

How to Lobby

Lobbying means trying to influence public officials to support or oppose particular legislation, regulations, or other actions. People have tried to influence public officials throughout history. Think of Moses' meetings with Pharaoh, trying to persuade him to "let my people go."

Here are suggestions that will help you make your case with public officials.

1. Know your message.

There is a reason that you will be meeting with the official. Perhaps you are concerned about inhumane conditions in the prison or about the lack of public confidence in the justice system. Make sure you have thought about what you want to say. Usually the message is that you want the official to do something and why, or to stop doing something and why.

2. Know about the official.

The official has political and personal interests, too. Do you know what those are? Is there a way that you make your request so that it helps him meet his goals, too? Will it be easy or difficult to give you what you want? Who would fight him if he did? Who would support him?

It is useful to become acquainted with public officials before the time comes to make a request. You might want to schedule meetings with key officials just to let them know about the work of Prison Fellowship. A visit from an RST member, a regional envoy, or a representative from the PFI Secretariat can be a great "excuse" to schedule a meeting.

3. Be prepared.

Have accurate information and material available on the issue you are concerned about. The official may not be aware of the issue; public officials have to deal with many different concerns and may not have the information you can give them. Also, remember that there are always at least two sides to a story, and that the official will quickly hear from people who oppose your idea. The more you understand the arguments of the other side, the more effective you will be in making the case for your side.

4. Be respectful.

Be friendly with public officials, even if they have not helped you in the past. It is still useful to create a favourable impression. Be firm about what you believe needs to happen, but be polite and respectful as well. Smile and greet them when you see them.

5. Be political.

To a greater or lesser degree, elected officials have to be aware of what voters are concerned about. When you can, show how what you are requesting is related to the interests of the voters or the media (who influence the voters). The public official may not want to take the "political heat" that will come if they support you. This is a reasonable concern. See if there is a way that you can help them overcome that concern; for example, try to get a favourable newspaper article so that you can demonstrate that there is public interest in the changes you seek.

6. Be persistent.

Jesus told the story of the woman who lobbied an unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). In the end, he agreed to her request not because he cared about justice but because he wanted to get rid of her!

7. Be ready to help make the change happen.

If you are successful in getting the public official's commitment, he may ask you to help him implement the needed changes. He may want you to serve on a commission, or to meet with someone, or to review new regulations. You don't have to be an expert, and you should not pretend to have expertise you do not have. But you do have gifts and experiences so do not be surprised if the public officials would like your help.

If you need help in preparing to lobby a public official, ask people who have done this before. The Centre for Justice and Reconciliation at Prison Fellowship International is here to help with information, strategies and prayer.

An interesting assignment: Read the story about Ebed-Melech, the man who rescued Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:1-3). Think about the approach he took toward the king, the officials and Jeremiah. He was a foreigner and may have been a eunuch, which put him at a disadvantage. Review the steps above and reflect on why he was such an effective lobbyist.