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GIVING EFFECTIVE LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY

Appearing as a witness before a legislative hearing can be very intimidating, especially for the first time. You want to make a good impression and give a convincing presentation for your cause or organization, but may be afraid that you will say the wrong thing or get stumped by legislators' questions.

What to do?

People who testify often and successfully follow these basic rules:

Those who show up get counted.

Unlike what we learned in school, the legislative process is a re-active process. As a former Texas lieutenant governor once said, "Legislation is decided by those who show up." Therefore, it is important to participate at public hearings and let your voice be heard. Perfect testimony is not required, however. There are any number of events and activities that determine the fate of legislation, but the content of public testimony is not near the top of that list. Simply showing up and expressing a heartfelt opinion at a public hearing is closer to the top of that list.

Use a real life story.

This is the most important rule of all. Testify about what you really know - your personal experiences or the experiences of a client or others similarly situated. Alternatively, show by analogy how the pending proposal will yield benefits or harm to the general public. Legislators respond to human-interest stories - not just facts and figures.

Keep it simple and avoid jargon.

Legislators deal with literally thousands of bills, most outside their area of expertise. On any given day, they may be confronted with 15 to 20 different issues. Therefore, if you want to have any chance of holding their attention and persuading them, keep your message simple and avoid using jargon.

Don't peel the onion.

When asked a question, try to answer in the least amount of words and still be a truthfully answer. There may a considerable amount of information that you could legitimately tell the committee in answering a question but don't do it.

Let the committee members through follow up questions request that additional information. (Let them peel the onion.) And if they don't ask, find a different forum to provide it. Most undesirable outcomes from legislative testimony occur when witnesses volunteer additional information in answers to questions.

Provide a written statement but don't read it.

Briefly reference your main points in your oral presentation and then provide greater explanation and back-up data in your written statement. Use a piece of your letterhead as a cover page to your written testimony, indicating the hearing's topic or subject matter, date and location as well as your name and title. Make enough copies for all the committee members plus four or five additional copies.

Attend prior hearings to see how the hearing process works for that particular committee.

Familiarity is a good thing. You can identify legislators' key interests and observe their questioning style, as well as how witnesses behave during their testimony.

Brainstorm with others to identify possible questions and how you will answer them.

Write down your answers, then rehearse and revise them until they are concise and to the point. If possible, try to rehearse your answers several times with a colleague or a supportive legislative staff person prior to your testimony.

Remember your mission and don't get sidetracked.

Address one issue at a time. Stick to no more than three supporting ideas or "message points" during your testimony.

Tell the committee members specifically what you want.

This sounds obvious, but you would be surprised at the number of witnesses who testify and never make it clear what they are asking the legislators to do.

Use visual aids.

Visual aids can be wonderful, if not overused. They rivet attention to the important points you are making. Consider using only one large poster board with text (a maximum of three bulleted points, each with only two to three words), or a graph or photograph if your supporting facts lend themselves to this type of presentation.

It is not personal unless you make it so.

Never, never show anger or get into an argument with a legislator, regardless of the legislator's behavior. There may be many reasons the legislator is acting the way he/she is that have nothing to do with you or your legislation.

It's their game and their rules.

Even if no one is listening to your testimony, keep going. If the legislators do not want to listen, that is their prerogative. A corollary to this rule deals with the interruptions: legislators get to interrupt you, you do not get to interrupt them.

Be polite.

Legislators often have long memories so don't be rude, arrogant, lie, or ignore their rules of decorum. Rudeness or lack of respect will hurt your cause far more than the content of an opponent's testimony or lobbying effort.

Practice saying, "I don't know, but I will get back to you."

This is one of the hardest things to do and, yet, the most important. Moreover, it is what keeps a witness from making mistakes. Your supporters will love you and your enemies will be downcast when you follow this rule. And be sure to get back to the legislators as promised as soon as possible.

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