



USING THE POWER TO CONVENE A 'How to' for Legislative Leaders

As elected officials, we have a power that we under utilize—the power to bring people together to work on common problems and issues.

However, once we have them together, to be effective, the role of convener requires us to act differently. It is different than telling citizens what the solution is, or talking to them about what needs to be done.

Rather than making decisions for people, legislative leaders get people involved in finding effective solutions themselves.

To do that requires leaders to take a different approach—to invite the people to help frame the issues, identify options for solutions, and even reach agreements about the roles that they will play in the solution.

In introducing oneself as convener, a leader could say, “ Today I am here to provide a forum for you to work together to address (this issue). This is different from my deciding what needs to be done and then bringing you together to tell you about it. I want you to build consensus around a recommendation for action.”

Here are eight suggestions for how to be an effective convener.

- **Be inclusive.** Engage a wide variety of people from different perspectives. If important players are left out, any solutions the group develops will be suspect.
- **Meet in a neutral place.** The place needs to ensure an impartial process. When the issue is complex and divisive, it will be helpful to get assistance from an experienced facilitator in planning and conducting the process.
- **Be impartial.** To keep people participating, they have to believe the leader is not going to favor one side or another, rather that they are trying to find a solution that all sides can embrace. If people think a legislator is taking one side or another, they won't stay with the process.

- **Establish the purpose for the process.** Let participants help frame the issues to open the way for discussion and problem solving.
- **Direct, rather than dominate, the discussions.** Bring people together to find agreement. Enable them to talk with each other, rather than talk only to you. It is often useful to get someone else to facilitate the discussions so you can listen and ask questions. Besides, busy legislators may not have time to run all the meetings.
- **Keep people moving.** Help keep participants focused and working together when their differences threaten to drive them apart.
- **Demonstrate visible commitment.** Even if a legislator can't be present at every meeting, send signals demonstrating on-going interest and provide feedback to the group on their progress.
- **Finally, make sure there's an outcome.** The best outcomes involve written agreements that spell out different people's responsibilities. Legislators can ensure that the agreements they reach get formally adopted.