

# **ADVOCACY for CHANGE**

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“Change has a considerable psychological impact on the human mind. To the fearful it is threatening because it means the things may get worse. To the hopeful it is encouraging because things may get better. To the confident it is inspiring because the challenge exists to make things better.”

King Whitney Jr.

## **Types of Advocates**

An advocate is defined as one who speaks on behalf of others. Certainly this defines a part of advocacy – acting for another’s cause, but the notion of advocacy, I believe is more encompassing. The most basic form of advocacy is speaking for yourself. So, as an advocate you can work toward changing your own reality as well as speaking out for others. These dimensions will be explored in this section separately, but for purposes of advocacy there is a third level to consider and that is people who are paid to advocate. These are professional advocates. Let’s look at each of these three groups separately.

### **The Self Advocate**

The first experience you had in speaking out for yourself was your first effort in self-advocacy. It might have been to advocate your parents to let you stay out on Saturday night longer than your curfew. Or, you may have promoted yourself as a candidate for a leadership position in a school club. Even to this day, given your current reality, I am sure you act as a self-advocate more than you realize.

### **Challenges of Self-Advocacy**

Self-advocacy might seem easy as a concept – to stand up for what you feel is right for you, but for many of us it is a difficult task. One basic reason for the challenge is that by its nature, advocacy is a confrontational issue. That is, you are put in a role of challenging another person about something, and most people have problems with confrontation. We know that we must “fight for our rights,” but the literature on human behavior suggests that confrontation is emotionally draining. Some anthropologists contend that human beings have a visceral negative reaction to confrontation. When a challenge or fight occurs, all aspects of the neuro-behavioral system become aroused and alerted. Your stomach begins to churn and your heartbeat accelerates. Blood pressure goes up and concentration levels advance. All of these physiological changes are

upsetting and uncomfortable. In fact, medical doctors suggest that in the long run these physiological changes can be life threatening.

Think about your last experience when you had to confront someone. Even if you won the battle, you probably felt lousy. The psychologist, Alfie Kohn (1992) wrote an entire book about the negative effects of competition and confrontation. Regardless of the situation, confrontation usually builds stress and makes people uncomfortable. These challenging experiences are ones that we would rather avoid. In fact, most people I know stay away from advocacy situations, even when they know that they are right!

Another reason why self-advocacy is difficult for people is that it, at times, seems selfish. By its very nature it is the process where someone is trying to get something for him or herself. This notion of selfishness goes directly against the grain of how many people are raised in our western culture. Some may argue this point, but it seems to me that parents I observe seem to always admonish their children when they act selfish. We're told over and over to share, play nice and be quiet. These principles of child-rearing have a deep effect on us, so much so that the majority of people, once we become adults, will not speak up, even when the situation might be outrageous. I have seen people try to eat under or overcooked food rather than call the waiter to complain. Deep roots are hard to change.

A third reason self-advocacy is challenging is because it is personal. Since it is about us (or someone we love) it is hard to be objective or abstract. Many a good advocate finds it difficult to advocate for themselves. Our emotions can engulf us and cause a strong skew to the perspective we might take and, at times, emotions can be blinding. This personal subjectivity is not always bad, but it can get in the way. It is no different from any other self-directed challenge. There are interesting stories and films about doctors who become patients, or lawyers who have to be defended. The novelty of the storyline is the same clutter that can get in the way of self-advocacy.

The last reason why self-advocacy is difficult is because it is hard. Often when a person is called upon to stand up for themselves it is tied to the most basic element of advocacy – that of power. The self-advocate is usually called upon to deal with people who seemingly have more power than they. This power differential will be explored in subsequent chapters, but suffice it to say here, that when you deal with people who have more power than you, it is usually an uphill fight.

### **Advocating for Others**

This dimension of advocacy, in some regards, takes some of the subjectivity out of the advocacy equation. In the “Advocating for Others” category, the advocate is usually somewhat removed from the person in need. Often we do this form of advocacy for friends or associates who need or request representation. A good example here might be a friend who stands up for another friend who has been maligned in some way. Now, it is important to not confuse this level of advocacy from the self-advocate that is representing

a family member. When the advocate is representing a family member this, in essence, becomes self-advocacy.

Advocating for others, like any good form of advocacy, requires that solid information be gathered and prepared for the cause. Because the emotional bond between the players is not as deep as with family members, the advocate should be as objective as possible with the information. Often, at this level, the advocating can also become a form of mediation. That is, if the information dictates, the advocate might be able to show that not all of the effects that led to the advocacy were unjust. The objectivity can help clarify the facts and hopefully lead to a resolution that is more viable to all.

### **Professional Advocates**

This final level of advocacy is called “professional advocacy.” This is when someone is retained to represent us in a cause. The simplest example here is when a legal snag causes us to have to hire an attorney. In these cases we are paying not only for objectivity, but also for information, strategies and fineness that comes from a professional understanding.

Now professional advocates come in all types. Some, like lawyers, have very detailed training. Others may have broader organizational training. Others might have had solid experiences that make them valuable as professionals. My own training as an organizer came from the University of Pittsburgh’s School of Social Work. The broad field of community organization is offered in most schools of social work around the country and prepares students in the process of advocacy. Many professional social workers are retained to help plan, organize or promote a cause. Many types of groups or coalitions hire organizers to recruit members or develop a presence where changes might occur.

Professional organizers have developed or learned specific problem solving and organizing skills. These include:

Research – the ability to gather information or data relevant to the issue.

Strategy development – the ability to look at the various approaches and focuses in on the ones relevant to the cause.

Recruitment of key players – the ability to know of and then find people or things that will help promote success with the cause.

Monitoring of timing and actions – the ability to keep things moving through the process.

Evaluation of success – the ability to measure how things are going.

Special skills – the knowledge of rules, regulations or policies that is critical to the cause.

## **Singular Advocacy**

Singular advocacy means just that – an individual cause to be addressed or changed. Singular advocacy is when we identify an issue that is wrong or unfair and begin the process of working, usually by ourselves, to reshape the concern. Singular advocacy may include others, but the primary focus is to benefit one person in one issue.

## **Collective Advocacy**

By contrast this is when a number of people band together for a cause that will affect many. Collective advocacy looks to organize people toward a common agenda with sweeping impact. Legal class action suits are, in some ways, an example of collective advocacy where many people petition for a change together. We will have more on collective advocacy later in this manual.

## **Conclusion**

So regardless of issue, whenever an injustice occurs, and mediation is not successful or possible, advocacy is often the next step. If you represent yourself, another person, or are hired to represent someone, there are key common features that are critical to the process of change.

“Never doubt that a small band of people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Margret Meade

Note – This article is from the book, “Advocacy for Change – A Manual for Action” available through [www.ancor.org](http://www.ancor.org) – 703-535-7850.