Political Influence: Why and How Healthcare Leaders Must Get Involved

Focus Paper

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Abstract

Advocating for positive change is an important part of being a healthcare leader. Oftentimes, this means being an advocate within the political sphere. Unfortunately, many players within the healthcare industry are reluctant to get involved in politics. Although the process may feel unnatural at first, proper preparation and practice can help one feel comfortable in this essential role. With the right knowledge and tools, any healthcare leader can and should use his or her power and position to influence change.

This paper informs the reader about the history of advocacy and lobbying in the United States and provides important background information needed to be an effective advocate. Additionally, the writer reviews multiple strategies and provides important details to help leaders in healthcare gain proficiency in the role of policy influencer. The author gleaned all information in this paper through research from professional journals, textbooks, and resources obtained from professional organizations. Information from personal interviews add to the depth of this paper’s content.

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance for healthcare leaders to engage in advocacy efforts and to provide strategies for success in these roles.

Key words: advocacy, lobbying, policy, grassroots, politics, legislation, influence, politics, leadership, Kingdon Model
Political Influence: Why and How Healthcare Leaders Must Get Involved

Advocating for positive change is an important part of being a healthcare leader. Oftentimes, this means being an advocate within the political sphere. Lawrence Epstein (personal communication, July 6, 2016), a Medical Group Management Association’s (MGMA’s) Legislative Liaison of the Year, stated most people in the healthcare provider community want the government to leave them alone to practice medicine. Additionally, because healthcare is a helping profession, many players within the industry are reluctant to wield power and get involved in politics. Although the process may feel unnatural at first, proper preparation and practice can help one feel comfortable in this essential role. Failure to get involved results in the government pushing its agenda on healthcare providers without a true understanding of the full impact (Epstein, personal communication, July 6, 2016). With the right knowledge and tools, any healthcare leader can and should use his or her power and position to positively influence change. This paper informs the reader about the history of advocacy and lobbying in the United States and provides important background information needed to be an effective advocate. Additionally, the writer reviews multiple strategies and provides important details to help leaders in healthcare gain proficiency in the role of policy influencer.

Background

To be an effective advocate within the political arena it is helpful to have some background information. This section of the paper discusses the history of advocacy and lobbying within the United States and informs the reader on how a bill becomes a law. Additionally, the writer reviews the three legs of lobbying and provides details to help the
reader understand how the three legs work together to provide optimal opportunities to influence policy.

**History of Lobbying and Advocacy in the United States**

The terms lobbying and advocacy are often interchanged. Both words describe efforts to show support for a cause or bring about change (Milbreth, n.d.; Milstead, 2013). The term lobbying as it relates to government activities originated in the early- to mid-19th century and was used to describe people who loitered in the lobbies of government offices in an effort to try to talk to and influence lawmakers (Milbreth, n.d.). Because the term has a negative connotation, many prefer to use the term advocate when referring to non-professional individuals who make efforts to influence legislators (Milbreth, n.d.; Milstead, 2013). Although states regulate lobbying efforts, the practice of using one’s voice to coordinate any effort aimed at influencing public policy is a protected First Amendment right (Milyo, 2010). Lobbying and advocacy occur at all levels of the government: city, county, state, and federal (Milbreth, n.d.; Milstead, 2013). It is easier to get politically involved in the United States compared to other countries because there are so many ways to do it and so many paths to enter the process (Milstead, 2013).

**How a Bill Becomes a Law**

To be most effective in influencing policy change, it is important to understand and respect the process. The steps it takes for a bill to become a law are long and can be quite complicated, but a basic understanding provides the reader with a deeper level of understanding regarding opportunities to influence. The information in this section of this paper is general and most applicable to federal law-making. While the process is
similar in state government as it is to federal government, there are some differences (Milstead, 2013).

Bills start out as ideas legislators decide are important enough to become the law. These ideas come from personal experience or expertise the lawmaker has, as well as from other people, like constituents or special interest groups. The first step of the process is putting the idea onto paper in the proper format and making it a bill (Milstead, 2013).

Next, the lawmaker introduces the bill to either the House or the Senate, depending on which chamber the legislator belongs to. From there, the bill is assigned to a standing committee, which gives the bill deeper consideration. Each committee focuses on particular subjects. For instance, bills about healthcare go to a health committee. There may even be subcommittees within the committee, which are assigned to particular sections of the bill. Each committee has a chairperson who has a great deal of power and influence within the group. While in the committee the bill is marked up and amended to the committee’s satisfaction (Milstead, 2013).

Once a bill makes it out of the committee, it goes back to the full chamber for a floor discussion and vote. While on the floor, there can be a lot of arguing and debating about all details of the bill. After that, the chamber members vote to move the bill forward or not. If the bill passes the vote in the chamber in which it was introduced, it goes on to the other chamber to go through the entire process all over again. It may take several years to get through both chambers, and many bills do not even make it to this point (Milstead, 2013).
If a bill passes both chambers, it moves on to a conference committee. Here, issues between the two versions of the bill passed by the House and by the Senate get resolved. A final version is then sent to the governor or the president. If he or she signs it, the bill becomes a law (Milstead, 2013).

To grasp how long it can take for a bill to become a law, consider how long it took to end Medicare’s sustainable growth rate (SGR) formula. Originally enacted in 1997, the SGR debate was long and tedious. The road to repeal took 16 years and 17 short-term fixes. In April 2015, years of debate and legislative gridlock came to an end when the Senate permanently repealed the long-despised SGR formula (Demko, 2015). This opened the door for another phase in healthcare reform, providing many more opportunities for healthcare leaders to participate in the future delivery of healthcare and payment reform.

Three Legs of Lobbying

Three aspects come to play for effective lobbying. It may be helpful to think of these as three legs to a stool, with each leg contributing to the sturdiness of the stool. The three legs are professional lobbyists, grassroots lobbying efforts, and money (Milstead, 2013).

**Professional lobbyists.** Lobbying is a term used to describe the act of influencing. Often, people interchange the terms lobbyist and advocate. Most often, the term lobbyist is used to describe those who engage in lobbying efforts in a professional capacity. Although anyone can lobby, most lobbyists are professional people who represent special interest groups. Professional lobbyists are seen by lawmakers as experts and provide important information to legislators about why they should or should not
support an issue (Milstead, 2013). One way individuals can support professional lobbyist efforts is by joining an organization within his or her field. Professional organizations use a portion of membership dues to pay for lobby activities (Milstead, 2013). There are over 11,000 registered lobbyists in Washington, DC. This is likely a conservative number due to the narrow definition of what it is to be a registered lobbyist (Demko, 2014; Glabman, 2002; OpenSecrets.com, 2016).

Mollie Gelburd (personal communication, February 24, 2016), MGMA’s Government Affairs Associate Director, pointed out many of the important things professional lobbyists do. For instance MGMA’s Government Affairs staff work between MGMA members and the government to make sure member concerns are applied to government advocacy efforts. Staff also provides MGMA members the most current information about what is happening in government and help make complex rules easier to understand (Gelburd, personal communication February 24, 2016). It is easy to see that professional lobbyist not only inform legislators but also those impacted by legislation.

Jodi Faustlin, a Fellow of the American College of Medical Practice Executives (FACMPE; personal communication, July 8, 2016), served as a registered lobbyist in both Missouri and Kansas. As a lobbyist, Faustlin testified at her state capitols regarding pending legislation. Her testimony helped guide important issues to help her organization succeed and impacted many other organizations within her states. Faustlin’s efforts directly influenced innovation surrounding healthcare reform. She made lawmakers aware of hospital cost transparency problems and demonstrated to legislators how her organization was a leader in providing patients with reasonable cost estimates.
Additionally, by building relationships with legislators, Faustlin gained access to issues surrounding legal regulations and implementation details of new policies. Faustlin (personal communication, July 8, 2016) said a highlight of her career occurred when President George W. Bush visited her organization as a direct result of her lobbying efforts.

**Grassroots lobbyists.** Grassroots lobbying is the term used to describe constituents who work to affect public policy (Milstead, 2013). Because there is a negative connotation to the term lobbying, many prefer to use the term advocacy to describe the efforts of individuals who engage in grassroots activities. Grassroots lobbying can be very effective in persuading citizens and legislators to change their view on a matter. It is at the core of representing democracy in action (Milyo, 2010). To be an effective grassroots advocate, one must be organized and well-informed. Knowledgeable and engaged constituents are a good resource to elected officials (AMA, n.d.).

When getting involved in grassroots efforts, one must keep in mind it can take a lot of time and a lot of compromises to pass a law. Also, some advocacy efforts occur outside the political arena. One effective way to increase advocacy power is to collaborate with other stakeholders and coordinate efforts. Look outside one’s own industry to create a truly collaborative effort. Also, seek support from local business owners, who legislators consider valuable (Kovner & Knickman, 2011).

Tony Palazzo, Vice President of Finance for Infirmary Medical Clinics in Mobile, Alabama (personal communication, July 13, 2016) spoke of the great power in engaging in grassroots efforts. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Tony became very active in advocacy efforts surrounding tort reform. At the time, Mississippi, where Tony worked
as a medical practice manager, experienced rising malpractice rates that caused many physicians to stop all or part of their practice. Additionally, many malpractice carriers pulled out of the state. Tony was instrumental in informing and organizing other practice managers to help guide the way they voted and to increase pressure on the Mississippi government to remedy the situation. As a result, Mississippi engaged in “some of the best tort reform in the country” (Palazzo, personal communication, July 13, 2016).

Money. Money plays a big factor in who wins an election or which laws get passed. Money is such an issue in politics, there are laws about money-raising efforts and which kinds of organizations can contribute. In spite of this, the amount of money flowing into political campaigns continues to increase and organizations keep finding new ways to enhance money-raising efforts to support political activities. One thing is undeniable. The power of money in politics cannot be ignored (Milstead, 2013).

Total lobbyist spending in the United States is between three and four billion dollars. Nearly half of that total amount is related to healthcare lobbyist activities. The organizations that spend the most on lobbying are pharmaceutical and health product companies, who spent $230.7 million on lobbyist activities in 2015. Hospitals and nursing homes fall ninth on the list at $92.9 million in 2015. Healthcare professionals are 11th on the list and spent $89.8 million on lobbyist activities in 2015. Much of the money for healthcare professional activities came from membership dues paid to professional healthcare related organizations (OpenSecrets.org; Milstead, 2013).

**How to Be an Effective Advocate**

Healthcare leaders must have strong convictions and exhibit the courage to take a stand on those convictions (Peterson, 2005). They must show patriotism by putting
themselves on the line for policies that will help ensure “the long-term interests of our company, our economy, and our country” (Peterson, 2005, p.62). During this time of healthcare reform, it is especially crucial to be involved in the legislative process (OMA, 2015a). It is important for people in healthcare to take the lead in making sure policies are effective and help sustain the business of healthcare (OMA, 2015b). The best healthcare leaders are “active, persistent advocates for both their vision and their organization” (Madden, 2013, para 6). Being an effective advocate requires “having the power, the will, the time, and the energy, along with the political skills needed to ‘play the game’ in the legislative arena” (Abood, 2007, para 1). This section of the paper provides the reader with strategies and tactics to become an expert advocate.

**Vote**

There are many ways to have an impact on public policy. The simplest and most basic way to make a difference is to vote. Mona Reimers, FACMPE (2011), said healthcare professionals vote in smaller numbers than people from other professions. According to Reimers (2011), only half of eligible healthcare professionals vote. It is time for those in healthcare to make a stand by casting their vote. To make their vote count, healthcare professionals should vote for candidates who support favorable healthcare policies and for measures that support their philosophies.

**Join Professional Organizations**

Another easy way to get involved in politics is to join a professional organization such as MGMA or the American Medical Association. Professional organizations coordinate lobbying efforts and engage professional lobbyists. Additionally, they provide their members with the information needed to be informed about important issues.
Importantly, professional organizations provide opportunities for healthcare leaders to build relationships and collaborate with others in the field. (Milstead, 2013). The importance of relationships and collaborative leadership cannot be emphasized enough as it relates to being an effective advocate (Kovner & Knickman, 2011).

**Look for Windows of Opportunity**

Timing efforts for the biggest impact is one way to maximize influential power. The Kingdon Model explains how issues show up on the political agenda and how solutions are introduced. The three streams of the Kingdon Model are the policy, problem, and political streams (Milstead, 2013). For the biggest impact, one should time advocacy efforts in alignment with one of these streams.

**Problem stream.** Oftentimes, policies result in reaction to a crisis, an identified problem, or some feedback that a program is not working. Policy influencers should be alert to such indicators and maximize on opportunities to get an issue on the agenda (Milstead, 2013)

**Policy stream.** The policy stream relates to people or communities that attach policies to rising issues. One way to push agenda items forward is to frame one’s proposed solution to the problem (Milstead, 2013).

**Political stream.** The political stream consists of elections results, campaigns by pressure groups, public mood, changes in administration, and partisan or ideological distributions in Congress (Milstead, 2013). Being alert to such issues may help an advocate see a window of opportunity to move forward with an agenda item.

The greatest windows of opportunity occur when all three streams converge, making it least likely for advocates to encounter resistance to proposed solutions. Most
Often, however, the problem and political streams provide more windows of opportunity than the political stream (Milstead, 2013).

**Network**

This writer must stress, again, the importance of building relationships and collaborating with other stakeholders. Always look for ways to be active and visible. Networking is one way the healthcare leader can increase his or her power base and align with other stakeholders to build a cohesive message about important issues (Kovner & Knickman, 2011; Milstead, 2013). Legislative liaison for MGMA, Larry Epstein (personal communication, July 7, 2016) pointed out the importance of networking at all levels of government, including city council, the state legislature, and the federal legislature. Epstein (personal communication, July 7, 2016) also emphasized the value of stakeholders working together to share knowledge and influence policy.

**Engage local business owners.** Business owners are important to legislators. The adept leader builds relationships within the local business community to leverage this advocacy strategy. One way to enhance those relationships is to be active within the local chamber of commerce and within community projects and platforms (Milstead, 2013).

**Be available.** The skilled leader takes every opportunity to be available to others. Remember, healthcare leaders hold expertise and information about what it takes to deliver the medical care people need (Aboud, 2007; AMA, n.d.; Milstead, 2013; OMA, 2015c). Always vocalize to others a desire and ability to participate in focus groups and committees working on issues impacting healthcare policy (Milstead, 2013). Reach out to meeting organizers and to the heads of other organizations participating in such
meetings. Respond to surveys and requests for information related to upcoming meetings or policy efforts. If unable to actively participate in meetings about policy issues, healthcare leaders must do all they can to stay well-informed on committee progress and to provide regular feedback to meeting participants and organizers. Additionally, remember to thank lawmakers when they make a change that has a positive influence in healthcare (Faustlin, personal communication, July 8, 2016).

**Reach out to Legislators**

Members of the medical community have a responsibility to communicate with members of Congress about the complexities of policy issues related to medical care and how those policies affect the care provided on the ground by medical professionals (AMA, n.d.). There are many ways the healthcare leader can and should reach out to legislators. For instance, one can write letters, visit legislators on Capitol Hill, or host a congressional visit within their organization (AMA, n.d.; MGMA, n.d.-a, b, c).

**Write letters.** Legislators like to hear from their constituents about matters that are important to them. There are some things to keep in mind when writing these letters so they have the biggest impact. First, write letters early in the legislative process. When writing letters to legislators, the healthcare leader should use stationary that includes his or her name and the name of the organization they represent, as well as the organization’s address, so the legislator knows if they represent that district. Make the letter succinct and professional, yet personalized. For the greatest impact, avoid form letters. One should try to include a brief personal story, which helps the reader connect to the message on an emotional level. Letters can be sent via email, fax, or postal service, although letters by postal service may make the biggest impact. (AMA, n.d.; Milstead, 2013). Due
to the anthrax incident that killed five government workers in 2001, it may take mailed letters longer to reach legislators than email or faxed ones. The United States Postal Service carefully screens letters to make sure they are safe before delivery to government offices (O’Keefe, 2011).

**Host a congressional site visit.** Hosting a congressional site visit is a great advocacy tool. Rarely do legislators refuse an offer to do a site visit, and it provides a great opportunity for them to see how legislation impacts healthcare where it happens. Additionally, a site visit gives the healthcare leader a great opportunity to build relationships with legislators and their staff, which is key to being a successful advocate. (MGMA, n.d.-b)

When planning a congressional site visit, remember some important steps about scheduling. First, schedule the visit though the member of Congress’ district office. Include staff, especially their healthcare legislative aid, in the invite. Be sure to be flexible in scheduling. The visit may take place very soon, or it may be booked out more into the future. When scheduling the visit, be clear about the purpose of the visit and what will be discussed. (MGMA, n.d.-b)

Prepare for a visit in such a way that it is meaningful yet concise. Provide a tour that highlights the position you wish to convey. Make sure there are points in the tour that allow conversation. Prepare what to say so it relates to the purpose. Be aware there may be rules around the ethics of offering food or snacks to members of Congress. Know the rules for the state in which the host practice is located before making offers for meals. At the end of the visit, it is a good idea to give the visitors a one-page document that clearly states the position and the reason behind the site visit. At the end of the visit,
the host should always offer him- or herself as a resource to the legislator, should the legislator have any need for further information or expertise. Always remember, the ultimate goal is to build lasting relationships. “Be courteous, polite, and prepared.” (MGMA, n.d.-b, para 8). If possible, get a picture with the congressperson during the visit. Finally, follow the visit with a thank you card. In the note, reiterate an offer to serve as a resource. Understanding constituents are a valuable resource to lawmakers helps one remain confident in his or her advocacy efforts. (MGMA, n.d.-b)

**Visit legislators on Capitol Hill.** Legislators like it when their constituents visit them on Capitol Hill. This writer took an opportunity to visit her state Senator during a Washington, DC vacation and began the process of building important relationships within the political arena. Not only did the Senator take the time to meet with this advocate, he introduced her to his healthcare aid and arranged tours of the White House, The Capitol building, and the Library of Congress. Although visits to Capitol Hill may involve fun tours such as these, it is important to take visits with legislators seriously and prepare for a successful interaction (MGMA, n.d.-a).

One must schedule an appointment ahead of time to meet with legislators. If the meeting is to discuss something in particular, be clear about it from the start and bring relevant materials to the meeting. Written materials should be succinct; try to limit information to one page. Arrive at the appointment on time, but be prepared to wait. Representatives have busy schedules with lots of meetings and frequently run late. While visiting legislators on Capitol Hill, the healthcare leader should spend time focusing on the healthcare legislative assistant. This person wields a lot of power, and can serve as an important path for the astute leader. While meeting with the legislator, be sure to make
time to briefly mention relevant concerns and ideas. It is helpful to relate discussions to personal experience. Tying issues to meaningful stories makes them more relatable and memorable. Finally, as always, the best healthcare advocate will offer him- or herself as a resource and provide business cards to the legislator and staff members.

**Conclusion**

Advocacy is one of the most important things health care leaders can do to bring about positive change in healthcare. When working on influencing others, it is important to understand leaders in healthcare have expertise that is valuable. One should feel confident legislators want and need to know what it takes to deliver medical care to the population. To be most effective, it is important to take time and opportunity to grow one’s power base. Great healthcare leaders understand the importance of building relationships and collaborating with others. Always remember that not participating sends as clear a message to lawmakers as participating, so choose to send a powerful message to further the cause at hand. Remember, all efforts to influence health care add up. Efforts can range from voting and joining professional organizations to meeting with legislators on Capitol Hill or hosting a site visit. Finally, know that being a strong advocate takes preparation and practice, but it is an activity all healthcare leaders can and must embrace. Not only is it worth the effort, it is a responsibility.
References


MGMA (n.d.-c). MGMA advocacy center: Together we can make change happen.


