

**MIDWEST CENTER**  
**FOR NONPROFIT**  
**LEADERSHIP**

**A DAY OF LEARNING:**  
*THE EDWARD A. SMITH DISTINGUISHED LECTURE SERIES*

**2004 Summary Report**

**Giving Voice to Your Mission:**  
**The Secrets of Building Will and Shaping Public Policy**

**David Cohen**  
*The Advocacy Institute*

*The 2004 Edward A. Smith Distinguished Lecturer was **David Cohen**, co-founder and co-chair of The Advocacy Institute, a Washington, D.C. ~ based nonprofit that prepares others in the nonprofit community to effectively advocate for their mission.*

**Tuesday, April 20, 2004**

## **Giving Voice to Your Mission:** **The Secrets of Building Will and Shaping Public Policy**

### **Advocacy as an Instrument of Democracy**

Social justice and political reform activist David Cohen has been tackling our country's systemic challenges – poverty, civil rights, war, nuclear arms, government accountability, abuses of power and the corrupting influence of money on American politics – for more than four decades.

But Cohen does not dwell on problems.

Instead, he emphasizes our unique power as citizens in a democratic society to participate in organized efforts to bring about change.

“Forming our more perfect union requires the understanding that citizenship is an organized community and collective responsibility,” he said in opening his presentation. “Above all, we must understand that citizenship is associated with the sense of commonwealth. People doing our public work to strengthen the public good and their common interests.”

Nonprofits, Cohen says, can use the instruments of democracy – elections, mass mobilization, civil action, lobbying, negotiations, bargaining and court actions – to build public will, inform legislative and community debate and shape public policy.

He uses the image of “THE RAMP,” derived from a set of core organizational values, to set a standard for social change and inspire our efforts to achieve it:

**T**RANSIRENCY – No hidden agendas. Advocacy requires an arena for public argument, therefore, we must make decisions in the open.

**H**OPE – Think in positive terms. Advocacy works against tough barriers and obstacles. Therefore, we must remain confident when challenging those who hold governmental, political and economic power.

**E**XCHANGE – Learn from one another. Advocacy recognizes that each individual brings something unique to a movement, therefore, we must communicate and foster public relationships.

**R**ESPECT—All ideas are valid. Advocacy recognizes that contributions are multiple and come from varied sources, therefore, we must respect the ideas of others in order to develop the powerful dynamic that strengthens and emboldens a movement.

**A**FFIRMATION – Engage in appreciative inquiry. Advocacy requires innovation and experimentation, therefore, we must evaluate, identify and affirm those things that work well.

**M**ODELING – Set standards of excellence. Advocacy works to effect change for the good of all humanity, therefore, we must establish principles modeled on codes of excellence.

**P**RAGMATISM – Create attainable goals. Advocacy has a determined vision of changing society's institutions, therefore, we must initiate practical actions that help advance that vision.

# How to Engage in Effective Advocacy

Cohen suggests three ways to help nonprofits effectively communicate for change and ascend the ramp to building and sustaining democratic participation:

## 1. Sustain Leadership

As we work towards a more just and equitable society, the need for dedicated and involved leaders in the nonprofit community is essential to effective advocacy. Cohen believes that one of the greatest strengths in our country is the healthy quality of social justice leadership.

He identifies three characteristics of strong civic leaders:

- **Leaders accept responsibility to tackle tough issues**
- **Leaders emphasize active education**
- **Leaders use the arts to build and strengthen community**

To sustain leadership, Cohen insists that we **identify, mentor** and **celebrate** emerging community leaders.

**Identify Existing Strengths** – Advocacy recognizes that all are needed and that contributions are multiple and derived from varied sources. To effectively engage in an advocacy movement, an organization must have a plurality of leaders who possess unique qualities and strengths.

Drawing on a set of categories developed by Advocacy Institute Co-Founder Michael Pertschuk, Cohen enumerates various types of leadership roles:

- *Role models* who mentor and coach other engaged citizens.
- *Visionaries* who challenge the conventional view of the possible and generate a picture of the long-term that others can discuss and modify.
- *Strategists* who advance the vision and chart the path to success.
- *Historians* who guard the memory and collected stories of an organization.
- *Resource mobilizers* who cut through institutional inertia.
- *Statespersons* who embody credibility and authority.
- *Communicators* who educate the public through symbols and metaphors that accurately represent the movement's objectives.
- *Outside sparkplugs* who raise the stakes and make the decision-makers "squirm."
- *Inside negotiators* who know the informal and formal political and policy systems and use that knowledge to apply pressure on the powerful.
- *Generalists* who bring years of experience to any effort.

Each kind of leader brings a special set of skills and talents to his or her movement or organization. Through the union of these leadership roles, an organization develops cohesion and strength, bringing it closer to achieving its goals and resolving community problems.

Cohen urges each one of us to identify what kind of leader we are: “Leadership is exercised in many different ways,” he says. “Think about where you fit in to these categories. No one is all of these, but each of you is at least one, and maybe more.”

**Mentor and Coach** – Essential to effective advocacy is the ability to engage individuals who have an interest in a policy result. There are “untapped people resources” in all communities.

“We must make it our responsibility to identify those sources of power and bring them into the movement,” Cohen says. “We must value and involve citizenry that is active and vibrant. That means many voices, hardly heard at all in the corridors of power and many that aren’t heard at all, have to be amplified.”

**Create Rituals of Celebration** – To sustain strong social justice leadership, Cohen encourages recognition and celebration of those “acting on the front lines.”

Praising Kansas City for its healthy tradition of honoring strong leadership, Cohen hopes that presentation of the Edward A. Smith Awards will serve as a model for other communities.

“This program is a wonderful example of recognizing both the work of individuals and the fact that those individual leaders are part of something larger,” Cohen said. “And with that we begin to move away from isolation and self-serving to move toward a sense of community and collective responsibility.”

Cohen also knows that appreciation goes a long way and emphasizes the importance of thanking elected officials when they act in our interest, even for an action they should have taken anyway. Cohen calls for a “welcoming, additive approach,” as opposed to a “puritanical approach” that rejects saying thank you because it is our leaders’ duty to act rightly.

## **2. Share Advocacy Stories**

In education, health, housing, transportation and the environment, says Cohen, civic leaders deal with substantially broken systems that “are beyond tinkering and tweaking.”

Still, dedicated and bold efforts are underway to address these problems. Believing there is much to learn from these efforts, Cohen urges individuals to share advocacy experiences with one another and transmit them through their structured networks.

“It is important to have stories,” says Cohen, “so that when you are addressing these conflicts, as you are here in your community, we can draw on those stories and begin to use the magic of decentralized communication to get the word out.”

Cohen shares a story from his work at Common Cause, a voluntary membership organization that focuses on government accountability issues and transmits advocacy skills. Following Watergate, Common Cause worked for an Independent Prosecutor legislation to hold high government officials accountable. A delegation of local members were to meet with their elected House of Representatives member.. Never having met with a legislator before, Common Cause organized a role-play activity that prepared them for their meeting. It resulted in a successful visit.

Cohen refers to an Advocacy Institute summary of goals fostered by storytelling:

- Learning from one's own experience
- Strengthening community
- Inspiring action
- Transmitting advocacy skills
- Developing issue perspectives
- Testing advocacy models

Cohen also notes three recently published books – Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickled and Dimed*, Beth Schulman's *The Betrayal of Work* and David Shipler's *The Working Poor* – to illustrate how storytelling influences community thinking. Addressing the issue of poverty in low-income families, the authors tell stories that enlighten the public to serious social problems. Through narratives and pictures, they shape community thinking and build public will for the establishment of workable policies that systemically address the problems of the working poor.

### **3. Create Structured Networks**

Cohen encourages the creation and nurturing of structured networks.

#### **Structured networks benefit communities by:**

- Maintaining the flow of useful information by organizing and sharing it through documentation, strategies and tactics.
- Shaping discourse on policy.
- Linking organizations advocating on similar issues across geography and constituency, made more possible today by technology.

Citing an essay by John Gardner, "How to Avoid Organizational Dry Rot," Cohen explains how consistently focusing on an organization's internal issues and structure creates "mission amnesia."

Because nonprofit organizations deal with issues "more expansive than self," Cohen encourages their leaders to reach beyond their own organizations and relate to others working on similar issues and goals.

While it is important to build relationships within our own organization, Cohen believes that we must **cross community boundaries to deal effectively with our public problems.**

"We must support the development of relationships that cross the boundaries of race, ethnicity, religion, community, geography and sector," says Cohen. "That means that we have to talk to people not only in our immediate community with whom we're always most comfortable but people who are in other sectors."

Between now and the end of the year, Cohen challenges us to expand our structured network by advancing in our organization three new relationships in different sectors, such as legislators, media, private foundations, international agencies and corporate and civic leaders. He highlights the media as an

effective arena of advocacy and encourages us to identify and foster relationships with those who cover our issues.

In closing, Cohen warns against allowing our strategies for social change to be caught in the polarization of ideology, noting that the most effective social changes in this country have involved both liberal and conservative leaders who shared belief in the value of an engaged citizenry.

“Together,” says Cohen, “we win.”

## **Practical Scenarios**

Day of Learning participants convened in small affinity groups following Cohen’s presentation to discuss the forces that both help and hinder their organization’s ability to engage in advocacy activities.

Cohen presented “Nine Questions” to be asked in planning strategy for advocacy campaigns:

1. What do we want? (GOALS)
2. Who can give it to us? (AUDIENCES)
3. What do they need to hear? (MESSAGES)
4. Who do they need to hear it from? (MESSENGERS)
5. How can we get them to hear it? (DELIVERY)
6. What have we got? (RESOURCES)
7. What do we need to develop? (GAPS)
8. How do we begin? (FIRST STEPS)
9. How do we tell if it’s working? (EVALUATION)

Later, participants voiced their advocacy challenges, successes, goals and stories. One local organization shared its goal of establishing an advocacy campaign created by the board of directors. In an effort to get the board excited and passionate about advocacy, the organization’s staff will bring in an expert to train board members and help them create an effective advocacy campaign. Cohen agreed that involving the board in understanding day-to-day management issues and needs builds the necessary collaboration to deepen stakeholding.

Another organization discussed using focus groups that meet regularly to address community needs. Cohen praised that organization for listening to the community, which he considers a critical tool in advocacy, lobbying and creating public will. Not only does the listening process help identify needs in a specific community, but it enables that community to connect to others with similar needs and build a structured network.

Other organizations spoke to the difficulty of collaborating with community partners due to territorial challenges. Cohen responded that territoriality and issues of organizational vanity can sap energy from one’s mission. He discussed the importance of sustaining leadership in one’s own organization and working towards earning trust with others in order to overcome these tensions.

Finally, many organizations discussed the diversity of their boards, attributing much of their success to having a place where people of different backgrounds come together to discuss common interests. Cohen agreed that it is critical to create and preserve a space for people who may be at war politically but can bridge differences around a common goal. At the heart of creating the public will to deal with significant social problems, he said, is the ability of leaders from opposing ideological or political backgrounds to learn to work together and thereby deal with and solve public problems. That will create the needed public energy and agreement to improve the lives of community members.

## **Conclusion**

David Cohen invites us to embark on an adventure in democracy. It is not easy or quick. We must be patient, not with injustice, but with the process of change itself.

Cohen reassures: “Our job is not to finish the task, but to start it and to continue it. None of this is magical. It recognizes that it takes stamina and persistence.”

So we exchange views, we voice opinions, we celebrate leadership, we lobby, we network, we mentor, we invent, and we innovate.

We actively engage in public-spirited work.

And we make a difference.

“That is living the life of citizenship to the fullest,” said Cohen. “It is also living to the fullest.”