**Stakeholder Relationships**

*Chapter Goals: After reading this chapter, you will be able to:*

* *Explain some best practices for forming relationships with stakeholders*
* *Differentiate between different types of stakeholders*
* *Understand the challenges around forming coalitions in advocacy work*

Part I - Advocacy is All About Relationships

Relationships are an essential part of advocacy work - you could even say that *advocacy is all about relationships*. When you are trying to make change in a community, developing strong relationships with a variety of different stakeholders is key. Whether you are trying to pass beneficial legislation, defeat legislation that is harmful to your cause, or raise awareness about an issue, relationships are important. In the next chapter, we will discuss creating influence. Relationships are at the heart of any mutually beneficial relationship, so the tips and tricks that we go over in this chapter around building relationships with different stakeholders should set you up to create influence.

When thinking about relationships within the context of advocacy, it’s often good to start with who you know. Who are you connected to? Who is in your circle: family, friends, other parents, neighbors, and maybe even community leaders? Regardless of how large your cycle is, your larger network likely knows a sizable and powerful group of people who are prime to lead community change.

After you’ve started thinking about who you know, start thinking about what you are going to ask people to do in your advocacy effort. Are you asking people to just learn more about a specific school choice issue? Or, are you asking them to take a specific action like showing up to a school board meeting or going door-to-door to raise awareness about an issue? It’s likely that you are going to ask different people to take different actions. The actions that you are going to ask people to take should be in alignment with your advocacy goals - this is why we take the time to set goals!

Once you’ve started to think about who you know and what you are going to ask them to do, you can really start to plan around how you want to build relationships with different stakeholders. In this chapter, we will first give you some suggestions for building relationships with stakeholders and then talk about the different types of stakeholders out there.

Part II - Forming Strong Relationships

After doing that initial thinking around who you know and what you are going to ask people to do, you can start brainstorming around how you are going to form relationships. While you are going to want to approach each stakeholder differently, there are some general rules that you can follow when cultivating relationships.

* **Do your research** - Forming relationships starts even before you talk with someone about advocacy for a school choice issue in your community. You want to do your research before you start engaging with individuals. First, think about how you know this person and how you got connected with them in your advocacy efforts. Then think about their interests. What parts of school choice do you think these stakeholders are most interested in? If you don’t know the stakeholder personally, you can do some initial research on Facebook about their interests. If the stakeholder is a community leader, you definitely want to take the time to understand their background, what connects them to public service, and if they have any positions or beliefs on relevant issues. When you are forming relationships with stakeholders, it is best to appear prepared, so take the time to do some initial background research.
* **Balance listening and talking** - When you start forming relationships with stakeholders, this will likely require conversation. In your conversation, make sure you are balancing speaking and listening. While it’s important to make your points, you also want to give your stakeholder time to share their story and fully respond to your questions. If anything, you should be leading the conversation, but the stakeholder will likely be speaking more. If you are able to plan what questions that you want to ask, much of the conversation will consist of your stakeholder responding to those critical questions. Ideally, your conversations will be natural, with a natural balance and flow between you and the stakeholder.
* **Have a goal and be clear -** For each interaction that you have with a stakeholder, you should have a goal. Maybe the goal of an email is to invite a stakeholder for a conversation over coffee. Or, maybe you are meeting a stakeholder over lunch and the goal of your conversation is having the stakeholder attend a school board meeting with you. Regardless of what the goal is, each interaction that you have with a stakeholder should be purposeful. If you are asking the stakeholder to do something, that ask should be super clear. Regardless of how big or small that task is, your stakeholder should know exactly what you are asking them to do after the meeting.
* **Follow-up** - Make sure you follow-up with each stakeholder. Forming relationships with stakeholders takes time and it will likely require multiple different touch points and conversations. That’s why you should make sure you are completing follow-up after each conversation. If your conversation has clear next steps, make sure you are following up on those and not forgetting about them. If there aren’t tangible action items after your conversation, that’s totally fine. Still, don’t be a stranger and make sure you are regularly checking in with people and keeping them updated about your advocacy work.
* **Tailor your outreach** - You should tailor your outreach for each stakeholder. Stakeholders should not feel like you are sending them a template email or reading a list of set questions. Instead, your interactions should be individually tailored to each stakeholder. If you are meeting with another parent, it’s likely that you can keep it fairly casual and really talk about your experience. If you are speaking with a lawmaker, you might want to make your conversation more formal and include some research and data in addition to your story. Each person that you connect with should feel like you individually tailored your conversation to them. This will likely impress the stakeholder and show that you are being thoughtful and strategic in your outreach efforts.

**Activity**

Identify one person who you want to build a relationship with. Try to have this person be related to your advocacy work around school choice. For this person:

* Do some initial research on them
* Think of a goal that you could set around building a relationship with them
* Plan how you would like to reach out to this person
* What would be some potential follow ups that you would like to pursue with this person after your meet

**Tips and Tricks**: When you are building relationships with a variety of different people, **we highly recommend** **tracking your conversations.** You don’t have to create an elaborate system for tracking all of the conversations that you have; a simple spreadsheet or journal works great. Check out this [relationship tracker](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1aJRzNZ4dh3UwJiIHmStFPESWdzTAkYaHJHfsmGCeewQ/edit#gid=0) that we put together. Feel free to use this, or come up with a system that works for you.

At a minimum, tracking your conversations will allow you to keep everything straight. It will help you not forget any meetings and see how busy your week is. Additionally, if you track your conversations, it will be easier to follow our guidance around building relationships with stakeholders. It will be easier to do your research and know your goal going into each conversation. Also, it will be much easier to make sure you are completing the necessary follow-up after each conversation. Follow-up is critical - it shows that you are responsible and dedicated to the cause of school choice. A conversation tracker will make quality follow-up that much easier.

Next, we will give you an idea about some of the different types of stakeholders out there.

Part III - Different Types of Stakeholders

In your advocacy efforts to advance school choice, you will likely encounter a number of different types of stakeholders. While the landscape of each community is going to be different, here are a few different types of stakeholders that you can expect to encounter.

* **Your peers** - These are the people most connected to your advocacy efforts. As a parent, this will likely be other parents. With your peers, you want to build your message and grow your support. When working with your peers, make sure you are sharing your story and also hearing the stories of others interested and involved in educational equity work. Building time for sharing stories is a great trick for developing relationships with your base.
* **General community members** - This group includes people in the community, but who might not have a direct relationship with your advocacy effort for school choice. Maybe these community members aren’t parents. Or maybe they are parents, but their children attend school in a different district. With general community members, you will likely have to do more informing - it’s likely they will be less connected to your work than your peers.
* **Community leaders** - These are the stakeholders in leadership roles across your community. This group is inclusive of elected leaders, faith leaders, directors of nonprofits and community serving organizations. Building relationships with these stakeholders might be more of a challenge - these individuals are often very busy and it can be difficult to get on their schedule. When you are building relationships with stakeholders in this group it is important to share your story, but also be prepared to share more research and data.

One way that you can see different stakeholders coming together is in the building of coalitions. In the next section, we will go into more depth around building coalitions.

Part IV - Building and Managing Coalitions

When you ask advocates about building and sustaining relationships, it’s likely they will bring up coalitions. **Coalitions are groups of people, stakeholders, or organizations who are united in a particular goal**. Building and maintaining coalitions will help you build popular support for your advocacy efforts.

In thinking about building coalitions, there will be some natural allies. These could be groups of parents, other school choice organizations, and networks of people who you are aligned with in values and beliefs. It will likely be easy to form a coalition and work with these more natural partners.

Other coalition partners might surprise you. There may be individuals and organizations who you generally disagree with, but you find yourself in alliance with a particular issue or piece of legislation. General best practice in advocacy is to not disregard these stakeholders, instead recognize the opportunity to achieve shared goals and bring them into your coalition.

It’s important to name, when you are working with stakeholders with different beliefs, coalitions may fall apart. In your work with stakeholders, you might find that you actually don’t have clear shared goals. This is ok and this is a natural part of advocacy.

There are pros and cons in working with both natural allies and unlikely partners. When working with natural allies, you might work well together because of your shared values and you may see a long term path for collaboration. The downside is that it might be difficult to get your message recognized by a wider group of stakeholders.

Working with unlikely partners definitely gives your advocacy work a wider reach. However, there is often a tension between different stakeholders in the group. Also, if the shared goals do not remain clear, it’s likely that the coalition will fall apart.

In leading your advocacy efforts you will want to think about the type of coalition that you want to build. You will want to consider your advocacy goals, in addition to the landscape in your community. What group of stakeholders is going to set you up to hit your goals?

*In this section, we hope that you started to see the critical role that relationship building plays in advocacy work. Additionally, we hope that you left with a few clear takeaways around how to build relationships with different stakeholders and started to see the different stakeholders that you could engage with in your advocacy efforts. Coalitions play a key role in advocacy efforts and it’s important for you to think about the type of coalitions that you want to build in leading your school choice efforts.*