

How to be a Strategic Advocate¹

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Policy advocates attempt to change the arc of history by influencing the course of events on matters important to the community. People who engage in this activity include individuals acting alone, spontaneous groups, informal associations, leaders and members of established organizations, paid professionals, government employees, elected officials and more.

As with all specialties, some practitioners are consistently more effective than others. We have had opportunities to watch some of these exceptional leaders from close range over several decades, and we have discovered that each has their own style, but they also follow very similar patterns when it comes to analyzing a challenge and deciding what to do. When we compared their approaches to some of the leading academic works on politics and public policy formation we found considerable overlap.

This essay is our best effort to synthesize what we have found into a set of tools that can help anyone to become a more effective public policy advocate.

The Big Four:

Effective policy advocates are constantly analyzing and testing how they understand four basic questions:

- *What is the **situation**?*
- *What is our **strategy**?*
- *What are the most likely future **scenarios**?*
- *In light of these scenarios, how can we **improve** our situation assessment and our strategy?*

The Situation:

There are many available tools and techniques for assessing a situation; at a minimum, these five subjects need to be addressed:

1. **What has been happening?** What is the *problem* or *opportunity* that has captured our attention? What is our time horizon? What has led up to this moment? Is a proposal for policy change on the agenda; if so, what forum and what are the rules? How serious and urgent is the problem? What are the internal institutional needs of our group that must be addressed?
2. **Who is “we?”** What is the structure of our group? What do we want? What policies do we support (and oppose) to achieve our goals? What other groups and interests align with ours? What are our resources of influence and our advocacy style? What

¹ This is the current version of the essay we have used in the opening class, both at Vanderbilt and at Evergreen.

are our perceptions of causal relationships, policy beliefs and world view? What Theories of Change do we subscribe to (see No. 6 under Strategies)?

3. **Who is “they?”** What groups are currently engaged in advocacy that could threaten our interests or block us? What do they want and why? What are their resources of influence and style? What is their existing or expected action plan? What other organizations or groups could smooth or block the path to the courses of action we want? What are their core values, perceptions of causal relationships and policy beliefs?
4. **Who are the key players** in this drama? Which office holders or officials are in the chain of command to make review or revise decisions? What other individuals or institutions are in a position to be consulted or otherwise directly influence the outcome of critical decisions?
5. **What is the power alignment?** Is the policy domain evenly contested or does one “side” dominate? If one coalition is dominant, does it work in a collaborative and cooperative fashion with weaker groups on some occasions, or is it constantly seeking to suppress or weaken competitors?

Our Strategy:

An advocacy strategy needs to include at least the following elements:

1. **A Theory of Change**, a spoken or unspoken hypothesis about how and why the behavior and choices of key actors can best be influenced or changed;
2. **A Desired Path going forward**, including short term objectives and their connection to longer term goals;
3. **Targets**, people, institutions or groups whose actions can shift the flow of events toward the desired path;
4. **Messages**, stories and ideas that will frame the conflict in a compelling way and influence what the Targets think, feel and do;
5. **Tactics**, the actions that will convey the Messages to the Targets.

All advocacy Tactics deliver a Message to those who hear it. All too often, advocates’ strategies fail because the Message is garbled or ambiguous, the Desired Path is vague or internally contradictory, or, in the worst case scenario, a poorly considered Tactic misses the intended Target altogether but generates resistance and counter-mobilization from an unintended audience.

At their best, *strategic* advocates develop a plan for multiple, coordinated Tactics that convey clear Messages to the intended Targets which, combined with other factors in the Situation, lead the Key Players to make the decisions necessary to shift the flow of events towards the Desired Path.

The Scenarios:

The most important characteristic that distinguishes strategic advocates from their more conventional peers is the habit of constructing Scenarios about the likely course of future events.

By “playing the movie forward” they prepare for changes in the Situation, and test their analysis of the Situation as well as alternative Strategies. Good scenarios touch on at least the following:

1. Results from *policy-making* processes now under way or planned;
2. Trends or likely changes in the underlying *problem*, with and without policy change;
3. Relevant *political* factors such as elections, appointments and political movements.²

Constant Adaptation and Improvement:

The Problems addressed by policy advocates are complex, and the flow of events in the related Policy stream and the Political streams is unpredictable. As soon as a plan is made the Situation will change, sometimes radically, opening up opportunities for different Tactics and Strategies while closing off others.

One last reason for advocates to practice the steps in the Framework when they have the luxury of time, and to make it a habit of working through Scenarios based on different Strategies and Situations is that things can change so fast, and often do. Some of the most important decisions any advocate will ever make happen so fast that intuition is all s/he will have to rely on, and intuition is the residue of planning and practice.

Using the Framework in Practice

There is no no right place to start and no “correct” order for answering the questions in the Framework since every answer affects all the others. At times conversation moves naturally to the Situation, at others to an assessment of alternative Strategies or competing Theories of Change. Thinking of the answers as variables, most of them will be fixed in a given situation, especially in the short run. Still, by systematically going over and over the same ground deficiencies may become glaringly apparent; new Strategic opportunities can appear, even breakthroughs; seemingly hopeless situations become amenable to change.

Finally, whether the Framework is used by individuals or as a consensus-building tool for coalitions and groups, it is an error to imagine that it will produce a clear, permanent and fixed course of action. Strategic advocates follow a plan, developed in advance, based on a systematic analysis of their situation; they are also flexible in the sense that they make adjustments on-the-fly as circumstances change. They are also honest with themselves, and in the face of persistent failure they pause periodically to entertain the possibility that their chosen strategy or one of their principal assumptions is flawed.

² The metaphor of three “streams” that flow along independently most of the time—the policy stream, the problem stream and the political stream—was first developed by political scientist John Kingdon. [Kingdon argued that a “window of opportunity”](#) for major changes in an existing policy occur when the three streams merge. We have found that this model and its cousin, “[Punctuated Equilibrium](#),” to reassure students who become frustrated over bad policies that appear to be protected by unassailable coalitions and interest groups.

Critical Skills

Three practices will improve the quality of strategic thinking:

1. *See as clearly as possible from the perspective of others*, including those of differing opinions, to understand their motivations and likely decisions. When disagreements are sharp there is a natural tendency to demonize others—especially when they are demonizing *you*. Seeing them as they see themselves will help you understand and anticipate how they are likely to react and sometimes reveal opportunities for defusing opposition or even collaborating.
2. *Anchor your work in vision*. Every advocate is tempted to act in ways that conflict with the values they and their organizations claim to live by. Stay aware of your short-term and long-term goals, remaining focused on your vision in the heat of the moment when it is easy to go off track or mirror the opposing side rather than be true to your organization's values.
3. *Be aware of your own emotions*, especially anger and fear, which can cloud realistic assessment of options. Find ways to observe wrongdoing, mendacity and deceit without being controlled by your personal response to the provocations of others.