

Why is it Harder to Lobby the Canadian Federal Government?

As a leader in your industry or professional association, you may have concluded that it is getting exceedingly difficult to achieve changes in the federal government. I believe you would be correct. This is a serious development because a primary reason for associations to exist is to press the case for changes in federal policies, programs and regulations.

There are reasons why it has become incredibly challenging to secure advocacy wins. This article examines this situation and suggests strategies to increase the chances of successfully advocating for your interests.

Five Critical Factors

We will look at five changes that have been occurring within the federal public service and answer the question why it matters to us as advocates.

Default to Structural Change

When it comes to improving things, it seems that structural change is the preferred panacea in the federal government. Structural change includes many things but over and above everything else it means changing the organizational chart. This includes changing reporting relationships and often involves changing the status of existing groups within an organization. If you want to paralyze an organization just shout "reorganization". It engenders fear in employees. It slows the ongoing work of an organization and it most often evades the root causes of performance problems.

Why is this important to us as advocates? Well, how many times have we heard the refrain from officials, "we are going through a restructuring now, so..." (and you can fill in the blanks)? Officials often forestall expectations of immediate action on important issues during periods of restructuring.

Managing Functions Not Programs

A move from line management to functional management is an ongoing trend. Imagine a series of discrete national programs that are morphed into horizontally managed programs. Directors who once were responsible for a single national program are now managing a single function across programs – say program development, or marketing, or performance monitoring.

Why is this important to us as advocates? Because as advocates we want to communicate with senior managers who are accountable for the overall performance of specific programs. We do not want to coordinate discussions with a multitude of officials.

What About Process Improvement?

During the past few decades, process improvement has been a huge factor in the improved performance of companies world-wide. Most well-run businesses are built on a culture of cross-functional teams addressing process improvement and innovation.

I have concluded that too many senior public servants think Six Sigma is a fraternity, Kaizen is a martial art, and Lean is a diet. Would it not be refreshing to hear how the federal government is using on a widespread basis, a proven methodology to identify and analyze problems and commit to process improvements that are validated by agreed measures? Tragically, this is not the case.

Why is this important to us as advocates? Because many industry and professional bodies' requests for change are aimed at improved government processes. Chief among them are simpler and timelier regulatory and product approval processes.

What More Executives?

There has been a massive increase in the number of executive positions in the federal government in the last three decades. This increase is not related to the growth of overall employment in the public service. It is not related to growth in new programs. The velocity of growth in executive positions seems to be entirely driven by internal dynamics. The consequence of this is an increase in the numbers of Director Generals, Assistant Deputy Ministers, Associate Deputy Ministers and Deputy Ministers.

Why is this important to us as advocates? This means there are many more shared jurisdictions at the top of the organization. It means we have to go higher and higher to communicate with an official who can make decisions without recourse to other officials.

Rotating the Executives

There is constant executive churn. The federal government is one of the few remaining organizations in the world that believes senior executives can manage an organization without prior functional or technical knowledge. Consequently, we too often encounter executives who have not been in their jobs long, nor have had any prior experience with the matters their agency is responsible for. It is ironic that the Canada School of Public Service's marquee speaking event is named in honour of Jack Manion, a distinguished public servant who worked continuously from the bottom of a department until he became its Deputy Minister. By the time of his departure, Deputy Ministers who came through the ranks of their own department were almost a thing of the past. In fact, Deputy Ministers who spend more than a few years in the same department have been a rarity for decades.

But in recent times, it is not just Deputy Ministers who are moved rapidly across the public service. It now includes all elements of the executive class.

Why is this important to us as advocates? It means that when we interact with officials – be it a Director, Director General, Assistant Deputy Minister, Associate Deputy Minister, or Deputy Minister - there is a really good chance they are relatively new to their job. Even more worrying is the likelihood those reporting to them, as well as those they report to are also newbies. It means that encountering public servants with a long history of working on matters that affect you is a diminished probability. It means that our communication challenges are immense.

An Approach to Advocating our Interests

We could throw up our hands and say it has become too tough to get anything done in Ottawa. Unfortunately, our interests are too important to just pack it in. Every sector in Canadian society needs a government that is responsive to the changing needs of the country. Every industry and profession should be able to convince its government of the need for change.

We need an approach that assumes a public service that:

1. Often wants to delay actions until restructuring is completed.
2. Has a lack of line responsibility for program development, program management, and sectoral policy development.
3. Does not have an internal culture which puts a high priority on addressing practical solutions – particularly regulatory and approvals processes.
4. Presents a multitude of officials to work with and through; and
5. Demonstrates a lack of depth of executive experience in the areas we are vitally interested in.

Given this situation I recommend an approach to advocacy that incorporates the following characteristics:

One #1 priority at any one time

Within any association there will be competing issues to present to government. But if the description presented above tells us anything, it demands that we have a rigorously developed strategy which enunciates a single high priority for the government to address. Therefore, within our association, a well-structured triage of issues must be completed so a priority issue can emerge.

Build a Narrative Story

We should never presume that officials understand the nature of our industry or profession, or have much experience in their own area of responsibility. It is safe to assume that our public service audience will need a cogent presentation that tells our story in a way that leads to the need for the specific actions we are requesting.

If we can present a request for action that provides a win for our members and a win for the government so much the better.

Create a Detailed Advocacy Action Plan that includes VITO

Given the challenges of successfully working with the federal bureaucracy, we cannot wing it. We need to develop a detailed, time-phased action plan that will lead to a positive decision by the federal government.

If we have learned anything about the challenge of getting a favourable decision by the federal government, it is the need to get to VITO. VITO is the acronym popularized by Anthony Parinello in his book *Selling to VITO*. It stands for the Very Important Top Officer who can make a decision without recourse to anyone else. Any strategy that does not include VITO will be undermined by the factors we have already identified. Very often we need to go directly to the Deputy Minister of a department in order to find VITO. As part of getting to VITO we should always be utilizing the leaders of our industry or profession. We need to create a peer-to-peer relationship strategy with VITO.

This article has focused on the public service. That does not preclude engaging political actors within the overall strategy – particularly responsible Ministers. But it is important to recognize that in Canada the senior public service is a crucial determinant of the ultimate success of any advocacy initiative.

Build Coalitions

Industries and professions are quite often fragmented into many associations. Which means there are usually other associations with shared interests. It is especially important to find other parties who can support our proposals (and benefit from government decisions). Build support where we can find it and bring them into the implementation of our strategy.

Commit to Unrelenting Action

It is getting a lot harder to lobby the federal government. We will have to be smarter and more resilient. We must remain focused on our priority. We must help officials understand our story and why it should matter to them. We must insist on meeting VITO and securing the decisions that are vital to our members.

We must adopt an unrelenting approach to implementing our advocacy plan. A detailed action plan will get us into the race but sticking with it will propel us into the winner's circle.

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