

Meetings with Decision-Makers

Personal meetings with decision-makers can be an effective form of advocacy, since this strategy puts you in direct contact with the person or body with power to take action. A personal meeting may help you figure out what type of campaign will be most likely to convince the decision-maker to act on your goals. The decision-maker involved may be a Member of Parliament, a Minister, a regional councillor, a local councillor, a traditional leader, an administrative official, a police official, a school board member, an employer or some other person or body.

Advantages of personal meetings as an advocacy strategy

In a face-to-face meeting, you have the opportunity to explain your views fully and to determine where the decision-maker stands on your issue. A personal meeting may provide an opportunity to discuss a compromise that will satisfy all parties, or to get a better understanding of the issue and the constraints faced by the decision-maker.

For example, you may discover that the decision-maker did not know about your issue and is willing to address it. **If this is the case, then your main task will be follow-up to make sure that action is taken.** You may find that the decision-maker does not understand the importance of the issue. **It will then be up to you and your organisation to educate the decision-maker about the reasons to take action on the issue.** You may find that the decision-maker does not believe that your issue is a priority. **It will then be up to you and your organisation to convince the decision-maker that your issue is critical.** You may find that the decision-maker does not have the resources to deal with the issue. **It will then be up to you to convince the decision-maker that your issue is so important that the necessary resources must be found.**



Arranging a meeting

Requests for meetings should be sent in the form of a letter written on the letterhead of your organisation. If you do not have a letterhead, make sure that your contact information is included in the letter. Make sure that you are writing to the right person and check that you have the correct contact details (such as by telephoning the office to confirm the contact information).

The letter should include a brief description of your organisation if the decision-maker is unfamiliar with it. The letter should have a short background on the issue you want to address and an outline of your specific concerns. You may want to enclose relevant documents. If so, you should explain in the letter what they are. Try to send materials which are clear and brief. Take the initiative on follow-up by stating in the letter that you will call the office to discuss a suitable date and time for the meeting. Indicate how many people want to attend the meeting, to make sure that the venue will be suitable.

Different government officials may have different procedures to follow when it comes to setting up meetings. If you are unsure of the procedure, you can call the office of the person you wish to meet and ask the secretary what steps you need to take to set up a meeting.

Presenting your concerns effectively

Most personal meetings will last no more than one hour, and you will want to make the most of your time. If the decision-maker feels that the meeting was a good use of time, he or she will be more willing to meet with you again in the future. ►

Tips for making your meeting effective

- **Prepare** thoroughly before the meeting.
- **Find out as much about the decision-maker as possible.** Does anyone in your organisation know this person? Has anyone met with them before? Is this decision-maker familiar with your organisation? What are his or her responsibilities? What is the scope of his or her authority?
- **If a group of people are attending the meeting together, decide in advance who will be the main spokesperson, and who will speak on what points.** The spokesperson can introduce the other people at the meeting. The group attending the meeting should not be too large.
- **Be polite and on time.** Dress appropriately as a sign of respect.
- **Keep the meeting focused.** Do not raise too many issues. Be sure that the group is in agreement about the message. You do not want the people in your delegation to disagree amongst themselves during the meeting, as this will weaken your position.
- **Bring along relevant documents.** Do not assume that the decision-maker has had time to read documents you provided in advance. Bring along extra copies and be ready to summarise key information at the meeting.
- **Listen.** Remember that a meeting is also an opportunity to find out information from the decision-maker. Concentrate on what the person is telling you, and ask questions if anything is unclear.
- **Reach a clear outcome.** By the end of the meeting, you and the decision-maker should have a clear understanding of anything that has been agreed. The decision-maker may want you to provide more specific information. The decision-maker may have agreed to take certain actions, or may have agreed to do further research and inform you about what he or she finds out. Make notes of the steps that each party has agreed to take at the meeting. Review this at the end of the meeting to ensure that everyone is in clear agreement about the next steps. If possible, set deadlines for when the agreed tasks should be completed.
- **Follow up on the meeting with a thank-you letter.** This letter should also briefly summarise what was discussed and mention any actions that were agreed upon at the meeting. If you have promised to do something, such as sending the decision-maker more information, complete your task as soon as possible. If it was decided that the decision-maker would take action, contact the decision-maker after a reasonable time to see if the agreed steps have been taken. ■



One person should be ready to take notes on the key points of the discussion.



You mentioned that there is no budget for increased old age pensions this year. Would you be willing to request funds for a small monthly increase in next year's budget?

I would like to go over our conclusions from this meeting. I understand that you have agreed to hold a meeting with the sports coaches to discuss the schools' equipment needs before the end of the month, and I have agreed to send out a letter to parents during the following month asking for donations for new equipment.



Thank you very much for meeting with me and my colleagues last week to discuss gender issues in the Labour Bill. We would also like to thank you for agreeing to discuss the matters we raised with representatives of Namibian trade unions and employer organisations.

Using a role play to prepare for the meeting

If you do not feel confident about the meeting, do a role play first. Work with a friend who will pretend to be the decision-maker you are going to meet with. Practise how the meeting might go if the “decision-maker” is sympathetic, then practise it again with the “decision-maker” acting hostile. You can change roles so that everyone gets a chance to practise different parts. This exercise will give you more confidence. It will also help you to put yourself in the shoes of the decision-maker, so you’ll be able to see which points might be most persuasive in the meeting.

I will pretend to be the Minister so that you can practise what you will say at the meeting.

Okay, then let's change places.

