

If Politicians Actually Want to Make Change, They Have to Think Like Organizers

Seattle Councilmember Nick Licata used his organizer skills to fight inequality from inside City Hall. Now he's taking his approach to other cities.
From an article by Josh Cohen May 19, 2016 *The Nation*

Six Strategies

To empower your constituents
and help get you the votes you
need to pass progressive
legislation

“What has fueled Seattle’s progressive victories, isn’t some mystery potion or innate Northwestern goodness, but the same hard work that has forced progress in other cities: grassroots organizing, tenacity, and political allies,”

This simple little pamphlet outlines the steps that council members can take to distribute the power they have as elected officials to their constituents to create a partnership with them for improving their lives.

**First Step - -
Have them recognize that complaining is not a solution**

How many times have you had constituents come into your office making legitimate complaints. You listen and nod in agreement. Then having felt that they have been heard they prepare to leave. **DON’T LET THEM LEAVE YOUR OFFICE WITHOUT MAKING AN ASK.**

The first step is to work with them to define a specific remedy. One that is not so distant in the future to be put off by endless studies. Ideally, it is something that can be accomplished within a week or two. It’s the first step in gaining momentum for making changes; by showing them that by working with you, they can taste success.

Second Step

Explain both the technical and social dynamics of city hall politics

Share with your constituent knowledge on how your city government works. Many citizens don't understand the committee structure or the legislative process. As an elected citizen, you have learned these details. Tell them which relevant committees would address their issue. Describe the council members on that committee and recommend who they should approach with your help to sponsor or co-sponsor the legislation. In addition, if they have staff, or if the council has staff, let them know who they are and how they can be approached.

Describe how the committee chair votes. Let them know who the chair is close to on the council and in the community. These people will likely influence the chair; they need to be approached and convinced to help on the issue.

Work with your constituents to have their issue brought before the relevant committee. If your council has open committee meetings, which they should, then see that there is time to take testimony before the committee either in a public period of comment or as a guest to sit at the table with the council members to explain an issue from a community view. Prepare them before hand on how to present information and to bring no more than a 2-page handout.

Third Step – build momentum by finding allies

Encourage your constituents to reach out to bring in new allies as a way of increasing the chance of success. Start with those people they know, neighbors, workers, those from the same religious community and finally any citizens that may be serving on citizen advisory groups to the city. Even a simple petition, on paper or on line, shows that the issue has more than a handful of supporters.

If the issue is geographically based, work to approach the leadership of the local community council or religious organization. Even if just one of their board members is willing to sign up in support of the issue, it could open a conversation with other council members. Also, approach former elected officials to sign on, which may help garner media coverage.

If it is a non-geographically based issue, invite in a representative from a national interest group or union that is engaged in this issue. If they need money to cover their costs, use that as a focal point for holding events to build community and raise funds. Moreover, when they arrive offer to have them speak before a council committee and invite the media to cover it.

Approach neutral parties, like the League of Women Voters, or any other local civic group, to write a letter of support. The point is to show the opposition that the issue goes beyond the immediate advocating group.

Fourth Step – use facts and data, and question the reliability of opposition’s information

Using hard data gets the attention of the media and gives them something to include in their coverage. It also shores up support among those who are or favorably inclined but have doubts. Demonstrate that the advocates know their subject matter.

As an elected official, you should have access to information that community groups do not. Use that power of access to release statistics or data collected by various city departments. If they refuse to release that 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 sites a survey to derail your effort, demand to see the entire survey instrument, all questions, responses and demographics collected. Again, if they refuse, then you raise the issue of a lack of openness and accountability – an excellent position to be in. 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 few questions can cost under a \$1,000. Consider using university students and faculty to assist with one. Keep in mind, 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 Step – Get the word out

Politicians have the ability to get media coverage. Use it! Don't fear taking a strong stand, because most people will forget what you even said, but they will remember that you said something that was important because the media covered it.

If there are protests, talk to the media about why there are protests. Use the incident by pointing out how future protests could be avoided by taking certain actions.

Use all media tools. If you send out an e-newsletter, include information about the issues that your constituency is organizing around. You don't have to say what you've done, say what you want done and how you are going to get there. Ask your constituents to re-tweet your points so that they reach as many people as possible.

Hold a forum in city hall on the issue at hand during lunch hour in the council chamber that is open to the public. Invite both sides on an issue, because it is more likely to get those on the council who are undecided to attend and it will garner more media coverage. If you cannot use city hall, find a community hall, church, library or even a tavern to hold a forum.

If you have surplus campaign funds because you are a sure winner, use your campaign material to educate the public on an issue.

Sixth Step – Encourage optimism by celebrating every win no matter how small and believing in democracy

Don't dwell on the goals not achieved because you will never achieve all of them. Instead, with every struggle that you join your constituency on, make sure that you know what a minimum win looks like from the beginning. When that is achieved, celebrate it. Then remind folks that it is just one stage and that the next day or week the fun begins again in fighting for and winning the next battle.

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. Everyone loves a parade.

Encourage your constituents to listen to the opposition to understand where they are coming from. Knowing your opposition improves your insight into their strengths and weaknesses. And that makes you smarter, more confident and a more articulate proponent of democracy because you are practicing it.

Keep in mind that the greatest obstacle to achieving progress is cynicism – distrust in democracy and a democratic government. Those who want to shrink government speak of freedom and liberty but a weakened democracy cannot protect those freedoms.

Nick Licata served on the Seattle City Council 18 years and was the founding chair of Local Progress. *The Nation* named him Most Valuable Local Official in 2012.

His book ***Becoming A Citizen Activist*** was released in January 2016. Six colleges are using it for classroom texts and more community organizations are using it as an organizing tool.

He has written on a number of topics including his visits to ALEC conferences. Reviews of his book as well as his other writings are available on the website.

[WWW.BecomingaCitizenActivist.Org](http://www.becomingacitizenactivist.org)

Contact him at nick@becomingacitizenactivist.org

