



Common Meeting Pitfalls

These are many mistakes that people frequently make when meeting with a member of Congress or staff that can easily be avoided through good planning. Some of these are listed below.

Not staying “on message.” One of the easiest and most common mistakes is to stray away from the message you want to deliver. Sometimes, the Member or aide may even try to drag you “off message” with questions about topics that are not related to your issue. Be prepared for this.

Sometimes, members of your own group may begin straying off message. The best way to avoid this is to rehearse the meeting and make sure everyone understands the importance of staying on message. You can even work out some subtle signal or form of interruption to use if someone strays too far off message.

Getting tripped up by questions that are too detailed. Sometimes staff will ask increasingly detailed questions that you cannot answer or do not have time to address. Do not worry about this; it is perfectly appropriate to say that you do not know the answer or would prefer to follow up with more detailed information. Use this as an opportunity to contact the staff about the topic after your meeting.

Not clearly identifying your “ask.” When you meet with the member or staff, it is easy to spend a considerable amount of time explaining who you are and giving background information about your issue – but remember the most important part of your visit is the “ask.”

For example, you may have to directly ask, *“So, can we count on you to vote for this bill when it comes up in committee?”* or *“Can we count on you writing a letter in support for of this legislation?”* The member or staff may be evasive not answer your question directly, but at least they should know exactly what you want them to do.

Wasting valuable time. Be cordial, but move through introductions quickly and don’t spend too much time with personal anecdotes. It is important to make sure the staff or member understands what your saying but be careful to not repeat yourself.

Stretching the truth. If you don’t know an answer, don’t try to fake it. Offer to follow up with more information the after the meeting. Exaggerating or making misleading statements is also a bad idea and can damage your credibility and that of your organization.

Being too casual or condescending with staff. Anytime you meet with staff, treat them with the same respect you would reserve for a member of Congress. When referring to a member of Congress, whether they are present or not, always call them either "Senator Johnson" or "Congressman Chase", or you could say "the Senator" or "the Congressman" when referring to them in the third person.

Not wrapping up the meeting effectively. Many times, people will come away from a meeting with a member or staff still unsure what was agreed to or how the member will vote. To avoid this, recap anything that you think was agreed to by the member or staff at the end of the meeting to ensure you and the member or staff are on the same page.

For example, you might say to an aide, *"So you'll be talking to the Senator this week and you'll let us know if she will write a letter of support by next Wednesday?"* Make the aide answer yes or no, or even "I'm not sure." Offer to help in anyway possible, such as volunteering to draft the letter.