

Tips for Better Meetings

by Luke Albee

After my wife and I were married many years ago, she started offering unsolicited advice to help me become the man I am today: Who knew you should clean the sink after shaving, or keep the shower curtain inside the bathtub, or replace a garbage bag after you took out the old one?

I dubbed these nuggets “Tips for Better Living.” They were annoying but grudgingly useful.

It is in that spirit, on the heels of an incredibly successful PAN Hill Day on Capitol Hill, that I respectfully offer guidelines for maximizing the chance to tell our stories to members of Congress and their staff. I do this based on my 27 years of service in the United States Senate, having sat on the other side of the meeting table literally thousands of times.

1. **Never Assume Anything:** For those without a lot of Hill meetings under their belt, Capitol Hill staffers and their bosses can seem intimidating. In truth, they are smart, harried and generally overworked folks just trying to do their jobs and get through their days. They have five or six half-hour meetings a day with all different kinds of groups, and often there are huge gaps in their knowledge on our subject matter. In our case, don't assume they know what Delta 8 is. Don't assume they understand how the potency of THC products has increased exponentially and are now far different and more intoxicating and addictive than their predecessors. Don't assume they understand the huge and growing mental health crisis our nation is facing, especially among young people. Don't assume they know the role of Big Tobacco in trying to addict our children. Don't assume anything.
2. **Dialogue, Not Monologue:** Back in the day, an old Senator was unloading on his chief of staff (and my friend) in a private meeting. When my friend spoke up, his boss thundered, “What makes you think this is a dialogue?” Unlike that Senator, we *want* a dialogue. Which means not telling stories for 30 minutes straight. All of us have stories of our families' battle with addiction. I can tell ours in one minute: Star Ivy League athlete. Career ending injury. Depression. Addiction. Recovery. Marriage. Grandchild. I can tell it in three minutes, ten minutes, or an hour. I can tell it forever. Your meetings are slotted for 30 minutes.

The goal is to have a dialogue. Pick a leader among your group from the members' district or state. They get 5 minutes. Then others get 2-3 minutes depending on how many of you there are. Ask questions... "Luke, did you know you can buy Delta 8 products in a 7-Eleven and they are completely unregulated?" You want an ongoing dialogue that extends beyond the meeting. Keep your stories short. That means practicing. Churchill practiced his speeches in the bathtub; Lincoln read the newspaper out loud to himself. I always carried a card in my wallet that I would slide to my boss when he was going on too long in a meeting. It simply said, "Stop Talking."

3. **Make a Human Connection:** You will get a cheat sheet from PAN that gives you guidance on various bills and points to make. This isn't a test. You don't have to memorize everything and regurgitate it all in the meeting. If you know there will be an attempt to repeal the Delta 8 loophole, just say it. You don't have to memorize the bill number and remember every co-sponsor. Eye contact is far more important than fact-spewing. Forty years after my college graduation, I still have anxiety dreams about having to sit for exams for classes I never took... "But I don't speak Spanish!" Don't fall into that trap. Get the gist of what you want to say. There is almost always someone from PAN (like me) in the meeting with you. They can fill in any blanks and send follow-up information.
4. **You are Somebody:** One of the most inspiring passages of a speech I have heard comes from the late Jesse Jackson in the middle of the civil rights movement. It's an exhortation to his audience to embrace who they are no matter what their station or their setbacks in their lives. I have repeated this to myself many times over the years, from being dumped by a girlfriend, to getting torched by my graduate school advisor, to other professional and personal challenges. I repeated the mantra "I am somebody." Enjoy the Sesame Street version [here](#).

In all of our families' battle with addiction, all of us have been through, or still may be experiencing, what seems like the fires of hell. We can feel diminished, alone, irrelevant. I liken it to being in a large secret society that no one could ever understand how you feel, and what you are experiencing as a parent.

Take it from me: You are somebody. Your story is important. And you have to work to maximize its power. Now get to work, and don't be afraid to stop talking.

Luke Albee worked in the United States Senate for 27 years and was Chief of Staff to two prominent United States Senators. Politico dubbed him “the Dean of Senate Chiefs of Staff.”