

Postcards from the Inferno

Lessons Learned from Recent Budget Battles

Assembly 2010 – October 15, 2010 – Austin, Texas

Advice for State Arts Agencies Facing Hard Times

This dialogue session involved participants in crafting “postcards” that offer advice to state arts agencies facing legislative crises or budget threats. Their counsel fell into five main categories: [Political Management](#), [Messaging and Messengers](#), [Communicating with Stakeholders](#), [Don't Go It Alone](#) and [Other Advice](#). See the [Session Notes](#) for an outline of the complete discussion.

Political Management

Discreetly fund expert lobbyists.

If you survive an attack and politicians figure out it's painful for them politically to cut your agency, you may get a reprieve in the future. Capitalize on those consequences.

If you get advocacy advice from a legislator or their aide—no matter how hard it is to hear—listen. Becoming defensive or hostile is not useful. They might be right.

Engage council members to use their political contacts.

Find the "G-spot" of the state budget director (mine was folklife). And learn how to kiss ass.

Develop relationships with legislative staff and budget analysts. They can be either obstacles or assets.

Get involved in governors' initiatives and make the arts work for each of them.

Focus on where the power is. Get to know key legislators, leaders of committees, your governor's staff and those making important decisions.

Build an arts caucus in the legislature.

Show off the size of the constituency that supports the arts. The issue isn't really money (the amounts are too small), it's political will. Develop and demonstrate your clout.

Get people to show up to legislative committee meetings—there is power in numbers.

Teach your constituents how to become leaders in their own communities. Not just arts advocates but people who make decisions and drive the political process.

Messaging and Messengers

Talk about public benefit—not need.

Train your grantees on how to approach their elected officials and what kinds of things to say to them. No whining!

Identify those in the community to best tell your story and seek them out to tell it. Our best messengers and allies sometimes come from outside our arts circle.

Know when to back off and get someone else to carry the torch for you.

Always have accurate data available to present to legislators and advocates to show how dollars are generated and the people that the arts

Visible grantee support is crucial. Everyone must send notes and make phone calls. Everyone needs to be thanked, even those who did not vote on behalf of the arts. Thank them publicly. This battle is never over.

Elevate your agency to the same level of importance in the eyes of decision makers as other sectors (i.e., not an arts "community" but an arts "industry").

"There are no weak claims, only weak claimants." David Stockman, Reagan OMB Director

Communicating with Stakeholders

Communicate well and often with your networks during good times so they are ready to help if crisis strikes.

Ramp up your communications with everyone. You may not see immediate results, but it will be helpful later.

Spend your own time communicating what's important and stay out of the weeds.

Tell your story and tell it often.

Keep your constituents/grantees informed every step of the way.

Stay as positive as possible for your staff. Your attitude can definitely influence theirs.

Get to know your stakeholders (artists, arts organizations, members of government, patrons, arts educators, funders, media reps, etc.) on a personal level. Form real relationships.

Relationships, relationships, relationships.

Maintain a strong network across the whole state. A broad base of support (from urban and rural and suburban areas) provides the best network for advocacy over the long haul.

Impress upon your grantees their advocacy responsibilities and potential.

Put artwork in legislative offices.

Engage your board members in a project. Have them learn one program in depth and become advocates for that issue with the rest of the council, legislators and the community at large.

Don't Go It Alone

Get yourself some great advisors who can inspire, strategize and encourage you along the way. Include diverse perspectives, all of whom are smart, connected and care about your successful journey into the future.

Don't be afraid to reach out to your state arts agency colleagues. It's safe, and someone else has been through what you are going through.

Engage your board members in a project. Have them learn one program in depth and become advocates for that issue with the rest of the council, legislators and the community at large.

Don't hesitate to ask for help. Look to NASAA and to other SAAs that might have been through the same issues.

Other Advice

You can't do everything. Do what you do best, delegate the rest and follow up frequently.

Remember why you were attracted to the work of public administration and the arts in the first place. Attend a performance. Visit a studio. Watch a child engage in the arts to gain stamina to make it through.

Learn to be a technology leader in your state. Have other agencies look to you as an example of advancement.

If managing advocacy isn't already in your job description, make room for it. This will take up a lot of time and crisis management will crowd out other responsibilities.

Work smarter, not harder.

Give chocolate to legislative staff.

Secure a dedicated revenue source.

Don't give up. This, too, shall pass.