
Chapter 5:

SETTING A POLICY AGENDA

There are no step-by-step rules or established set of parameters that nonprofits can follow to ensure success when seeking public policy change. What we can do, though, is develop a policy agenda — a set of issues or problems aimed at gaining the attention of policymakers and decision-makers — sometimes known as the “policy ask”. Setting a policy agenda involves many components, including: identifying the issue, forming a clear goal or goals, framing the issue, and creating conditions for success.

It might seem like a daunting task to set a policy agenda, but it does not have to be an intimidating or complex process. Simply, setting a policy agenda is a way for your nonprofit to potentially increase its impact by focusing on a few key policy priorities. For example, you can clean waste out of a river, and also ask government to legislate that polluting rivers is illegal – both work to achieve the goal of a clean river. Policy advocacy work is best as an everyday focus, not just a one-off activity, which is critical in preparing for expected and unanticipated opportunities to bring your policy agenda forward.

Specific vs Broad Policy Agendas

It may be tempting to think of a policy agenda as a specific policy ask but this is not always the case. That might be true in some cases, where the policy agenda consists of a very technical or specific policy ask (e.g. requesting a cost of living increase for income supports). Specific asks can be helpful, as the issues your nonprofit is trying to address are likely complex, so your policy agenda might represent a stepping stone to the broader changes you wish to see. It may also be the case that a policy ask is more aspirational, idealistic, or inspirational (e.g., to reduce poverty by 50% in five years). Both of these approaches are valuable and serve different purposes – specific policy requests can make a big impact and broad policy requests can serve to prepare and motivate allies and supporters.

Creating a policy agenda is not likely to be a neat and tidy process. A good policy agenda is not created in a vacuum and is sure to be accomplished only after several revisions, lengthy discussions, and healthy debate. The more people you can talk to who have differing views and positions, the more robust and thoughtful your policy agenda will be.

To set the issue or issues on which you will focus your policy agenda, consider your strengths as a nonprofit by asking questions like:

- What issues have you already researched? What expertise do you possess?
- What policy issues have you been involved with in the past? Are there opportunities to build on previous momentum?
- If your nonprofit is a registered charity, does this issue fall within your charitable objects?
- What is the capacity of your nonprofit? Who can lead and who can support the work?
- What connections with the intended audience (e.g. government, community, industry) already exist?
- What are other nonprofits doing and can you leverage each other's work?
- What kind of policy shift would make a big impact on the people, community, or issue in your nonprofit's mandate?

Set Your Goal

Often times, we consider policy change to be the end goal, but you may not want to start there. Ask yourself what it is you want to achieve with your policy agenda. The following are a few examples of some goals your nonprofit might be trying to reach through a policy agenda:

- Establishing credibility and/or expertise on a particular issue.
- Building relationships with bureaucrats, elected officials, and/or media.
- Maximizing impact by forging partnerships with other organizations.
- Creating engagement among stakeholder groups.
- Educating and/or informing decision-makers about issues.
- Seeking public commitment on a policy issue from parties (either through the party platform or other public declaration of support).

Framing Your Agenda

Framing refers to the lens that you will apply when communicating about the issue(s) on your policy agenda. There are multiple ways to look at every issue or problem, so it is important to frame your policy agenda with communications that are crisp, clear, and in a language that speaks to your audience.

Framing a policy agenda comes back to your nonprofit's ultimate goal — once you have become clear in what you hope to achieve, you can ask yourself some of the following questions to help you frame your policy agenda:

- What problem does this solve and how can that be communicated in a way that conveys the importance of your ask?
- Who is your audience? Be specific – who are you trying to reach with your message?
- What is most relevant or compelling about this issue to your audience?
- What does your audience already know about this issue?
- What is the language that will resonate with this audience?
- What evidence exists for your issue? How prominently does the evidence feature in your message? Evidence to support your policy agenda is important but it is rarely the central story, it is a supporting player.
- Who does your issue impact? What would be the effect if your policy agenda was implemented?
- Who are the critics and what are the risks?
- Who are the allies and how can you bring them along?
- Whose jurisdiction does the issue fall into?
- How critical is the issue? Is there a need for immediate action or can it be addressed over time?

Creating Conditions for Success

Although there is no magic formula for developing a policy agenda, there are ways to set conditions for success to strengthen and position your policy agenda:

- 1. You know people.** And you know people who know people! Reach out to your networks, and the networks of your networks, to talk to a variety of people about your policy ideas. This may even lead to a collaborative approach and a stronger voice advocating for the same issue.
- 2. Test out your ideas for unintended consequences.** Think through as many of the possible outcomes as you can by consulting with people who would be impacted by your policy agenda.
- 3. Know the timing.** Find out when and how all political parties are developing their platforms.
- 4. Stay up to date on current events.** You can sign up for newsletters from parties, pay attention to news of the day, and find e-news sources that are timely and informative.
- 5. Stay focused.** Remain true to your policy agenda but be nimble on how to move it forward by monitoring, learning, and adjusting your plan as you go along.

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Have fun with it!

Remember that setting a policy agenda does not have to be a daunting task, but instead a way to maximize the impact your nonprofit has on the communities you serve.