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Climbing the Mountain: An Approach to Planning and Evaluating Public-Policy Advocacy

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Keywords: Public policy, evaluation, philanthropy, nonprofit, advocacy, strategic planning

Key Points

- This article proposes a new methodology for planning and evaluating public-policy advocacy. The methodology is designed around a series of stages, each with a different set of strategic planning and assessment requirements.
- The article suggests that both planning and evaluative approaches that fail to take account of the necessary stages required to develop and then implement an advocacy strategy will likely assign the wrong indicators of success.
- This analysis is based on direct experience working with both policy processes and a wide range of foundations and nonprofits that have invested in public-policy advocacy, including the Rockefeller, Ford, David and Lucille Packard, and William and Flora Hewlett foundations.

Introduction

The rise of outcome-oriented philanthropy has absorbed significant oxygen in the nonprofit sector over the last decade, and many of its concepts and techniques are continuing to gain steam in philanthropic circles, helping leaders and institutions to think critically about how best to achieve results and measure impact (Brest, 2012).

Yet one challenge to this movement has been the question of how most effectively to plan, support, and evaluate public-policy advocacy. While philanthropic investments in public-policy advocacy

remain a core part of many foundation strategies, planning and evaluation tools have not evolved to meet the challenge. In our view, the sector remains caught between two incomplete points of view. Some have said that public policy advocacy simply can't be planned or measured with any rigor. Others believe public-policy planning and evaluation can adapt quantifiable measures to the public-policy context.

In our opinion, while these approaches are useful contributions on which we draw later in this article, neither of them will work alone. We've worked directly with and for policymakers and consulted for advocates and nonprofits seeking policy change. From this experience, we suggest a new model, which we call "climbing the mountain." This approach segments the relevant stages of public-policy advocacy and urges a mixture of targeted quantitative and qualitative insights. By dividing public-policy advocacy efforts into discrete phases, this approach can help funders and advocates gain greater clarity about the incremental measures of success, adopt more realistic plans for impact, and know when and how to hold themselves accountable for public-policy outcomes.

Debunking the Myths

If the planning and assessment of public-policy advocacy efforts are to improve, persistent myths about their nature and scope must be dispelled. These misconceptions often contain a kernel of truth applicable to some policy fights, but are

too easily (and frequently) misapplied. The result is that many funders and advocates treat every policy effort in the same terms, rather than adapting their tactics and techniques to each unique situation.

The first is the “myth of the movement.” This describes the idea that all public-policy reform movements proceed in essentially the same way. The two major camps are those who focus on the grassroots and those who believe that policy change emanates largely from insider maneuvering.

The truth is that both points of view can be accurate depending on the issue, and there are numerous recent examples of either approach carrying the day. Take Feed the Future, the federal government’s \$3.5 billion program to alleviate global hunger (U.S. Agency for International Development, n.d.). The effort was aided by the Chicago Initiative on Global Agricultural Development, convened by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Designed to reinvigorate the U.S. commitment to global agricultural development as a solution to hunger, the Chicago Council process tapped an array of thought leaders in foreign policy and development (Chicago Council on Global Affairs, n.d.b).

The initiative was well timed. Coinciding with the presidential transition and early months of the Obama’s administration, the effort provided a clear policy blueprint for incoming policymakers and featured high-level access from project leads (Independent Leaders Group, 2009). The initiative kicked off in September 2008 and by the following July, President Obama stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his counterparts at the G8 Summit in L’Aquila, Italy, to mutually commit to reducing global hunger (Baker & Dugger, 2009) – no broad movement, no armies of activists, but billions of dollars aimed at reducing hunger through a clear, directed political and policy strategy.

Recent years saw just the opposite strategy succeed to defeat two pieces of legislation regarding distribution of content over the Internet.

We suggest a new model, which we call “climbing the mountain.” This approach segments the relevant stages of public-policy advocacy and urges a mixture of targeted quantitative and qualitative insights.

Championed by the film and music industries, the Protect IP Act (PIPA) in the Senate and its House companion, the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), were proposed to address the problem of foreign websites illegally distributing copyrighted content. Yet many in the Internet sector – from major companies such as Google down to individual app developers – opposed the bills as overbroad measures that would essentially censor Internet content and threaten innovation (Abrams, 2012a).

While these players joined with open-Internet advocates in pursuing an aggressive strategy in Washington, the decisive moment was a massive uprising of Internet users. Mobilized by companies and nonprofit advocacy groups, millions of users participated in a range of traditional grassroots actions – with an Internet twist. On Nov. 16, 2011, when SOPA was scheduled for hearings in the House, the microblogging service Tumblr deployed an application that allowed Internet denizens to call their member of Congress with the click of a button. Thanks to the ease of engagement, nearly 90,000 people did just that (Reisinger, 2011). A few months later, on Jan. 18, more than 100,000 websites including such giants as Wikipedia “blacked out” to protest the bills. The action prompted more than 4 million emails to Congress (Fight for the Future, n.d.). After the blackout, the two bills were effectively dead (Abrams, 2012b).

While insider action was critical in driving criticism of the bills and spurring public engagement,

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it was the scope and size of popular action that ultimately defeated two pieces of legislation that began their lives with significant congressional support.

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The Myth of Duration

The second myth, the “myth of duration,” is that all policy efforts require the same investment of time. This myth is false on its face, but a lack of clarity about the scope of a given policy effort has bedeviled many efforts.

Sometimes policy impact happens quickly. The Chicago Council’s Initiative on Global Agricultural Development took less than a year to see significant success, although it was built on decades of previous work in the field. The SOPA/PIPA fight was similarly short. Defending the gains made by Feed the Future or holding the line on Internet intellectual property policy may require lasting investment, but the overall term of each effort was relatively brief.

Other fights are much longer. The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, a cornerstone of U.S. leave policy, took well over a decade to pass. Democratic Rep. Howard Berman, who had championed a leave law for mothers when he served in the California State Assembly, got the ball rolling on a federal law shortly after winning

a seat in the U.S. House. Yet the concept would take many twists and turns before it became a central issue for a range of progressive women’s groups in the late 1980s and, later, a cause célèbre for Democrats before evolving into a signature campaign issue for then-Gov. Bill Clinton during the 1992 presidential campaign (Elving, 1995).

The Myth of Movement

Finally, some public-policy efforts are episodic, with rapid progress followed by long periods of stagnation. The right to serve in the armed forces irrespective of one’s sexual orientation had been a significant campaign issue for Clinton but, as president, he was forced to compromise on the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, which was enacted through executive action due to bipartisan opposition to removing the prohibition against service by gays and lesbians in the U.S. military (Shanker & Healy, 2012). It was not until 2010 that Obama was able to work with Congress to finally repeal “don’t ask, don’t tell” (Stolberg, 2010).

A common mistake is to ascribe the wrong time horizon to different public-policy efforts. Successful planning and assessment require taking a realistic view of the issue, the prevailing political landscape, and the relative difficulty of properly aligning the various forces in play. Treating a 10-year effort like a short-term campaign won’t work. Just as unwise would be wasting an immediate opportunity by building long-term infrastructure.

The Myth of Means

The final myth is that the nonprofit sector is always outgunned. This is the “myth of means”; at worst it results in despair, and at best a tolerance for inflexible and ineffective action. This myth derives from the truism that corporate and partial interests vastly outpace the nonprofit and philanthropic sector in the scale of their investment in political processes at the local, state, and national levels. In 2013, total lobbying expenditures – while at a five-year low – reached \$3.2 billion (Auble, 2014). These advantages are real, and a steep financial advantage is abetted by significant tax code restrictions that constrain the ability of the nonprofit sector to play on the same footing as so-

called “special interests” (Schadler, 2012, p. 6).

Yet money is not destiny in public policy. The financial industry spent more than \$386 million in lobbying in 2009 and 2010, when the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act was drafted, debated, and passed (Center for Responsive Politics, n.d.a). The finance, insurance, and real estate industries also contributed almost \$64 million to federal candidates through political action committees during the 2010 electoral cycle, with spending nearly evenly divided between the parties (Center for Responsive Politics, n.d.b.). The health care industry spent \$527 million in lobbying for 2009 alone during the debate over health care reform (Center for Responsive Politics, n.d.c). At one point in 2009, health care providers, insurers, and pharmaceutical manufacturers were spending more than \$1 million per day (Eggen & Kindy, 2009).

In reform of neither Wall Street nor health care did this astronomical investment carry the day. While industry won battles along the way and succeeded at watering down some aspects of the laws, an alliance of policymakers, public-interest advocates, and private stakeholders ultimately prevailed, passing historic pieces of legislation – Dodd-Frank and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act – that imposed wide-scale, meaningful reforms on two major industries. Money matters, but it is not decisive.

Once advocates and funders free themselves of the myths of the movement, duration, and means, they are prepared to take a clear-eyed view of how public-policy reform can be achieved and how progress should be assessed along the way. They are ready to climb the mountain.

How to Climb the Mountain

Despite the wide variation in efforts at public-policy reform, what holds them together are a set of stages common to nearly every public-policy advocacy process. Identifying these stages within a given effort can make planning and evaluating public-policy advocacy much more rational, if not considerably easier. Martha Campbell and Julia Coffman identify five major stages: “Choose the

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public policy goal,” “understand the challenge,” “identify which audiences can move the issue,” “determine how far audiences must move,” and “establish what it will take to move the audiences forward” (2009, pp. 124-126). These are useful, but they are most effective as guideposts to inform philanthropic strategy development, largely encapsulating a public-policy “theory of change.”

We have come to conceptualize public-policy advocacy as climbing a mountain. Mountains can differ by height, by climate, and by grade of climb. In a given expedition, a climber can face a mixture of well-worn paths and treacherous, vertical ascents. Efforts to engage in successful public-policy advocacy also vary in their degree of difficulty and duration. Even within the same effort, there are moments of impasse and frustration, followed by those of easy triumph. An ideal planning and evaluative framework addresses each of these stages on its own merits, rather than as a continuous whole.

The uniquely dynamic nature of public policy is well recognized among commentators. As Campbell and Coffman note, “because the policy process is complex and dynamic, foundations must prepare for the likelihood that their grantmaking strategies will change over time. For instance, foundations may need to adapt them in response to shifting political circumstances or opportunities” (2009, p. 129). Similarly, Steven Teles and Mark Schmitt put the question of judgment and adaptability at their heart of their conception of public-policy advocacy. They call advocacy evaluation “a form of trained judgment,” explaining that “evaluators must recognize the complex, foggy

FIGURE 1 A Synopsis of the "Climbing the Mountain" Methodology as It Relates to Planning and Evaluation

	PLANNING	EVALUATION
ATTAINING THE SUMMIT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is our ultimate goal? • Are we clear on the venue and time frame? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did we achieve what we set out to do? • Are there policy steps left to be taken?
REACHING BASECAMP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What will move decision-makers? • Are there tactical efforts necessary to consolidate success or inoculate ourselves? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are we gaining tangible milestones? • Are the final steps in sight? • Is the issue firmly cemented on the agenda?
STAGING THE CLIMB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have we developed a strong, tactically detailed strategic plan? • Do we know the "who, what, when, where, and why" of the campaign effort? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was our theory of change correct? • Do we have clear indicators that we are shifting attitudes of key audiences?
PREPARING FOR THE CLIMB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do we have a good sense of the capabilities and capacities needed to succeed? • Are these capacities in place, or do they require development? • Is there a plan and organizational hub or network to do so? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are advocates building a credible presence in the field? • If this locus of work is new, are the background organizational and human capital elements being put into place?
SURVEYING THE MOUNTAIN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does this issue demand a public policy intervention? • Does a short-, medium-, or long-term opportunity appear feasible? • Are we ready to devote significant resources to an uncertain endeavor? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have we adequately planned an approach and considered multiple scenarios? • Will this align with our other strategies and programs long enough to stay the course?

chains of causality in politics" (Teles & Schmitt, 2011, p. 39).

Due to these considerations, we resist efforts to too rigidly assess, implement, and measure public-policy processes. The temptation to develop quantitative systems may be great, but they are more likely to confuse judgment than to clarify decisions. For example, Ivan Barkhorn, Nathan Huttner, and Jason Blau have recently proposed

a way to "score" nine key conditions for effective policy interventions. The conditions are sensible, ranging from ensuring a clear opportunity to developing a feasible solution to building a strong advocacy coalition and engaged public. For each condition, they suggest assigning a score between 1 and 5 (where things are before commencement and expected outcomes). These scores are then filtered through a mathematical formula to yield key indicators that range from the chances

of success to the hoped-for return. The authors acknowledge that this approach is “a decision-making aid, not scientific truth” (Barkhorn, et al., 2013, p. 61). Despite this caveat, such a methodology converts numbers into a proxy for judgment, obscuring the sometimes very uncertain bets that philanthropy and advocates place when they take on public-policy advocacy.

The existing literature is largely consonant. Public-policy advocacy is essentially uncertain, often involving significant resources allocated for outcomes that may take years to come to fruition. Planning and evaluation rubrics that ask too much of this hazy landscape will fail. To split the difference between illusory over-specification and a sense of futility, we divide most efforts to impact public policy into five distinct stages. Each of these stages represents a part of the climb up the mountain of policy: surveying the mountain, preparing for the climb, staging the climb, reaching base camp, and attaining the summit. (See Figure 1.)

Stage 1: Surveying the Mountain

The first stage of public-policy advocacy takes place before the first dollar is ever invested. This phase – “surveying the mountain” – marks the initial exploration of opportunity. For philanthropy especially, this is a time to assess several critical factors: the opportunity for impact, the existing capacities within the field, and the relative cost of engagement. Activity in this stage is confined to planning, exploration, and assessment of opportunities.

The essential task in “surveying the mountain” involves literal surveying – what we sometimes refer to as “landscaping” an issue. This requires commissioning original research – both qualitative and quantitative – about the needs within the field and the potential scope of impact, and a sober analysis of the policy opportunity. Our methodology in this stage has often focused heavily on confidential stakeholder interviews that canvass interested parties, potential allies, possible competitors, and target audiences. This process is designed to elevate opportunities and uncover barriers.

Expending significant effort in anticipating and understanding the target field or issue for public-policy advocacy pays dividends once engagement begins. It provides for more targeted planning, allows for preemptive accommodation of possible obstacles, and ensures that investment and activity originate from clear thinking about the task ahead.

This is also a time to have a clear grasp of the legal terrain. The laws governing nonprofits can be restrictive. This does not mean advocacy is not possible, only that it must be undertaken with care and after appropriate due diligence.

Expending significant effort in anticipating and understanding the target field or issue for public-policy advocacy pays dividends once engagement begins. It provides for more targeted planning, allows for preemptive accommodation of possible obstacles, and ensures that investment and activity originate from clear thinking about the task ahead. At this stage, planning aids – such as Campbell and Coffman’s five stages to design public-policy strategies or an inventory along the lines of Barkhorn, Huttner, and Blau’s nine conditions for effective campaigns – are most useful.

Stage 2: Preparing for the Climb

Once the planning is done, the work begins. In many cases, advocates enter the fray with little more than the desks at which they sit, specific issue knowledge they need to begin making their case, and a strong desire to effect change. They may have some relationships with other players,

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but their strategy is likely just coming into being. They are probably without the coalition or network that will ultimately carry the day and may lack many of the necessary capacities to exert a direct influence on policymaking.

“Preparing for the climb” describes the first “active” stage in a public-policy advocacy effort. For nascent efforts that aim at major legislative change, this stage may be marked by actions as basic as forming a core organization and hiring a staff. Even when mature organizations take on new issues, their early work is often consumed by adding staff and forging relationships with putative allies and others engaged in the issue. This period often includes the hard work of demonstrating some “ownership” of the topic by advertising engagement to a broader set of individuals and organizations. It will likely also involve building relationships with policymakers and other targets.

Other efforts take aim at more modest, targeted action. For example, advocates may seek direct intervention by policymakers such as a letter from a member of Congress. For these initiatives, getting started may mean building key relationships with a narrower set of influencers, or acquiring internal or external capacity to provide direct access to ongoing policy processes.

All of these activities are focused on helping advocates to become “mountain climbers” –credible

participants with a platform to engage the policy-making process. From a planning perspective, the key questions for this stage should be focused on capacity. Does an organization or coalition have the people and resources it needs to invest in success? Strategic plans to “get in the game” should address basic infrastructural questions about how to design a new entity or bolster an existing one. Preparing for this stage also requires a sophisticated political outlook about the precise pathways by which policy change will happen – what in philanthropy is referred to as a “theory of change.” This will help ensure that advocates plot out capacities that match what it will take to succeed. An issue that will happen in a legislative arena will require a lobbying capacity, for example, where an administrative rule change may not.

Evaluation of the first stage should take a similarly circumscribed approach. Many of the metrics advocates routinely file in reports reflect “preparing for the climb”: how many meetings with policymakers, the number of media hits, the size of the coalition. Yet there are neglected indicators of success at this stage, many of them qualitative. To what extent have needed capacities been developed? Do key participants in the effort display trust and a good working relationship? Does the strategic orientation accurately reflect a credible pathway to success? These questions are equally important, and the answers can provide a valuable assessment of the early health of a public-policy effort.

Commentators often regard these capacities as essential elements of successful campaigns –and they are. Barkhorn, Huttner, and Blau identify “strong campaign leader(s)” and an “influential support coalition” among their nine conditions for public-policy campaigns to succeed (2013, p. 61). Teles and Schmitt add that the “key” to public-policy advocacy “is not strategy so much as strategic capacity: the ability to read the shifting environment of politics for subtle signals of change, to understand the opposition, and to adapt deftly” (2011, p. 41).

Where we diverge is in insisting that such capacities may have to be built, rather than made. On an

issue of merit and urgency, the lack of existing capacity should not itself rule out an investment or effort. The first stage, “preparing for the climb,” recognizes the enormous effort required to simply be a presence on a given public-policy issue. It’s often in later stages – when organizations have already demonstrated success – that investment becomes attractive and results feel tangible. Yet intelligent early planning, investment, and patience are just as vital to ensuring that such later achievements have a chance to come to fruition.

Stage 3: Staging the Climb

Issues tend to move through our public and political culture in waves. A cause or problem may wait in silence and obscurity for years before it suddenly seems to become a dominant topic in the news, on op-ed pages, and among policymakers. Yet this transition is rarely as abrupt as it appears. Even when an issue truly does rocket onto the scene, its seemingly spontaneous appearance is likely not wholly an accident of fate, although serendipity may play a role. The recent debate on immigration is a good example. Advocates have been diligently working for decades. When demographic shifts in the electorate during the 2012 election forced policymakers from both parties to take up the issue (Brown, Sherman, & Raju, 2012), a wide and robust advocacy community had long been shaping the contours of the debate (Lamarche, 2013).

This process of elevating an issue into the broader consciousness is “staging the climb,” the third stage in climbing the mountain. This refers to the point at which an issue begins to enjoy significant traction within the circle of influencers that a sound theory of change identifies as critical levers. Beginning the climb requires focusing on activities that are clearly aligned with outcomes, but are broad enough to represent the major strategic pillars of short- or long-term engagement. At this stage, planning and evaluation move beyond infrastructure concerns and begin addressing the signs and symptoms that activities are beginning to move the needle on an issue.

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which the effort launches a discrete campaign or series of activities to drive toward a concrete outcome. For example, a foundation may decide that national advocacy is a necessary component of its overall strategy to reduce the rate of childhood obesity. This is the stage to determine the specific advocacy elements that figure into that strategy. At this point, all of the “preparing for the climb” requirements have been met. A credible advocate or advocates with appropriate capabilities should be in place. What remains is to plan and implement a concrete effort. In the case of childhood obesity, perhaps this is a multipronged approach focused on K-12 adoption of a healthy-eating curriculum, a national law on nutritional standards in food, and regulatory reform of foods served in schools. Each of these activities requires a detailed strategic plan that answers the “who, what, where, when, and why.”

The “why” is especially important. It is at the “staging the climb” phase that a foundation or nonprofit must screen out activities that are not likely to have a tangible impact on outcomes. Success is never guaranteed in public-policy advocacy, but this initial strategic roadmap should illustrate a credible hypothesis. In the anti-obesity case, if it is unlikely that any schools will adopt a healthy-

Before the passage of a bill or change to a rule, public-policy advocacy campaigns may reach significant milestones. In a complex legislative fight, just getting a vote may represent progress.

eating curriculum, then this activity stream is likely to drain resources without producing meaningful results and should be eliminated.

Evaluation should track the implementation of these strategies, but not focus too heavily on final outcomes. In the fictional anti-obesity example, the number of school districts that adopt the curriculum should take a privileged place. Other metrics will matter as well. If a local media strategy figured within the strategic plan for this element, then the number of media hits in target school districts is significant. Similarly, evaluation may take account of supporting campaign elements, such as long-term alliances forged with key constituencies.

While the intended outcome is adoption of a K-12 anti-obesity curriculum at the school-district level, the relative success in achieving this result cannot trump all other considerations. This is not to excuse half-measures, but to acknowledge a brute reality about public-policy advocacy: that it cannot be planned with the benefit of rigorous predictive tools. Businesses can assess market opportunities with a far higher level of confidence than a foundation or nonprofit can prognosticate how political calculations will be made in a changing public ecosystem.

This does not mean that public-policy advocacy planning and evaluation should take a fatalistic approach to objectives, only that the need for learning and adaptation is acute. Every public-policy

and advocacy effort is a hypothesis that is tested in real time. The quantitative and qualitative metrics that extend deeper than the final objective can elicit important information about that hypothesis. In our anti-obesity example, perhaps the decisive issue for potential adopter school districts that ultimately did not take on the new curriculum was a countervailing message about the “nanny state” that warned against schools policing child behavior. This might suggest a more parent-oriented approach in the future. Or perhaps school districts required affirmation from teacher and administrator associations, implying the need for a better effort to recruit these constituencies from the beginning.

Testing various hypotheses constitutes the bulk of any effort that has reached the third stage of the mountain. This stage is often the most arduous part of the climb, because it may reveal flawed assumptions that could not have been anticipated. For this reason, success at this stage should be measured both by the progress of the climb toward identified objectives and by the ability of an organization, initiative, or campaign to be adaptable and open to change.

Stage 4: Reaching Base Camp

Before the passage of a bill or change to a rule, public-policy advocacy campaigns may reach significant milestones. In a complex legislative fight, just getting a vote may represent progress. Leave laws were introduced, reintroduced, and voted on several times before Clinton signed the family leave act into law. The very peak of the mountain may be elusive at the same time that an effort is inching upward. Public-policy advocacy efforts that reach this stage are taking genuine strides toward final outcomes, and these intermediate outcomes may be achievements in themselves. For all the difficulty in attaining them, however, they are still short of ultimate success.

The fourth stage in the mountain – “reaching base camp” – honors these intermediate outcomes and represents the period when an effort is poised for long-term success, but still has work to do. This is also the phase that is most vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the public-policy process.

At this stage, the strategic plans that were implemented in “staging the climb” should evolve into a highly granular set of tactical moves. For example, an early phase in a legislative strategy may have included lining up long-term champions. At this stage the focus should be on what levers to pull to prompt action from those champions. This stage should also take account of marginal strategic amendments that will move an effort across the finish line, such as identifying constituencies essential to a coalition and determining what would assure their participation.

Evaluation at this stage should be focused on official milestones in policymaking processes. In the legislative context, this could mean bills are being introduced, discussed, and voted on, irrespective of success. In the case of regulation, it could mean that draft rules are being circulated or rulemaking processes are launching. Policymakers need not be acting at this stage, but the issue should be firmly on the radar.

Stage 5: Attaining the Summit

The final stage of the mountain is best described as “attaining the summit.” This is the phase in which concrete outcomes matter most, but even at the peak of the mountain there are meaningful gradations. Perhaps the desired outcome is a simple regulatory change. Or maybe an effort is simply seeking to prevent a program from being eliminated. All of these outcomes count. What matters at this stage is the extent to which policymaking results correspond to outcomes out in the world. That is, has the policymaking victory achieved desired outcomes for people and institutions?

While this is the final stage at the mountain, it should figure into the earliest discussions around a public-policy advocacy effort. The outcome sought also dictates the height of the mountain or, literally, the scope of the endeavor. An attempt to prevent a program from being cut may face a shorter time frame and employ a more targeted strategy than a campaign to pass a major piece of reform legislation. From a planning perspective, this means having a clear sense of the potential endgame from the beginning. Too many public-

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policy advocacy efforts are agnostic in their early stages about exactly what constitutes success. This is willful blindness. Substantive negotiation and compromise will be essential to the process, as will adaptation, but beginning without even a provisional aspiration handcuffs any meaningful planning.

This impacts evaluation as well. Public-policy advocacy efforts that refuse to state their ultimate goals or their intermediate objectives can never be meaningfully evaluated. The “climbing the mountain” methodology makes clear that end results are not the only measure of success in public-policy advocacy, but the opposite extreme – that they should not matter at all – is equally destructive to rigorous accountability.

Climb and Climb Again

One illusion implied by the analogy of “climbing the mountain” is that the ascent is always linear. An initiative starts at the base of the mountain, proceeds through each stage, and then reaches the top. This is a fiction, and obscures three critical truths about public-policy advocacy.

The first is that adaptation is an inherent feature of effective advocacy efforts. Many long-term campaigns near the peak without reaching it. They lose a critical vote on a piece of legislation, or win in one house of Congress before losing in the other. In these cases, a campaign may have to move down a stage in the climb, revisiting its strategy and capabilities.

Successful public-policy advocacy is within reach. The key is to tailor efforts to the unique context of the issue, develop appropriate and meaningful benchmarks, and plan effectively.

The second is, to stretch the conceit further, the impact of the weather. Very little in a public-policy advocacy fight is under the control of advocates. A sudden change in circumstances can derail a campaign or, conversely, breathe new life into a lost cause. Health care reform is a recent example. Had President Obama not insisted on making reform a signal cause of his first term, it is unlikely a bill would have passed (Brown & Thrush, 2013). Unquestionably, decades of effective advocacy helped set the stage for his decision and the final victory, but to a large extent the issue was decided by the will of a single person. A good public-policy advocacy campaign plans for the weather, ready to climb when clouds clear and ready to retreat when storms set in.

The third truth – to push the metaphor to its utmost limits – may be the size of the mountain. Public-policy challenges are rarely straightforward. What makes public-policy investment so attractive is the ability to leverage enormous resources – material and in policy fiat – to solve sometimes systemic challenges. Some of these social and economic issues introduce major obstacles into the policy process. Others are so deep that even a successful campaign may not reach them. Indeed, well-intentioned public policies have often been shown to introduce perverse effects or negative externalities. No amount of planning may ultimately be able to discern the size and shape of the mountain, or the depth of the crevasses it hides.

Conclusion

These factors only underscore the uncertainty that afflicts public-policy advocacy, leaving it resistant to many of the now well-established tools to aid foundations and nonprofits in planning and evaluation. The response to these unique difficulties should not be to give up and abandon rigor, but to employ a different set of tools better adapted to the public-policy context. Successful public-policy advocacy is within reach. The key is to tailor efforts to the unique context of the issue, develop appropriate and meaningful benchmarks, and plan effectively.

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