

Getting your way

Some tips on effective meetings with politicians



July 2013

Recreational fishers need to master the complexities, subtleties and courtesies of meetings with senior politicians so that they maximise the benefits of those rare opportunities.

Developing this capability is especially important for organisations that have limited lobbying experience, limited financial resources and limited volunteer time.

This article provides pointers on how to organise a meeting and how to act to ensure the most effective outcome. It emphasises simplicity, efficiency and courtesy.

It mainly covers meetings where you are invited to visit and meet politicians in their offices, such as at Parliament House, but the suggestions are generally useful for other situations including meeting politicians at their electorate offices or when meeting them on your own turf, such as when they attend a meeting of your members.

The advice is also relevant for when planning meetings with public servants.

Peter Gibson

Recreational Fishing Alliance of NSW

Introduction

Arranging a meeting with a politician, especially a state or federal minister, isn't easy. If you do manage to get a bit of time in their busy schedules it's important not to waste the opportunity by setting yourself up for a negative reaction.

A senior public servant who has attended many meetings between anglers and politicians recently told me that in the 20 or more years that he has been in his job he has noticed worsening behaviour by anglers in meetings. He's a keen angler himself but he complained that in meetings anglers often made unreasonable demands and displayed extraordinarily rude behaviour including shouting and—quite literally—table thumping.

In meetings I've attended between anglers and politicians I've seen the same sort of behaviour, as well as lack of punctuality, poor preparation and unprofessional presentations. It has usually resulted in negative reactions from politicians and their staff.

I don't know how recreational fishers got the feeling of such enormous self-importance that makes them think they can be so 'in your face' to politicians. Perhaps they get carried away by the 'I fish and I vote' idea. It's all very well to be firm and assertive but there's nothing to be gained by being downright discourteous, much ruder than people would normally be to customers, bosses, business associates, neighbours, family and everyone else they meet.

Aggressive behaviour is a turn-off in any relationship and is bound to put people on the defensive. Politicians are normal human beings and being too pushy or abrasive will get you nowhere. It's better to be polite, persistent and persuasive and willing to engage for the long term, than to ruin the relationship with a display of bad manners and unprofessional preparation and presentation.

So here are a few tips about how to arrange a meeting with a politician and how to make it successful.

Organise and plan

Organise the meeting

Meetings can be arranged by writing or emailing directly to the politician. You can find their addresses and contact details on the NSW Parliament website at www.parliament.nsw.gov.au. Make sure you get their name and title right.

Write your request on your organisation's letterhead, post the letter or send it as an attachment to an email.

When requesting a meeting you should explain who you are, who you represent and why you want the meeting. The politician you are meeting will probably wonder why this issue hasn't already been dealt with by someone in the department, so make sure you explain why you need the meeting at this level; explain why representations at lower levels have not satisfied you.

After your letter is received it will be one of the politician's staff that responds to you and sets up the time and place. Make sure you get the name of the staff person and their contact details when they call you, they are vitally important to your ongoing contact with the politician.

Politicians are busy people and have unexpected issues and events that may be more important than a meeting with you. So be prepared to change the meeting time, not just once, but possibly several times.

Sometimes a meeting might be organised for you by another politician. For example your local member of parliament (MP) might arrange a meeting for you to meet the fisheries minister. In this case be particularly careful about the date and time of the meeting and be flexible. Don't embarrass your MP by changing your mind about a suitable date after he and she has gone to the trouble of approaching the minister on your behalf.

Organise your team

You will usually take a small group of people to the meeting, perhaps a couple of people from your own organisation, or you might include representatives from like-minded organisations if you have a common cause. Be careful who you invite to be part of the team. A small delegation is usually better. Only take people who have something important to contribute.

Don't ask too much of your own team's time. As volunteers, most of them will have limited time they can spend on the meeting. Nonetheless, if you have a meeting time agreed with a politician ask your team to

turn up not just for the meeting but also for a quick get-together, say half an hour before the meeting, to agree any final points.

If your MP has arranged the meeting he or she will usually attend the meeting and introduce you to the more senior politician, so you might be expected to meet briefly with the MP before the meeting to check last minute details and take advice from the MP on how to handle the meeting.

Create an agenda

With your team's agreement and input, prepare an agenda of issues you wish to raise, and keep it sensibly short. Once you draft the agenda prune it back as much as possible. Don't try to raise every issue that's been bugging you for the past five years...just stick to the main problem you can cover in half an hour or so.

The politician's staff will usually want to see the agenda before the meeting so that their boss is properly briefed. They might even suggest changes to the agenda. That's usually OK, go along with it, as long as your main issues are still on the list. They will also want to know the names of the people attending the meeting.

Brief your team

Make sure that everyone knows what is going to be discussed and make sure they agree with it. You will look really stupid if you disagree amongst yourselves during the meeting.

Anyone in your own team who springs a surprise on you during the meeting by bringing up an unexpected subject or arguing a line that wasn't agreed beforehand is potentially doing you a lot of damage and is best left out of future meetings.

Always have a solution

Here is one of the most fundamental rules of lobbying: **Never go to a meeting with a politician just to raise a problem—you must also have a solution.**

If you don't put a solution on the table the politician will come up with his own solution to shut you up or fob you off. And it might not be the solution you had in mind.

So, before you raise the problem, come up with a solution, or several solutions, that will suit you. Make sure it has a reasonable chance of also suiting the politician—don't set yourself up for a flat rejection.

Act effectively in the meeting

Security

If your meeting is at Parliament House or government offices you will be expected to sign in, pass through security checks and wear an identity pass at all times. The staff at the front desk will ring the politician's office to check that you have an appointment. Allow a few extra minutes for this.

Arrive on time, finish on time

Every politician is on a tight time schedule that would kill most of us. They start the day before dawn to check the day's media and briefings from their party, they move on to media interviews and breakfast functions, then meetings with their colleagues, staff and constituents before either appearing in parliament or at various events during the day, followed by functions or more work late into the night.

If you have been fortunate enough to get a meeting it will often be for just half an hour or an hour. There is absolutely no room to move on that appointment—be on time or forget about it. They are not going to throw the rest of their diary into chaos just because you couldn't find a parking spot or missed the train.

Be very clear not only about the starting time of the meeting, but also the finishing time. As soon as you sit down check again how much time you've got for the meeting—it might be less than you originally thought, or if the politician isn't busy or in a particularly good mood you might get more time than you expected. You might also be told that the politician has to leave the meeting early but that you can continue discussions with the advisers for a short while afterwards.

Stay sober

Despite what you may have seen in the news most politicians are very sober people and expect the people they meet with to be the same. I've seen people turn up at meetings after having a glass of wine or two at lunch, and then be just a bit too loud and outspoken during the meeting. Politicians and their staff will quickly notice it and they won't forget.

If you invite politicians or public servants to your meeting, such as a meeting of your fishing club, organise it in an alcohol-free venue to ensure emotions are kept under control. This will have the added benefit of enabling families and young people to be present; the importance of recreational fishing to families should always be emphasised.

Dress appropriately

If you are going to a politician's office show some manners by dressing appropriately. That means dressing like the people they normally deal with. Don't wear your fishing gear or T-shirts with slogans. You can't go wrong wearing a suit and tie, although a tie is not *really* necessary these days—but at least wear a jacket.

Polish your shoes. You think these things aren't noticed? Sorry, you're wrong.

Watch the clock

Keep an eye on the clock and be ready to wind up your discussion as the finishing time approaches.

Don't lose track of the time and get bogged down in details, leaving you with not enough time to cover all the issues.

If you have several people in your team, appoint one of them to watch the clock. They should have a clear idea of the agenda and they should politely remind you during the meeting or kick you under the table if they think time is running out.

Be polite

Make sure your mobile phones are off before entering the politician's offices. Smile. Be nice. Don't be personally offensive. Don't take offence easily. Don't make threats. Don't shout or thump the table. Don't whisper amongst yourselves.

Who else will be there?

If you have sent an agenda ahead of the meeting the politician will be able to see any issues that they may not know much about. So they might ask staff from the relevant government departments to be present to advise them or to answer questions during the meeting.

This is perfectly normal and you might not be forewarned who will be present. Although this is sometimes a surprise it's generally a good thing and should allow you to strengthen your dialogue, contact and trust with those people.

Introduce your people

Don't turn up to meeting with a bunch of hangers-on and expect the politician to remember who they are, especially if you don't introduce them.

Once you sit down and exchange a few quick pleasantries, very quickly go around the table and

introduce your team. Just give their name and position, don't give their responsibilities, life history or try to make any amusing remarks.

Business cards aren't really necessary, but if possible leave a list of names and contact details with the politician's staff in case they need to get back to anyone.

Get down to business quickly

Don't waste time on social chat. This meeting might be the most important thing you've done lately but it's probably not the biggest thing the politician has to deal with. If you get over-excited about the occasion and make a fuss, you'll just waste the few minutes you have available to get your points across.

Don't expect tea or coffee, they probably won't have time for it. If asked if you want tea or coffee, I suggest you decline. Use every minute to discuss the issues, not to muck around with whether you want milk or not.

So, don't waste time on the weather, the time it took to get there, the problem you had finding a parking space, the nice view from the office, etc. Just walk in, say hello, shake hands, sit down, introduce your team as quickly as possible and then get down to business.

If you have asked for the meeting, offer to outline the points you wish to discuss and do it quickly. If the politician has asked for the meeting, ask them to outline what they would like to know.

And then get to work... "Minister, we'd like to talk to you today about *this*."

Do it on paper

Unless you have professional experience in speaking and presenting, keep it simple and take your presentations

on paper. Don't stuff around with laptops, PowerPoint, slide shows and white boards. Just hand out clear notes or fact sheets around the table and ask the politician and his staff to refer to anything on the paperwork if and when necessary.

Email the politician's staff after the meeting if they want electronic copies of any of your materials.

Take notes

Don't attempt to record the meeting. It's just not done, and it will certainly stop the politician from making off-the-record comments and concessions.

One member of your party should have the job of keeping notes of the issues discussed and the actions required. As soon as the meeting is over make sure they sit down and make a sensible record of the notes...preferably the same day, working with other members of the party to clarify what they thought was discussed. The sooner you do this the more accurate it will be.

No long good-byes

Don't stand around chatting when the meeting is over. The politician will probably have another meeting waiting. Thank them for the meeting, stand up, shake hands and cheerfully move quickly from the room. There might be a couple of minutes of exchanging a few notes or documents with the politician's staff, but do it quickly and get out of there. If there are details that didn't seem to get finalised simply email the politician's staff after the meeting to tidy up the loose ends.

Overstaying your welcome makes it less likely you'll be invited back.

General strategy

Never underestimate the politician's staff

Politicians have staff to advise them on strategy, work with the media, help with research and numerous other functions. Several of these staff will usually attend a meeting.

These people are usually very intelligent, influential and well-connected. They are usually younger than you expect. They are often aspiring politicians themselves. By necessity they have an enormous capacity for work and have a surprising grasp of the details of very complicated issues.

They will have done some research before the meeting and will be the ones who will (or won't, if they aren't impressed) follow up your issues after the meeting. They will be either your future point of contact with the politician or the brick wall you can't bust through.

Don't ignore them, don't patronise them and don't fail to talk to them. Get offside with these people at your peril.

Don't ambush the politician

No one likes nasty surprises. Don't set an agenda for the meeting and then drop an unexpected bombshell in the middle of it...or if you do, make sure it's worthwhile. It's just common courtesy to let people know in advance what you want to discuss so they can prepare suitably.

Of course there may be issues that are so confidential or so urgent that you can't go into details before the meeting, but if you have to make an unexpected announcement, assertion or request, make sure you do it politely and in a way that will not cause embarrassment.

Don't waste time arguing about details

Go to the meeting armed with any relevant facts, figures and solid examples. Make sure they are correct and that you can back them up. Arguing about details or facts is a waste of time. If they are important, offer to take them up with the politician's staff after the meeting. But during the meeting save your time and energy for the key points that you need to discuss with the politician here and now.

Give ground if you must, but hold your ground on the most important issues. If faced with an impasse don't back down, but offer to defer the issue to a discussion with your stakeholders and to follow it up with a further response to the politician. Don't let a disagreement in the meeting become a roadblock in your relationship with the politician.

Don't dwell on the losses. Don't expect the politician to make a perfect response to everything you asked for...and you don't have to agree with everything that is said to you.

Take a long term view and choose being successful over being right. Get over it, move on.

Know when to shut up

As well as using the meeting to get your own points across you must listen to what the politician has to say. If you go to a meeting with a politician and don't listen you will have learned nothing.

Quite simply you need to *talk less* and *listen more*.

Five things you have to listen for:

- Listen to assess whether the other side is receptive to your ideas.
- Listen for specific objections to your ideas so that you clearly know what needs to be resolved.
- Listen for moments of agreement to your ideas so you capitalise on that common ground.
- Listen to know when you have adequately made your point or won the argument. Don't keep banging on when the other side has conceded the issue.
- Listen to the other side, not to yourself...you can't persuade a politician if you don't know their side of the argument.

Capitalise on the outcomes

Discuss the outcomes with your team

After the meeting quickly get together and discuss the outcome. Fifteen minutes in a coffee shop going over what had happened, and perhaps clarifying the notes taken by your note taker, will be time well spent.

Discuss the high points and low points of the meeting. Don't be critical of any mistakes but mention anything that might be done better next time.

Don't over-stretch your team's patience. Some of them may have given up hours of work time to attend the meeting and be keen to get back to their businesses, offices or to other appointments. A quick wrap-up is all that is required, use email and the phone to tidy up loose ends. If the event takes too much time your team will be less inclined to be involved in the future.

Follow up quickly

There are three groups of people you need to follow up soon after the meeting.

Firstly, send a letter or email to thank anyone who helped facilitate the meeting, such as your MP. Even if they were at the meeting, send them a thank-you message anyway.

Secondly, follow up the politician and their staff. Write them a letter to confirm all the details you think were discussed, and include any additional information they requested. This letter needs to go within a few days of the meeting—in some cases it might need to be sent within hours. Wait any longer and they may have forgotten who you are and what the issues were.

Thirdly, inform your own people about how the meeting went. Show them you've been working for them. Make sure you send a copy of the follow-up letter to everyone from your team that attended, and send an email or a

newsletter to your members about the meeting and the issues that were discussed. Make sure they know the effort you went to and whether or not it was a good outcome.

When you report to your stakeholders be careful not to use 'off-the-record' comments made by the politician. Any off-the-record remarks or promises should stay that way and reporting such remarks publicly will potentially embarrass the politician, and they certainly won't be as frank with you ever again.

Even if the meeting wasn't the outcome you were hoping for, report it positively and then re-position yourself and your strategy to make the next steps.

Make sure your stakeholders know what happened so that they fully support your actions in the future.

Make the most of the contacts

After a meeting you need to act quickly so that any positive outcomes can be quickly seized upon and any negative outcomes can be addressed and re-strategised.

Follow up the issues raised and resolve any loose ends. Revise and re-submit information if necessary.

Use the contacts you have made, such as names and email addresses of the politician's staff; add them to your database, include them on your email and newsletter mailing lists.

Try and get another meeting with the politician at an appropriate time and if that proves difficult, try to get occasional quick meetings with the politician's staff at which you can present issues you would like passed on.

Five ways to ruin your chances of ever being invited back:

- Turning up late.
- Staying too long.
- Being rude and aggressive.
- Embarrassing anyone who helped arrange the meeting, e.g. your local MP.
- Getting offside with the politician's staff.

About the Recreational Fishing Alliance of NSW

The Recreational Fishing Alliance of NSW (RFA) is the peak volunteer representative body for recreational anglers in NSW, made up of member associations including:

- Australian National Sportfishing Association (NSW Branch)
- New South Wales Fishing Clubs Association
- New South Wales Council of Freshwater Anglers
- NSW Underwater Skindivers and Fisherman's Association
- Professional Fishing Instructors and Guides Association
- South West Anglers Association

The aims of the Recreational Fishing Alliance of NSW are:

- To represent the interests of the recreational fishers of NSW and to gain equitable representation in the management of the State's recreational fisheries.
- To promote sustainable fishing practices throughout NSW.
- To encourage the participation of children in recreational fishing.
- To pursue and secure the rights of recreational fishers to fishing access in NSW waters.
- To encourage recreational fishers to become involved in the well-being of the fishery.
- To promote consultation and communication between government bodies and fishers.
- To promote fishing safety.

The RFA is 'staffed' by a small group of volunteers drawn from its member organisations. These volunteers meet amongst themselves, and with other recreational anglers, government agencies, politicians, the media, local government bodies and so on, to resolve issues and execute projects.

The RFA is funded by a small contribution from each of its members but depends on government grants and industry support for most of its projects.

Recent achievements of the RFA include: its major fishing safety project, an award winning, government and industry funded initiative to educate recreational fishers and the broader community about fishing safety (commenced in 2007 and still ongoing); a 'future leaders' training program to develop representational capabilities among young fishers (2009) and a major conference on recreational angling access attended by fishers, government and legal experts (2009).

The Recreational Fishing Alliance of NSW also disseminates information within the fishing community, distributing electronic bulletins linking fishers to information on fishing safety, management and zoning plans, consultation processes, habitat projects, angler access issues and other information to encourage fishers to get involved in the well-being of the fishery.

About the author

Peter Gibson is a volunteer member of the executive committee of the Recreational Fishing Alliance of NSW and the NSW Council of Freshwater Anglers. He serves on a number of recreational fishing government advisory committees. He has a professional career in corporate communication, design and writing.

© Peter Gibson 2013

For permission to reproduce this document contact the Recreational Fishing Alliance of NSW, PO Box 328, Matraville NSW 2036 Australia, or email info@rfansw.com.au.