

## Thinking Through a Successful Think Tank

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*The following article originally appeared in the April 2000 issue of The Insider, a publication of the Washington, D.C.-based Heritage Foundation. Since that time, the Mackinac Center has hosted at its office, 15 Leadership Conferences over 358 individuals from more than 40 states and 40 countries. The conferences afford think tank executives and policy professionals the opportunity to learn new strategies for making their organizations more effective and influential.*

How much thought should go into starting and operating a successful free market think tank? Arguably, it requires at least as much thought as the ultimate product itself—the policy studies, commentaries and events that define the organization in the public mind. A poorly conceived or poorly run operation will not likely produce a good product and can still flounder well below its potential even if it does.

The explosive growth of the state-based free market think tank movement since the 1980s is one remarkable measure of the success of sound ideas. Though a majority of states can now claim to be home to at least one such group, there is still plenty of room for growth. The states that have none are prime territory for local think tank entrepreneurs to get started. And there's not a single existing organization that can't benefit from following some of the same sound practices that are so crucial to the success of new start-ups.

At Michigan's Mackinac Center for Public Policy, we've made a few mistakes but we've done many things right and have learned a lot since we started twelve years ago. With our sister groups, we proudly share much of what we've learned about management, planning, personnel, communications, and fundraising at twice-annual "Leadership Conferences" at our headquarters (and in Costa Rica at a special session last summer). More than 150 individuals from over 30 states and 20 countries have attended. The people and organizations that have made that commitment understand the importance of taking time for *training*—the investment in know-how and human capital that can pay for itself many times over in future effectiveness and impact.

A few of the more important elements explained at our Leadership Conferences are offered here, particularly for the benefit of very young or prospective free market think tanks. Keep in mind that there will never be a more formative period in an organization's history than its earliest days. That's when the public's image of your group is first cast, and it's hard to later shake any bad first impressions others may get. Make a mistake in whom you hire, how you present yourself, what issues you address, or what your publications look like during this period and you may have to spend time and resources later to simply undo the harm that careful planning could have avoided.

## DEVELOP A THOUGHTFUL STRATEGIC PLAN

"If you fail to plan, you plan to fail," according to a wise old maxim. It's both tempting and easy for a new group to fly in all directions, to chase dollars instead of focusing on key issues and core competencies, and otherwise allow spur-of-the-moment impulses to dictate their agendas. But the most successful groups are those that know precisely who they are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and what they want to accomplish in the way of specific, measurable, short-term and long-term objectives.

Take the time with your staff, board of directors, and key supporters to develop meaningful mission and vision statements. Identify the key "customers" or intended audience for your products. From there, develop a strategic plan that lays out the steps by which your mission and vision can ultimately become reality. A thoughtful strategic plan should be a living document that keeps the organization on track and accountable. When someone suggests a new project, use the strategic plan as a guide in determining whether that new project is in keeping with your agenda or a time- and resource-consuming diversion.

Supplement your strategic plan with an in-house manual of important tasks and functions. You'll be forever reinventing the wheel, so to speak, if you don't keep good records of how things are done, where things are kept, what your policies and practices are, and who is responsible for what. For-profit businesses do this all the time, and it's one good way for nonprofits to conduct their affairs in a more efficient, business-like fashion.

## GET TO KNOW THE MEDIA

"Print it and they will come" is not good advice for free market think tanks to get their material in the press. Nor is it a good idea to view the media as an incorrigibly hostile bunch who need to be bashed on a regular basis. Sure, there are plenty of uninformed media people who view market solutions with a skeptical eye, but your best strategy is to impress them with your friendship, integrity, scholarship, and value to the public arena.

Shortly after we started the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, I committed myself to visiting at least two editors or reporters every week. I no longer maintain that kind of a media schedule, but the benefits of having done it more than a decade ago still accrue today. Even those who disagree with you will find it hard to attack you or keep you off the op-ed pages if they've come to know you personally and if they regard your organization not as an angry propaganda mill but an insightful fountain of challenging, intellectually solid ideas.

Many in the media are tempted to pigeonhole organizations if those groups are too predictable or if they only run around with birds of the same feather. That's when they tune you out. Look for opportunities to build coalitions with unlikely partners across the ideological aisle (for example, the Mackinac Center once seized an opportunity to work with Congressman John Conyers on the issue of asset forfeiture). Don't hesitate to praise Democrats when they're right and criticize Republicans when they're wrong, or you'll be

seen as nothing more than a GOP front group. Stress how your policy recommendations will help real people and actual, living families; if you're too focused on taxpayers or bottom line dollars and cents, you'll be dismissed as cold, heartless conservative accountants. Invest in making your publications aesthetically attractive and user-friendly because in the business of commanding attention, how you say it is often as important as what you're saying.

## BUILD A FAMILY OF RESPECTED ADVISORS AND ASSOCIATES

Choose members of your board of directors with great care. Never pick someone for your board because you think that's what will get them to contribute financially. A prospective board member should be a person with a track record of supporting you, with little public baggage and a good deal of proven ability to bring prestige, respect, and valued guidance to your organization.

You can deepen the esteem with which others regard your group if you assemble respected business and professional people into a "board of advisors" and give them opportunities to become active. We've organized two such boards at the Mackinac Center, according to geographic regions within the state. They are made up of very busy people in their own right, but who nonetheless make time for two local breakfast meetings per year where they get the "inside scoop" on forthcoming publications and events and are invited to provide advice.

Most if not all state-based think tanks have felt the need to assemble a "board of scholars" comprised of sympathetic academicians, researchers and authors. Don't just add names to a list when you put one of these boards together. Demand a candidacy period before persons can join such a board and tell them all the ways in which they can be helpful and involved. If they do nothing during that period, don't put them on your board later.

## THINK BIG

Remember that your "competition" is not other like-minded groups. Don't waste time comparing yourself to them. If you're a market-oriented think tank, your competition is composed of thousands of government employees who work to make government bigger, unions and trade associations that lobby for more government, and university faculty that teach tens of thousands of students every day that government is the answer to every problem. You need to re-educate any of your directors or contributors who think that it's sufficient for a free market think tank to have a half dozen employees slaving away in a rented dungeon. We'll never win on a shoestring as long as the other side has legions of public employees and piles of tax money to fight with.

Thinking "big" has ramifications for activities throughout your organization. Groups that don't send timely thank you letters to their contributors, or that hire personnel virtually off the street because it's quicker than conducting a thorough search, or whose employees dress and speak like they're running a neighborhood rummage sale—scream "small" in the eyes of others.

In fundraising, have the confidence to ask for major gifts. Chicken feed is for chickens. You're working to preserve and enhance the liberties and opportunities of a free society, and that includes a prospective donor as well as his or her children. That's damned important, and worth a major investment of anybody and everybody.

Finally, commit yourself and your employees to excellence in everything you do. Excellence in the way you treat each other as comrades and fellow professionals, excellence in the content and presentation of both the printed and spoken word, and excellence in your dealings with the opposition as well as with your friends. The cause we are advancing is simply too important for any of us to fail for want of a commitment to do and be the very best.

<http://www.mackinac.org/article.aspx?ID=3456>

