must be willing to do something about it.

To gain political power you don't have to be a super hero or dedicate your life to activism. However, you should know what you want and how to get it.

This brochure briefly outlines the steps toward making effective change based on the more detailed lessons described in ***Becoming a Citizen Activist – Stories, Strategies and Advice for Changing Our World.***

## **First**

### **Complaining is therapeutic - not an action plan**

When meeting with a public official you must explain the problem you want addressed and what you want that person to do. It should not be so general a request that the politician can nod and say he or she supports your goal and will work toward it. That is fine but not enough!

Make your ask for something specific and measurable. For instance, ask the politician to hold a press conference, issue a statement, hold a public hearing, be the main sponsor on a piece of legislation or work with you to write that legislation. All of these options must be tied to a specific time line. And one that is not so distant that it can be postponed indefinitely.

Present the problem and your request on no more than 2 pages, which should include your contact information.

When you leave it with them ask for a specific date when they can get back to you.

This is the first step in gaining momentum for making greater changes. Demonstrate that by working with you, they can taste their own success. If you can only meet with the public official's staff, meet with that person and follow the same routine. However, also ask for confirmation that the politician has personally received your request.

## **Second**

### **Know how government works**

No matter whether it is a city, state or federal government there are basic structural and procedural features that they all share. Know what they are and how they work.

They all have issue committees and chairs of those committees. Determine in advance what committee will deal with your issue. You can do that by either looking at the committee title or looking at what issues it has dealt with. Almost all levels of government have this information on their websites.

Know who the committee chair is and members of the committee. Do research on them. What groups have endorsed them? You can find this out from looking at their past or current campaign websites. Find out if their campaign contribution donors are listed on any government websites. Find out if you know any of the groups or donors.

Know the schedule for introducing and passing legislation. For instance, how long does it take for a piece of legislation to be introduced before coming before the full deliberative body? Who has the authority to introduce it? How many sponsors are needed to move it forward?

Find a committee member who will work with your group on some level. Best if they can hold a hearing on your issue. But if not that, see if they will allow testimony before a committee meeting or at a committee meeting. Or at a minimum bring the issue up at the committee meeting to get it aired publicly.

## **Third**

### **Build momentum by finding allies**

You cannot win working alone. Strength comes from numbers. Reach out to individuals and groups to increase the chance of success. Start with people you know: neighbors, workers, those from a religious community and finally any citizens that may be serving on citizen advisory groups to the city, state or congress. Providing

even a simple petition, on paper or on the Internet, shows that the issue has more than a handful of supporters.

If the issue is geographically based, approach the leadership of the local community council or religious organization. Even if just one of that organization's board members is willing to sign in support of the issue, it will make an impression on a politician. Also, approach former elected officials to sign on, which may help garner media coverage.

If it is a non-geographically based issue, invite a representative from a national interest group or union to speak out. If they must travel to your city, see if you can cover their travel costs. Use that need as an opportunity to hold fundraising events and attract a broader base of support. If you have a noted speaker, request that they speak before a committee, a public forum or a hearing and invite the media to cover it.

Ask your supporters, including allied politicians, to contact potential sympathetic groups for a letter of support. The point is to show politicians and the public that the issue goes beyond the immediate advocating group from just one district or interest community.

## **Fourth**

### **Use facts and question the reliability of the opposition's**

Using hard data gives the media something to include in their coverage. It also shores up support among those who may have doubts about the merit of an issue. Using facts demonstrates that the advocates know their subject matter.

Encourage supportive elected officials to share government reports from departments and drafts of legislation under consideration. If an agency refuses to release information, then the issue becomes "Why are they hiding this information?" It puts the opposition on the defense and forces them to account for their behavior.

If the opposition cites a survey to derail your effort, demand to see the entire survey instrument, all questions, responses and demographics collected. Again, if they refuse, attack their creditability because of their lack of openness and accountability. Once you receive their information, look for inconsistencies and expose them. All surveys have multiple ways of being interpreted, pursue them.

Conduct your own opinion survey on the issue. You do not have to spend \$10,000

for one. A reliable survey with a couple of questions can cost under a \$1,000. Consider using university students and faculty to assist with one. You just need one strong fact to stand out to derail the other side by forcing the media to include it in their coverage.

## **Fifth**

### **Get the word out**

Even after you make a specific request and have strong allies, you still need to keep the public informed of your efforts and the relevance of the issue. Make a list of journalists and bloggers who might cover your issue. Personally contact them to tell them what you have accomplished, no matter how minor it may seem.

You want to show that the issue has the attention of a number of people and groups. And that it has momentum. Reporters want to see movement, something that is developing, and something that is changing the public discussion or could significantly change the political landscape.

If you hold a protest action, follow it up with having your participants post on Facebook and tweet with photos and comments. Make sure that your supporters share your group's posts and retweet them. This requires having an email list serve to your supporters to remind them to spread the information among their friends and media contacts.

Hold an open forum on the issue at your place of worship after a service, at a public library community room or even at a city hall council chamber during lunch hour. Try to get a public official or sympathetic organization to host the event. Invite all public officials to attend, even if they do not speak their attendance will be recognized.

## **Sixth**

### **Celebrate every win no matter how small**

Don't dwell on the goals not achieved because you will never achieve all of them. Instead, with every struggle make sure that you know what a minimum win looks like from the beginning. When that is achieved, celebrate it. Then remind supporters that it is just one victory and that the next day or week the fun begins again in fighting for and winning the next battle. A meaningful and joyful journey is the end objective, because there will always be something to work on.

Integrate cultural activities into every organizing effort, because people like to have fun and if it isn't fun, it's harder to grow your movement. Have a parade, a party, a dance or a movie; any opportunity to enjoy oneself with others keeps people engaged.

Make these activities open to everyone, because a growing supportive community achieves success far more than a stagnant or shrinking one.

## Seventh

### Believe in Democracy

If you don't believe you have the power to change your life, it will not change. If you withdraw from participating in the democratic process, those that remain engaged are those that benefit most from the status quo and have the most to lose from any change. So, things are likely to remain the same.

As a result cynicism replaces hope, leading to distrust in democracy and a democratic government. If that happens, those who want to shrink a government that is accountable to the public, and replace it with a corporate or elitist model that is not open and accountable to all citizens will determine your future. That may be good for a business or closed special interest groups but not for the general public whose needs and rights can only be guaranteed when citizens participate in guiding their democratic institutions.

Always keep in mind that being a citizen is knowing that you have the opportunity to make a difference and then acting according to your needs.

**Nick Licata** served on the Seattle City Council 18 years, was the founding chair of **Local Progress**, a nation-wide network of municipal public officials and was named Most Valuable Local Official by *The Nation*.

College classes across the country, along with community organizations, are using ***Becoming A Citizen Activist – Stories, Strategies and Advice for Changing Our World***, to help students and citizens make our democracy more accountable and transparent.

More information is available at: [WWW.BecomingaCitizenActivist.Org](http://WWW.BecomingaCitizenActivist.Org)

