

ADVOCACY GUIDE: RESOURCE 1

Advocacy: The Heart of a Leader

Redefining Advocacy



Advocacy skills are an important tool to help leaders bring people together around significant issues and compel them to action. On a personal level, people can develop into leaders when they can clearly and persuasively communicate their needs and seek opportunities to take on more responsibility. Advocacy is at the heart of leadership and needs to be communicated with heart. As with many forms of public speaking, advocacy is less effective when the message is purely for the benefit of the speaker and fails to account for the need to build community around an issue. Advocacy should not be analogous with venting, but instead be a persuasive technique used intentionally to create a catalyst for personal or societal change. Ultimately, the most authentic advocacy is when a speaker has the ability to inspire others to be part of solving problems together.

Reflecting on the Problem

While we often see the final product of advocacy -- that final speech at the podium, the rallying cry at political events, the marches, the policies put into place -- it does not begin there. To clearly express your ideas as an advocate, the process begins with reflection. Sometimes, it is hard to know how to identify the problem you are trying to solve, or where that problem comes from. Without being clear on the problem, it will be difficult to even begin organizing a speech or crafting talking points that get your message across. Depending on the issue at hand, you might reflect on your personal struggles, internal emotional barriers, or external societal barriers that get in the way and give you a reason to advocate. Ask yourself about:

• Personal Experiences

- o Am I able to speak up for myself? How about the people I care about?
- o What issues impact everyday life, both for me and the people I care about?
- o Where should we ideally be heard and on what issues?
- o What happens when I can't speak up for myself? What does it feel like? What does it look like?

• Internal Barriers

- o How do we hold ourselves back from communicating our needs and concerns?
- o What fears or emotions get in the way?
- o What habits prevent us from moving our message forward?

• External Barriers

- o What types of situations or people silence us?
- o How have past experiences or histories gotten in the way?
- o What danger or harm might we face by speaking up?
- o What forms of institutional oppression might we face?

Beyond reflecting on the barriers, advocates should also reflect on what the ideal world looks like. What would the world look like if your message was taken seriously and people changed their actions? How is this world different from the status quo, in terms of social, economic, political, relational, or even emotional change? How might this positive change cause a ripple effect that results in benefits in other areas of society?

Positioning the Advocate

Even when we conclude that our message needs to be heard, some individuals are able to position themselves as advocates while others still cannot. According to decades of social science research, this happens because our identities are shaped by "social positioning", or how powerful we are viewed by others and ourselves. Being able to take a stand on an issue already implies that we believe we are capable of communicating in service of ourselves and others. Beyond believing that our voices are important, speaking up sometimes involves deciding to speak despite the real risks and dangers that we might face due to sources of institutional barriers and oppression. To develop the capability to face the vulnerability and danger associated with public speaking, emerging advocates need experiences that position their voices as so important that speaking up is worth the risk.

Throughout our lives, there are both positive and negative “positioning moments”, which can form patterns that stick over time and can shape what type of person people think we are, how capable we think we are, and whether we can be an advocate. When we have had encounters that help us believe that we are capable and experiences when we are positioned by others as an expert, it becomes much easier to take up powerful positions and advocate. Some examples of positive and negative positioning include:

	<i>Positive Positioning</i>	<i>Negative Positioning</i>
Verbal messages from self	“I know I can do this, I’ve done it before.”	“I’m just bad at this. Everyone else is better than me.”
Verbal messages from others	“You should pick her, she’s always the best.”	“Why is she even here? She doesn’t belong.”
Non-verbal behavior	Smiles, nods, encouragement	Never being called on
Culture	Being rewarded, receiving special opportunities	Sense of failure or being the victim of damaging stereotypes

Learning Environment for an Emerging Advocate

Because social positioning influences advocacy, it is important that your development as a speaker takes place in an environment and culture where your voice is positioned as important. Personal and societal issues that warrant advocacy are hard to communicate, and in the future, you may be speaking to an audience that is hostile or unwilling to listen. By the time you get to that audience, it is important to build your confidence and hone your message with people who will be there for you or can act as a thought partner. Practice your content in low-stakes environments before you move to high-stakes environments. Surround yourself with people who understand where you are coming from and gather information from their experiences to strengthen your message.

At the same time, developing a strong message cannot take place in a vacuum or “echo chamber”, where you only speak to people who agree with you. Part of strengthening your message means working your way to more high-stakes environments and remaining open to learning from differing perspectives. Resist the temptation to “other” people who think differently than you, making generalizations about them or thinking of them as enemies. When this happens, it becomes difficult to communicate effectively in a way that builds connections and brings people together. This does not mean that you must accept intolerance, discrimination, or oppressive behavior and there are times when openness and connection might not be possible. Still, take care not to rush to judgment based on a single moment and prioritize listening and information. Strong advocacy speaking skills requires extensive knowledge and awareness of views that may differ from your own.

The Final Takeaway

Advocacy is a skill that goes beyond communication and the way we express ourselves can go a long way to making sure our message is heard. Advocacy skills are strengthened when we take the time to reflect on personal, internal, and external barriers and gradually build from low-stakes to high-stakes audiences. For beginners and young speakers, advocacy can be challenging for those who think that their perspective is not as valuable or as important as others. Leaders have a social responsibility to help people who may feel silenced or may even silence themselves. In the words of the late Toni Morrison, “If you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.”

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