

Advocacy 101: Discover Your Personal Style

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Abstract

Advocacy makes a difference for all people with disabilities. “Advocacy 101” discusses a variety of advocacy techniques, types of advocacy, and personal styles. Personality types and their various strengths are examined. Unique and educational advocacy that departs from standard phone calls and letter writing is explored.

Keywords: disability, advocacy, activism

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During the 2022 Pacific Rim Conference on Disability and Diversity, advocates from around the world came together to educate, and be educated, about Disability Advocacy. “Advocacy 101: Let’s Learn How” focused on the often-overlooked fundamentals of activism, i.e., that we can all participate in changing the world through our own individual strengths. The presentation was designed to teach Disability Advocates, whether beginners or experts, to examine their goals and talents to make their greatest impact. Advocacy is equal parts teaching and learning. We all have the ability to teach, and there is always something to be learned from others. We must learn about ourselves, find our own unique voices and communicate our needs and desires to teach others.

Who Can Be an Advocate?

Disability Advocacy is acting, speaking, or writing to promote, protect, and defend the human rights of people with disabilities. *Anyone* can be an advocate, whether they are living with a disability or not. Advocacy can be done *anytime* and *anywhere*. We can educate others just by our presence in the community, promoting inclusion, justice, access, and equality. We can make ourselves heard at community advisory committee meetings that focus on disability related issues such as special education, state councils on developmental disabilities, and at public meetings, which are not necessarily disability focused.

Common Forms of Advocacy

“Advocacy 101” began with a review of some of the most common types of advocacy: Self-Advocacy, Group Advocacy, and Systems Advocacy. *Self-advocacy* is person centered; the goal is to get what you need or want as an individual. This type of action

requires us to understand our own needs and rights before we can speak up for ourselves. We use this form of activism to communicate our interests and desires, to teach others that we are experts on ourselves, and, to contribute opinions to the discussion of issues which affect us personally. *Supported self-advocacy* gives us one-on-one support from an advocate of our choice to work with us on our advocacy efforts. Help and encouragement can come from family members, friends, caregivers, or paid advocates. People with similar experiences or issues can often provide the assistance we need if we are new to advocacy or unable to advocate for ourselves.

There are two general types of supported self-advocacy: *directed* and *non-directed*. For directed advocacy, we can choose someone we know and trust to work with us to identify the issues we face and decide on the type of change we want or need. We are in control; the advocate's role is to assist. We give instructions and make our own decisions. It is up to us whether we want to speak for ourselves, or let the advocate do the talking. With non-directed advocacy, close friends or family members speak for those of us who do not have the ability or capacity to represent ourselves. Actions are person-centered and based on the belief that all people have common fundamental rights. A non-directed advocate will act in the best interests of the person with a disability to secure any necessary supports or services. Anyone interested in finding advocates to assist them, can make use of the various nonprofit and government legal assistance programs such as family resource centers and family education centers that can be found at parentcenterhub.org.

Group Advocacy occurs when people with shared goals and values meet to talk and listen to each other. They speak out collectively for the common good, and act as a group to impact and change public opinion. People who work to change a system, or a social norm, are *Systems Advocates*. They work to change laws and policies which impact people with

disabilities as individuals or as part of a group. Moreover, there are no strict rules about the types of advocacy we can be involved in. In fact, the varieties often overlap. An individual may be a self-advocate within a group of systems advocates who are working to change a law or policy that affects all of them.

The 5 Ws of Advocacy

Planning an advocacy campaign requires us to consider some important questions to give our efforts focus and keep us on track toward our goals:

Who is the audience? Political decision makers? School officials? Other Influencers?

What are the values, ethics, and solutions you are advancing?

When does change need to happen? Is this a long-range goal, or is it time sensitive?

Where do you want to end up, i.e., what is the change you want?

Why is the current policy harmful?

The How of Advocacy

For many of us, learning how to advocate is an important first step. We must learn how to approach others and incorporate their interests into our presentations. We should be complimentary and empathetic whenever possible. Remember that most decision-makers are good people; they may simply be unaware of the ramifications of their actions. It's also important for us to understand that other people have their own, or the same, issues which may make it difficult for them to harness the energy needed to make change. Part of our job

is to present information in an easily accessible and understandable way.

As more people with disabilities hold positions of power, remember that they are on our side. They may have invisible disabilities, or family members and friends with disabilities, which can make it easier to empathize, but harder to do the work needed.

Addressing Barriers to Effective Advocacy

There may be barriers to communication and understanding on the part of the advocate or the audience which will have to be addressed. For example, lack of eye contact from people with autism spectrum disorder, or other neurological conditions such as PTSD, social anxiety, or generalized anxiety can be perceived as problematic. Many people believe that people who do not look others in the eye when speaking to them lack credibility. We can address those issues openly with our listeners or we can choose to engage in another form of communication which makes us more comfortable.

Other issues which may impact our ability to advocate can include mobility issues and communication issues. If a meeting is taking place in a building which is not accessible, a person with a mobility issue will need to plan accordingly and tailor their advocacy to address the lack of accessibility while still conveying their messages. Others may have communication issues, such as a lack of interpreters, inability to speak, or a lack of familiarity with the method of communication being used, such as Zoom.

As an example, I explained my own barrier to advocacy. I am bipolar, and confrontation triggers a fight or flight loop in my brain which is referred to as “amygdala hijacking.” Essentially, the neurons in my brain don’t communicate sufficiently between my amygdala and my frontal lobe, which is designed to process the fight or flight response and turn it off when there is no danger. Confrontation can be very stressful and may do long term

damage to the brain.

For many years, I believed that I could not be an effective advocate because of my aversion to confrontation with other people. I have since learned that there are many forms of advocacy and that each one of us can be a powerful advocate by relying on our own personal strengths. I am comfortable writing and teaching others in a non-confrontational way about the various issues that affect people with disabilities. We are happier, and better advocates, when we discover how to make change with our own unique talents.

Personal Style

To increase our effectiveness as advocates, we can each develop a personal style that relies on our gifts and assets. We can ask ourselves what makes us feel and work best at our best. Some of the things to consider are: are you an introvert or an extrovert; are you an artist; do you have a personal preference for working in audio presentations or video presentations? Do you work better in a classroom environment as a teacher or in a more crowded or noisy rally?

Generally speaking, there are 16 personality types. These are not emotions; these are characteristics of your personality that are more or less consistent overtime. For example, many people believe that being an introvert means that a person is shy. However, shyness is not an emotion; it is how you feel at a particular moment around other people. A personality type, such as introversion, has specific characteristics around the ways in which we function.

Exploring your personality type can be informational and entertaining. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a self-test that is available at www.verywellmind.com. By answering a series of questions, the online program will produce a profile on your personality: extraversion versus introversion; sensing versus intuition; thinking versus feeling; and

judging versus perceiving.

Once you learn the general characteristics of your personality, you can research them on the site to discover more about your style of working and communicating. This will give you a good start toward identifying the types of advocacy that will suit you best.

Introvert or Extrovert?

An introvert is described as someone who is inward turning, reserved and private. Introverts are particularly good at slowing down and thinking deeply. They tend to look inward for inspiration and creativity, and they dislike working in large groups or being around other people while they are working. Introverts tend to enjoy being alone or working in small groups, one on one. They are most comfortable meditating on the issues and making plans. If you are an introvert, thoughtful, personal activism may be your greatest strength.

As such, “quiet” forms of activism are often carried out by introverts. Reading reports, researching what works, and compiling statistics for presentations are introvert superpowers. Working behind the scenes, gathering donations or organizing supplies, introverts excel at the “hidden” parts of activism which are necessary for success.

Some of these strengths of introverts are addressed by Sarah Corbett, an activist in England, in her Ted talk, “Activism Needs Introverts.” Corbett describes how she felt a sense of failure because she became overwhelmed by the stress of requesting signatures on petitions and other activities, but she longed to participate. In a flash of genius, she formed groups of artists and made gifts for people in power. She describes how some of the politicians who received their gifts were strongly impacted by the gesture and often felt more inclined to engaged with the advocates.

In one case, the artist activists made small scrolls with messages on them about the

impact of fast fashion on the environment. They tied up the scrolls and hit the streets of London, depositing the scrolls in the pockets of garments hanging in the clothing shops. When customers tried on the clothing, or purchased it, they would find the scrolls in the pockets with the message to think about the impact they were having on the earth with their choices.

On the other hand, extroverts have their own strengths in advocacy. They tend to be outward turning, sociable, and assertive. They enjoy attention and excitement, and they thrive in the world of public speeches, protests, and rallies. The web site www.simplypsychology.org has more information about the contrast between introverts and extroverts.

With all of this in mind, it's important for all of us to realize that while extroverts can march in large groups waving signs, the signs were probably made by the introverts. Also, extroverts may excel at attending and speaking at government meetings and lobbying, but much of the research has been conducted and synthesized by the introverts. We can all work together to strengthen our advocacy projects.

What's Your Superpower?

There are many different ways to engage in advocacy. If you enjoy writing, composing letters to government representatives and editors of newspapers and magazines can have a great impact. Writers can also create online newsletters or email chains that educate a wider audience. Digital, video, and spoken word poetry presentations need writers to be successful. (For reference, sample advocacy letters may be found in the resources section of the www.familyrn.org website.)

In addition to considering the unique contributions introverts and extroverts may

make, during advocacy 101, we also talked about the contributions that artists can make. Provocative art which tells a story or highlights an issue can be quite persuasive. Beautiful posters or signs that catch the public's attention can contain information that gets people to think. Crafting or painting together can help advocates to engage with others and design advocacy projects. The resulting crafts can be worn or distributed to other advocates or to decision-makers, e.g., T-shirts, wristbands, posters, or cards.

Get started

Now is the time to start your journey to becoming a disability advocate. Discover and value the skills and the traits that you already have. Make a list of the activities you enjoy the most, whether it is talking on the phone, reading, writing, or making art. Focus on your strengths. Are you detail oriented? Do you like large crowds?

It's also important to realize that many of us are not able to engage in the everyday activities of organized advocacy; however, anyone can provide valuable support to advocacy organizations. Many organizations need financial support, administrative assistance, and gathering materials for their events. There is something for everyone.

Most importantly, remember that our greatest advocacy tool is our right to VOTE.



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