

How to Succeed in Public Safety Politics without Bragging or Begging

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Despite the fact that they work in a political environment, public safety leaders often are unwilling, or feel poorly equipped, to engage actively in “politics.” Unfortunately, this reluctance may have a negative impact on the safety of their communities. The good news is that becoming proficient at navigating the political process is a skill that can be learned and improves with practice.

The insights listed below may be applied to nearly any political issue, internal or external, in any organization. They were shared by a veteran of political processes, Fire Chief Kingman Schuldt. For over 35 years he has worked in heavily politicized environments, including the fire and rescue service, municipal government, educational institutions, and community organizations. Currently he is co-leading the merger of the East Naples – Golden Gate (FL) Fire Control and Rescue Districts with the districts’ two Boards of Fire Commissioners. Though not exhaustive, this list provides concrete suggestions about what it takes to succeed in navigating the politics of public safety without resorting to bragging or begging.

Your Mindset and Preparation

- Treat politics as a process, not an event or task to be checked off.
- Don’t underestimate yourself and your ability to be successful in the political arena.
- Identify and articulate clearly the value your agency provides to its stakeholders – e.g., creating a safe, healthy, economically viable community. Make it the touchstone for all you do.
- Focus relentlessly on communicating that value. Tell your stakeholders what’s in it for them to support this outcome, and what it will take to achieve it.
- Do your homework. Figure out the people and the political process *before* you jump into action.
- Politics is all about relationships. Build and nurture them in advance. Include all stakeholders.
- Give credit where credit is due. Share credit liberally, publicly, and often.
- Balance policy vs. management responsibilities. Be clear about your roles and those of others.
- Understand that you are the public safety expert who educates stakeholders; politicians, administrators, and community members are the decision-makers.
- Be honest and transparent. You demonstrate your integrity when you refuse to lie or mislead people.
- Leverage your strengths and find support for your weaknesses.
- Become involved with state, regional, and national professional organizations. This helps you get to know the players, understand the process, see the bigger picture, and develop wide networks.
- Learn to control any personal frustration with the political process. Don’t allow it to show.

Community

- Embrace the community’s participation. It is your job to listen and respond to their concerns.
- Don’t underestimate the influence of local residents; many are actively engaged in the political process and can influence politicians. They are voters.
- Each community is different: its people, needs, dreams, and political process. As you move from one community to another, adapt and customize your approach to meet their needs.
- Educate your community members about the political process as well as the issues.
- You are the “face” of your agency. Get out in the community regularly. Accept invitations to community,

- business, and professional events. This enables people to get to know and trust you.
- Make yourself readily accessible – directly when possible, and through a designated representative when not. Let them know how to reach you.
- Get back to people quickly. Return their calls. Answer their questions honestly.
- Tell people what's in it for them personally to support your request or effort.

Employees

- Teach all of your employees how the department is run.
- Ask employees to help with the education process as they interact with community members.
- Develop close, trusting, collaborative relationships with your union board members. Union members can take actions in the political area that you cannot. Coordinate your efforts.
- Trust your staff to work with politicians directly. Have them keep you informed.
- Have someone on your staff who knows the political process very well and can find answers.

Boss

- Recognize who your boss is (e.g., mayor, city manager, commissioners). It is your responsibility to adapt to his/her/their styles and needs, not vice versa.
- Keep your boss out of political trouble by educating him/her/them so they don't inadvertently wander into harm's way.
- Share credit liberally. Make your boss look good.
- Show your boss what's in it for him/her to do as you suggest or request.
- Interact closely and communicate often.
- Invite your boss to attend community meetings with you. This sends the message that you are a team.
- Recognize that you are expendable: you could be gone tomorrow – or before lunch today.
- Provide several viable options when possible. This effectively changes the question from "CAN we do X?" to "HOW can we do X?"

Politicians

- Understand politicians and what drives them. Couch your requests in terms of your mutual interests.
- Learn to control or change the conversation by asking purposeful questions.
- Politicians have varying levels of political astuteness. Most must be educated about the issues and process public safety leaders face.
- Let politicians know they have direct and easy access to you and your staff.
- Meet regularly and often with local politicians, even the ones you don't report to. Keep them informed.
- While state legislators are likely to be well-versed in the political process, you are the expert in public safety. Meet with them regularly, establishing connections *before* you make requests.
- Get to know politicians' key staff members. It is their job to be very knowledgeable about the issues. They may act as the gatekeepers to their boss. Have your staff develop close relationships with them.
- Learn the legislative process – e.g., when the sessions begin, when the committees meet, the best times to testify in committees and to be seen. Walk the halls, be visible.
- Show respect for politicians: use their titles and be courteous even if you do not agree with them.
- Speak honestly and be yourself.
- Don't underestimate yourself or your expertise.

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