

RESEARCH BRIEF

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# *ALIGNING THE ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTIONS*

- Reconciling opposing departmental mandates
  - Improving collaboration across departmental silos
  - Limiting excessive iteration on content
  - Enhancing information flow between departments
  - Embedding departmental translators, ambassadors
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## ***ALIGNING THE ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTIONS***

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### **Reading Time**

**Full Text Reading.....30 Minutes**

**Skim Text Reading.....10 Minutes**



## RESEARCH BRIEF

# ALIGNING THE COMMUNICATIONS AND ADVOCACY FUNCTIONS

## STUDY DESCRIPTION

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As collaboration between the Government Affairs and Communications functions becomes a near daily requirement for effective advocacy groups, organizations are experimenting with new mechanisms and structures to foster more productive, cross-silo working relationships. This brief features practice concepts that will help organizations sidestep common inter-departmental flashpoints, promote cross-functional collaboration, and align external affairs strategy.

## INTENDED AUDIENCE

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Highly recommended for any organization in which Government Affairs and Communications functions must work closely together—particularly those organizations in which regular collaboration or alignment between Government Affairs and Communications is hindered by significant geographic, cultural, or strategic barriers.

**Organization Types:** Corporation, Trade Association, Professional Association, Interest Group, Think Tank

**Departments:** Government Affairs, Communications, Public Affairs

**Job Titles:** Head of Government Affairs, Head of Communications, Director of Government Affairs

- ❑ Conflicting mandates often are at the heart of fractured relationships between the advocacy and communications functions; whereas communications professionals are incentivized to elevate the profile of the organization and its brand, government affairs professionals may prefer to train external attention on a specific policy argument (and away from the organization entirely)
- ❑ Some wonder if the divisions between the departments are so fundamental as to be intractable; coordinating and compromising so that both groups can reach their highest performance goals seems a difficult—even impossible—task

## HEART OF THE ISSUE: OPPOSING MANDATES

### Differences in Department Goals Between Communications and Government Affairs

<i>Communications Goals</i>		<i>Government Affairs Goals</i>
Foregrounding brand at all times	↔  ↔	Foregrounding legislative position at all times
Publicizing for credit as often as possible	↔  ↔	Prioritizing strategic disclosure; selectively hiding role
Reaching a wide and public audience	↔  ↔	Reaching a narrow audience of influencers
Timing announcements for broadest impression	↔  ↔	Timing announcements for strategic leverage

- ❑ Faced with this alignment challenge, the prevailing response of advocacy professionals has been to steer clear of it; generally, the work (and staff) of each department is piloted away from the other, day to day, week to week, as long as possible
- ❑ While avoidance may reduce internal tensions in the immediate term, it sooner or later triggers crisis, and ultimately hampers the organization's ability to advance its policy agenda; whether the relationship is actively managed or not, advocacy and communications teams engage in many of the same activities and have a substantial impact on one another's success

## COLLABORATION FALLS VICTIM

*Goal misalignment, at best, limits sharing between departments...*

### Frequency of Government Affairs-Communications Sharing

Communications standards?	<i>Sometimes</i>
Communications tools?	<i>Sometimes</i>
Staff expertise?	<i>Sometimes</i>
Key contact information and data?	<i>Sometimes</i>
Goals and incentives?	<i>Almost never</i>

*...and at worst, fosters belief that the partner department is a barrier*

#### Like Walking in Quicksand

"We spend way too much time iterating, and all the time that is wasted building consensus is often the difference between getting our message into the conversation at an opportune moment, or not... It would be a lot easier if we didn't have to navigate GA's opinion on every message."

Director, Communications

#### A Heads-Up, Please

"It is rare that a month goes by in which I don't lose a full day walking back something that was said without our knowing it. I wish they would ask us for feedback before they push a message. I am always bracing for the next fire. I don't know why it's so hard to pause and ask first."

Executive Director, Advocacy

Source: National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis.

- Some organizations are attempting to chip away at misalignment between the functions by exploring models for sharing tools, expertise, and information across department lines on an *ad hoc* basis; common solutions in this mold are described below
- The solutions represented here often underperform, however, because they are unsustained—deployed when a decision must be made, when a threat requires resolution, or when compliance demands it; they therefore fail to imbue among staff a sense of how each function can work productively (and regularly) with the other

## COMMON HALF-MEASURES

### Sample Models of Collaboration Identified in Research

	<i>Third-Party Arbiter</i>	<i>Dyad Decision-Making</i>	<i>The “Two-Up” Ask</i>
<i>Illustration of Model</i>			
<i>Description</i>	<i>Third-party arbiter irons out differences on ad hoc basis</i>	<i>Function heads work directly with one another on projects as needed</i>	<i>Nonthreatening junior staff member approaches leader with requests on ad hoc basis</i>
<i>Keys to Success</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trusted third-party involvement</li> <li>Acknowledgement of problems on both sides</li> <li>Financial incentives to ensure sustainability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early intervention when problems arise</li> <li>Shared or proportional financial stake in outcomes between functions and leaders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thick-skinned junior staff who can take initiative and navigate office politics</li> </ul>
<i>Shortcomings and Challenges to Confront</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No long-term alignment of goals; addresses <i>results</i> of misalignment, but not <i>root causes</i></li> <li>Tends to require ongoing attention; need for repeated leadership intervention is a source of frustration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Executives have scarce time to contribute</li> <li>Generally, limited to special projects; not applied to day-to-day operations that may benefit from partnership</li> <li>Limited incentives for deep collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support limited to very specific (and often trivial) situations/circumstances</li> <li>Model hinges on generosity of leadership; cooperation is a favor</li> </ul>

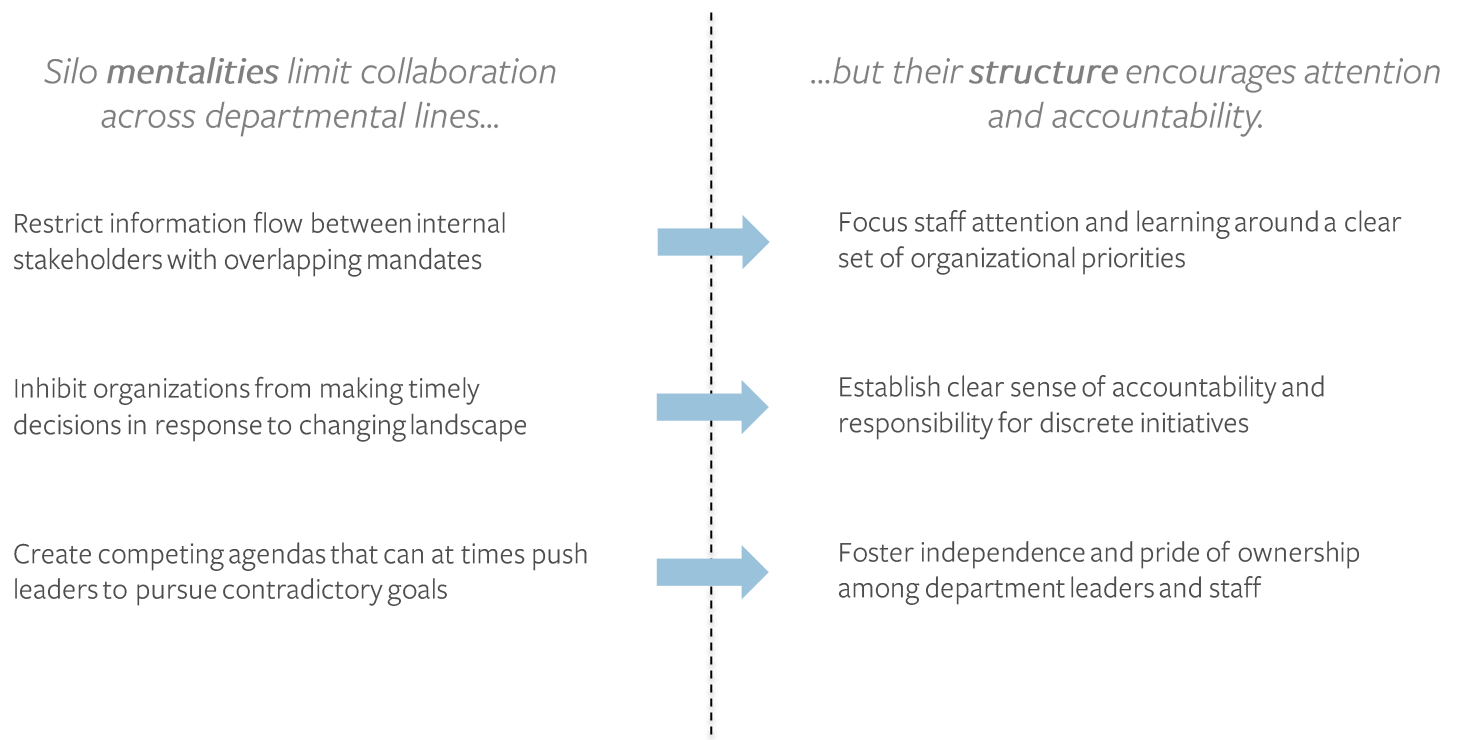
Source: National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis; Images from the Noun Project (Boatman, Edward. Man. 2010).



- ▣ Aiming to create a more regular working relationship and more compatible incentive structures, some organizations are adopting a unified management structure; the logic: under a single (highly aware) leader, department-level goals and expectations for collaboration can be adjudicated in a way that mitigates confusion and internal competition
- ▣ Implemented on its own, though, the efficacy of this tactic as a means to improve collaboration can be challenged; without the investment of significant time and attention, this structural integration does not (automatically) give rise to the desired functional integration, wherein staff all the way down the line begin thinking, sharing, and acting as part of a single system

## IS STRUCTURAL INTEGRATION THE SOLUTION?

### Silos Still Serve Important Organizational Function



Source: National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis.

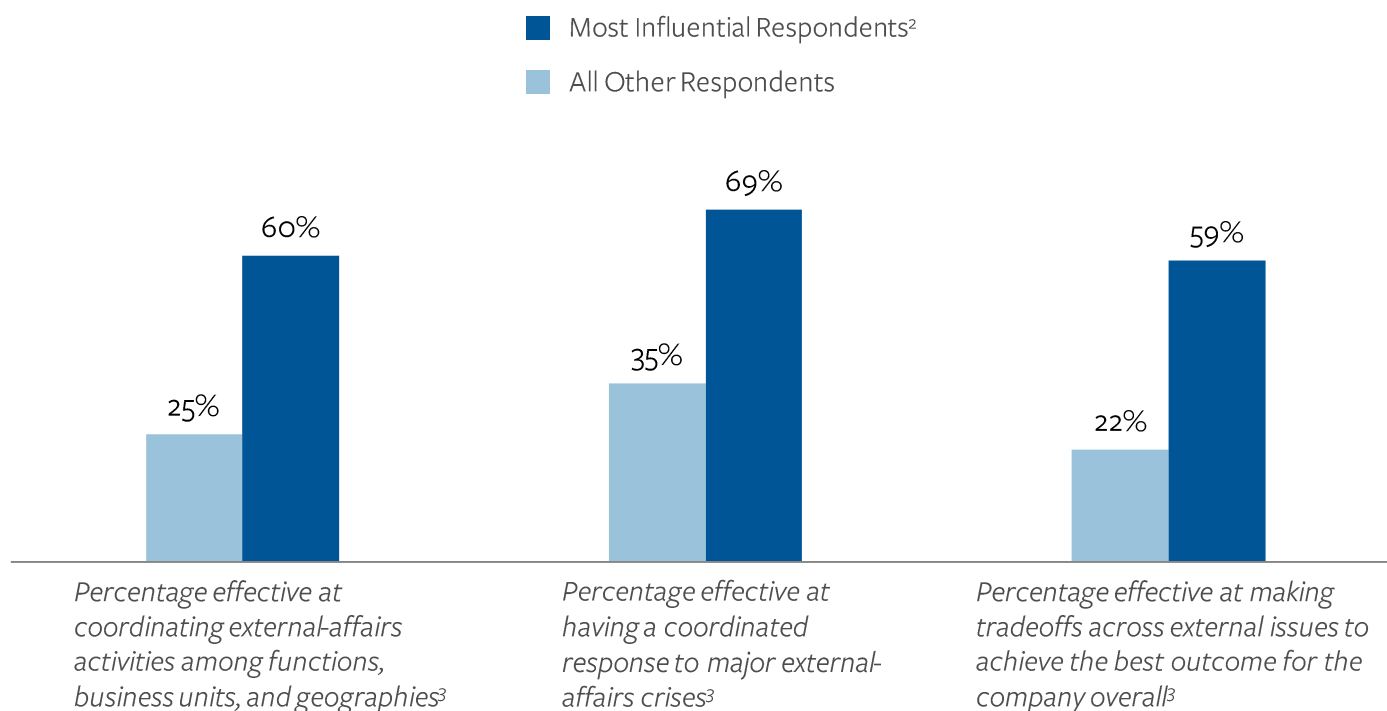


- Elusive though answers may be, organizations are right to continue experimenting with models for improving functional alignment; organizations that have a high degree of internal coordination and are comfortable making tradeoffs in the name of organizational interests tend to outperform their peers on self-assessments of policy influence
- For member consideration, the Strategy Research team has identified five concepts for aligning government affairs and communications functions, briefed in basic detail across the remaining pages; concepts address some of the most common challenges to collaboration—weak or poorly drawn departmental boundaries, a culture of isolated decision-making, and a lack of visibility and context for other department's actions

## HIGH COST OF NOT COLLABORATING

### Link Between Perceived Policy Influence and Coordination Across Functions

*N = 1,396 Corporate Executives<sup>1</sup>*



<sup>1</sup>N refers to size of total, overall respondent pool; <sup>2</sup>Respondents who self-report that company influences policy successfully and manages reputation very effectively;

<sup>3</sup>Based on respondent self-report

Source: "Managing Government Relations for the Future," McKinsey, 2011; National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis.



# CONCEPTS FOR MEMBER CONSIDERATION

## Aligning Government Affairs and Communications

### Negotiating Rules of Engagement

#### Key Themes

- Assigning ownership rights
- Understanding boundaries
- Limiting excessive iteration

#1 Messaging Boundaries

#2 Time-Bound Comment Period

### Socializing Cross-Functional Collaboration

#### Key Themes

- Breeding cross-silo familiarity
- Structuring focused meetings
- Compelling intensive collaboration

#3 Weekly Messaging Huddle

#4 Challenge Project

### Embedding Department Translators

#### Key Themes

- Contextualizing department actions
- Facilitating information flow
- Accessing additional expertise

#5 Communications Embed



- ❑ Most communications and government affairs leaders have devoted only limited attention to defining the boundaries between GA and communications; lists of unresolved key questions—on which issues would each department benefit from the other’s input? what are the terms for how and when each department engages the other? and so forth—remain long
- ❑ Lack of clearly defined boundaries and “rules of engagement” pose a growing liability to each department and to the organization; communications and advocacy functions have both diversified strategies to the extent that they deploy some of the same tactics, use some of the same resources, and even target some of the same audiences...but sometimes for different purposes and without knowledge of the other department’s (competing) activities

## NEGOTIATE STANDARDS AND PROCEDURES

### Opportunities to Standardize Collaboration

#### *Sample Flashpoints*

#### *Questions to Answer*



Struggle over control of key channels and stakeholder audiences



- Who “owns” each communications platform?
- Who can directly contact each stakeholder group?



Failure to consult peer function on matters that affect department’s work



- What messages always require peer consultation?
- How will feedback be gathered?



Drawn-out editing and review process for communications materials



- What is a reasonable timeframe for feedback?
- Who will be involved, and ultimately sign off?



Disagreement over attachment of organizational brand to policy position



- To which policy issues will we attach our name?
- What criteria will we use to make the decision?



Differing opinions on ideal frequency of messaging to stakeholders



- How often will we communicate with stakeholders?
- What are acceptable levels of attrition/unsubscribes?

Source: National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis.

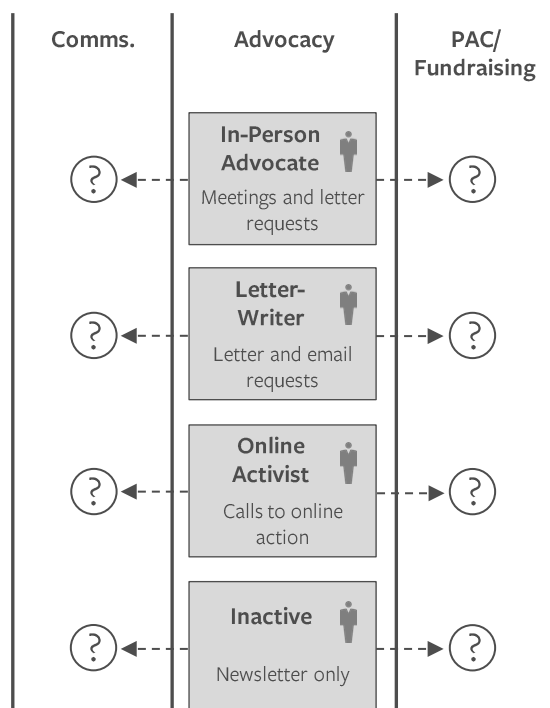
## Concept #1: Messaging Boundaries

- ❑ One of the most important boundaries to define is which department “owns” communication with each individual audience/audience member; disagreements or misunderstandings on this front will present one of the surest flashpoints within the organization
- ❑ The most important criterion in making this decision is how the audience member can best serve the organization

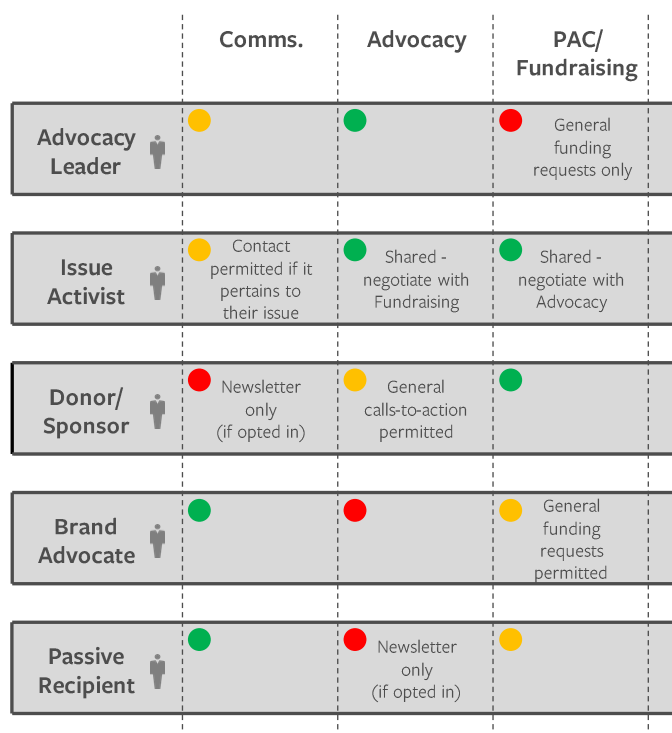
# ADOPT A SYSTEMS VIEW

## Managing Stakeholders at the Organization Level

*Traditional View: Limited Appreciation for Stakeholder Roles Beyond the Department*



*Emerging View: Alignment of Departments around Stakeholder Roles that Best Support Organizational Goals*



### Right of Way

- Green: Owner; contact always permitted
- Yellow: Contact permitted with owner's sign-off
- Red: No contact permitted (beyond noted exceptions)

Source: National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis; Images from the Noun Project.



- Only after considering the needs of the organization (and, if applicable, the known interests and preferences of individual stakeholders) should a department “owner” or specific communications protocol be assigned
- Well-constructed outreach protocols include sufficient detail so as to minimize the amount of process management and internal policing required; at the very least, these protocols (as in the example on the page) define which individuals are part of each audience, define the type and frequency of communications permitted to each audience, and define which departments have general authority over each kind of outreach

## DRAW CLEAR BOUNDARIES

### One Model: Assigning Permissions for Stakeholder Contact

Matrix codifies:

- Which individuals belong to each audience
- Which audiences receive each communication
- Which department manages each communication

Departments do not need to request outreach permission for the communications they manage

■ = receives email		Inactive	Activist	Issue Activist	Core Activist	Donor/Eventgoer
		12 mo. no action, 24 mo. no gift, No event ever	Taken one advocacy action in past 12 mo.	Taken action on a specific issue, ever, in GetActive	5+ actions in past 12 months	Gift to HRC in past 24 months, OR joined by event RSVP or upload
Full List Strategy	Monthly eNewsletter					
	Monthly Advocacy Action (could incl. followup)					
	Fundraising Appeals (3-4 msg every 2-3 mo.)					
Extra actions	State/Local Actions (online or offline)	Only if urgent (would then replace monthly action)		ONLY if it's on their issue		
	Monthly offline action			ONLY if it's on their issue		
	Extra advocacy actions (unlimited)			ONLY if it's on their issue		
Extra fundraising	Events/Volunteer Opportunities			ONLY if it's on their issue		
	Merchandise, or other special fundraising campaigns			ONLY if it's on their issue		Always, but recommend no more than 1 per month

Rules also take into account top priorities of the organization, not one department

Outreach rules further informed by expressed interest of volunteer stakeholders

### Case in Brief



**Profiled Organization:** Human Rights Campaign  
**Organization Type:** Interest Group

- Organization develops formal rubric matching types of content and requests to different stakeholder groups
- Guidelines codify the implicit boundaries between advocacy and fundraising outreach

Source: Human Rights Campaign, “How HRC Built Its Online Program, and Reaped the Benefits” by Ann Crowley and Lindsey Twombly; National Journal Membership Research analysis.

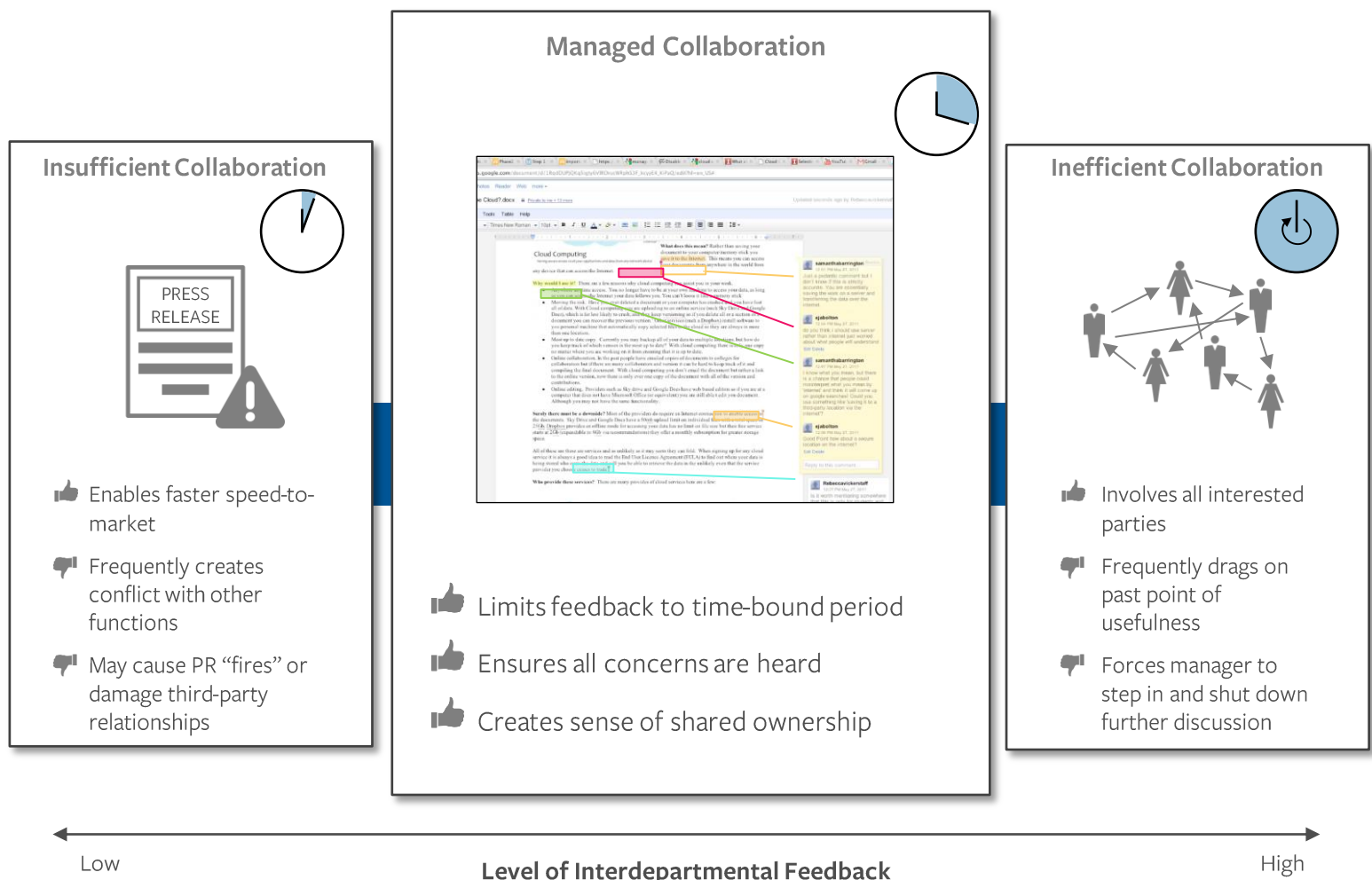


### Concept #2: Time-Bound Comment Period

- ❑ Another, more collaborative approach: opening up some decisions—particularly those related to planned future outreach—for communal input
- ❑ Essential twist: Some organizations are now employing a comment period of fixed duration—24, 36, 72 hours—during which internal stakeholders may weigh in on group decisions; the time-limited feedback window prevents foot-dragging and protracted debate, and forces contributors to share highly specific input
- ❑ Clear guidelines are required to execute this approach successfully; types of issues for which a comment period is required, standards for the processing of feedback by senior staff, and selection of collaborative tools (i.e., for submitting suggestions) all must be determined in advance

## MANUFACTURE HELPFUL URGENCY

### Fostering Efficient Cross-Functional Feedback



Source: National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis; Images from the Noun Project (Bauer, Juergen. Alert. 2010; Tannoia, Michaela. Paper. 2013; Boatman, Edward. Man. 2010; Bovolden, Jorgen. Thumbs Up.)



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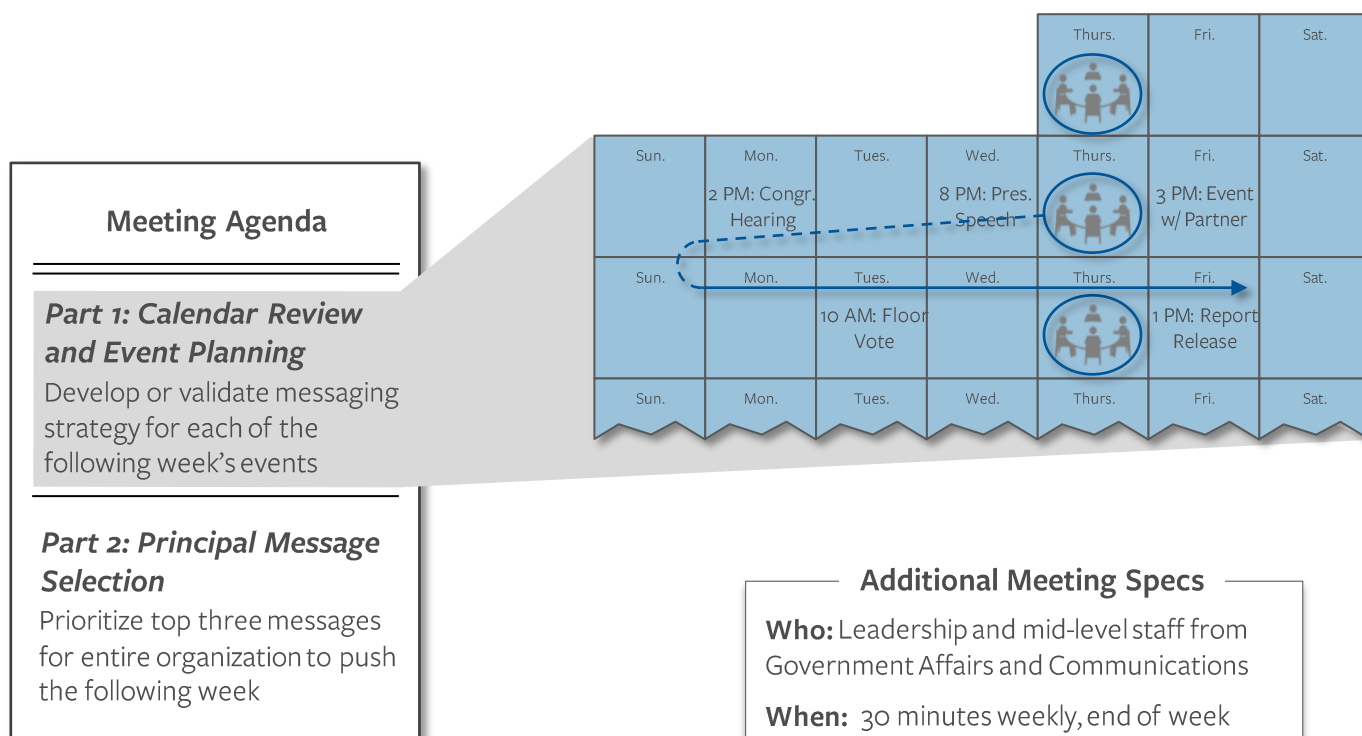
#5 Communications Embed

### Concept #3: Weekly Messaging Huddle

- Even outside of specific initiatives, some organization leaders hold standing meetings with all advocacy and communications staff; the idea is to routinize the experience of interdepartmental coordination, thus improving the organization's preparedness for dealing with bigger, higher stakes coordination challenges when they present
- Primary focus is always the tactical agenda for the week ahead; sharing key decisions, the implications of these decisions, and the messaging strategies to be used with different audiences minimizes the risk of surprise derailment of any ongoing work due to internal confusion

## ROUTINIZE COLLABORATION

### Weekly Cross-Functional Look-Ahead Moment



### Case in Brief



**Profiled Organization:** National Delta Association<sup>1</sup>  
**Organization Type:** Professional Association

- Organization's external affairs functions establish a standing interdepartmental meeting to discuss scripting and plans of action for each of the following week's events
- Meeting participants select three top-priority message points and distribute to leadership via memo to ensure unified organizational voice

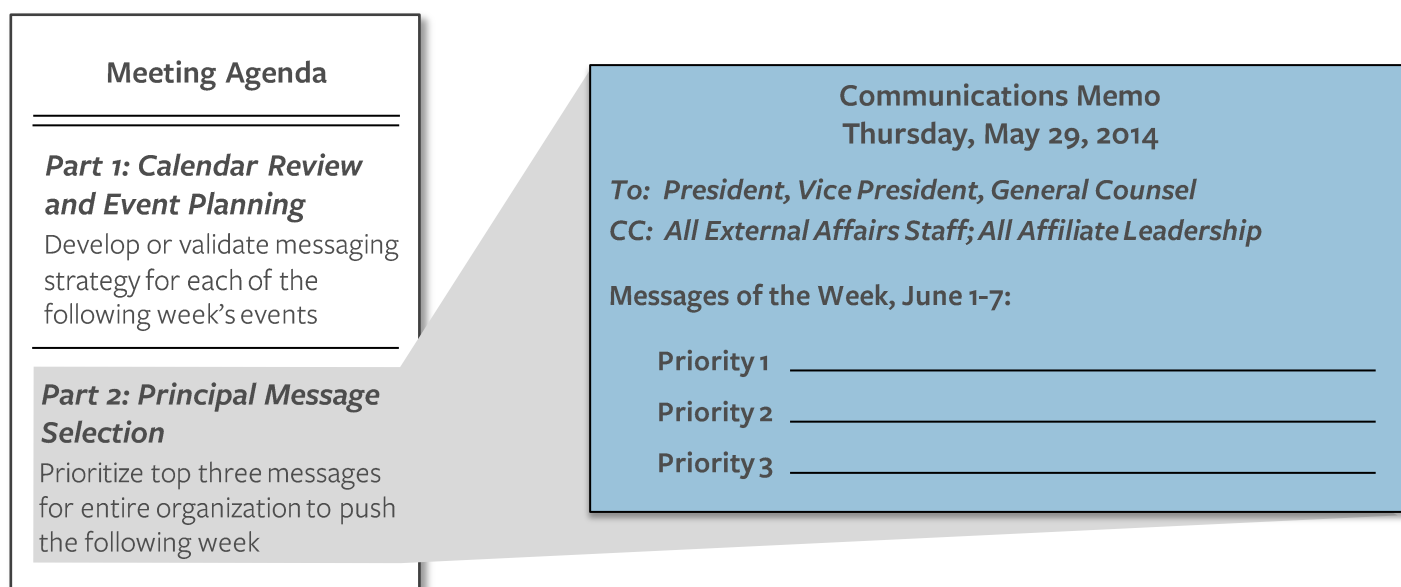
<sup>1</sup>Pseudonym

Source: National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis.

- ❑ The regular, large-group meeting format allows all to (continuously) learn from exchanges between staff and leaders as details are clarified, particularly during Q&A
- ❑ Essential meeting features: committed involvement of top decision-makers, a meeting agenda limited to pressing issues, and clear “next steps”; meetings lacking one or more of these elements may be dismissed as a waste of time and ultimately abandoned

## MANAGE TOWARD OUTPUTS

### Weekly Prioritization of Messages to Push



### My Favorite Meeting

“When this meeting was added to my schedule, I was a little bit skeptical. But I always learn something that prepares me for the week ahead, and the number of fires we avoid cannot be understated. It is my favorite meeting now.”

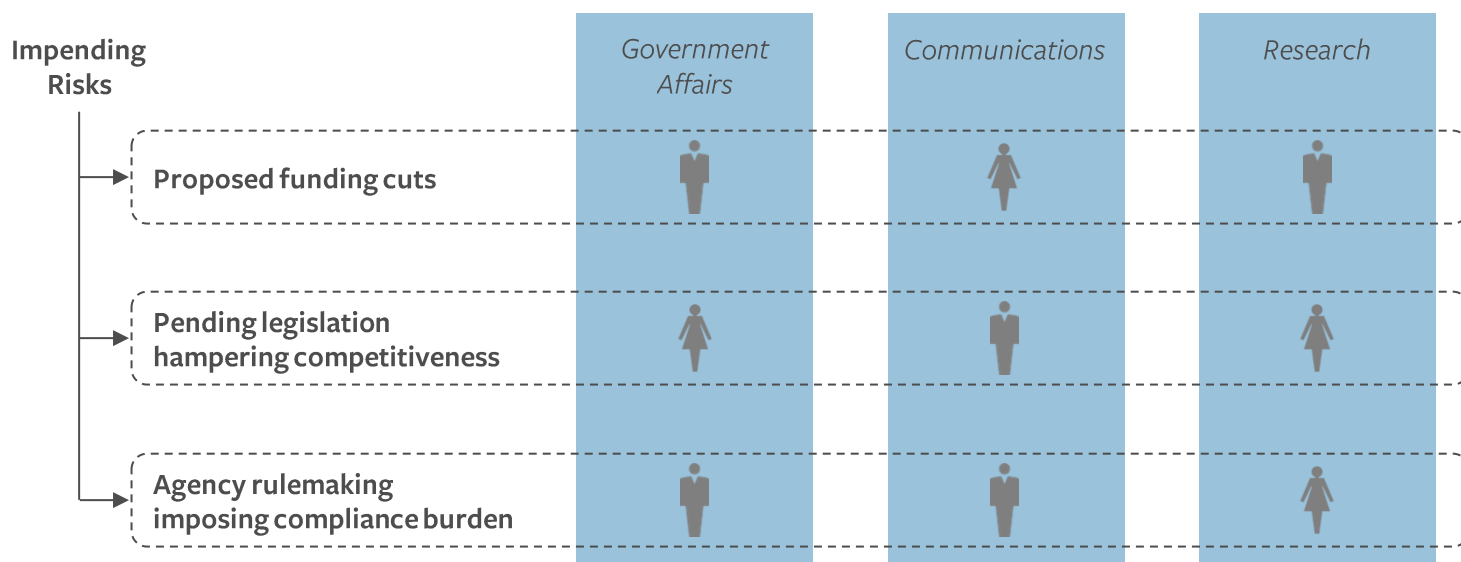
VP of Government Affairs  
National Delta Association

### Concept #4: Challenge Project

- Another way to accelerate cross-functional collaboration is to create focused periods of intensive partnership, called “challenge projects;” in challenge projects, staff representing different functions are assigned joint responsibility for developing a high-impact strategy in a very short period of time
- By their nature, challenge projects can be helpful for improving coordination quickly; the demands of the project force involved individuals to build an appreciation for the styles, skills, and perspectives of their peers—all necessary to facilitate challenge project compromises—in a matter of only weeks

## ASSIGN A CHALLENGE PROJECT

### “Urgent” Team-Based Assignments Hardwire Collaboration



### Case in Brief



**Omega  
Industry  
Association**

**Profiled Organization:** Omega Industry Association<sup>1</sup>

**Organization Type:** Trade Association

- Organization challenges cross-functional teams (including Government Affairs, Communications, and Research staff) with developing a coordinated messaging strategy for a specific policy risk, 6-12 months ahead of time
- Joint project creates urgency for collaboration in the absence of an all-consuming crisis; exposes typically stove-piped staff to the capabilities and concerns of other functions

<sup>1</sup>Pseudonym

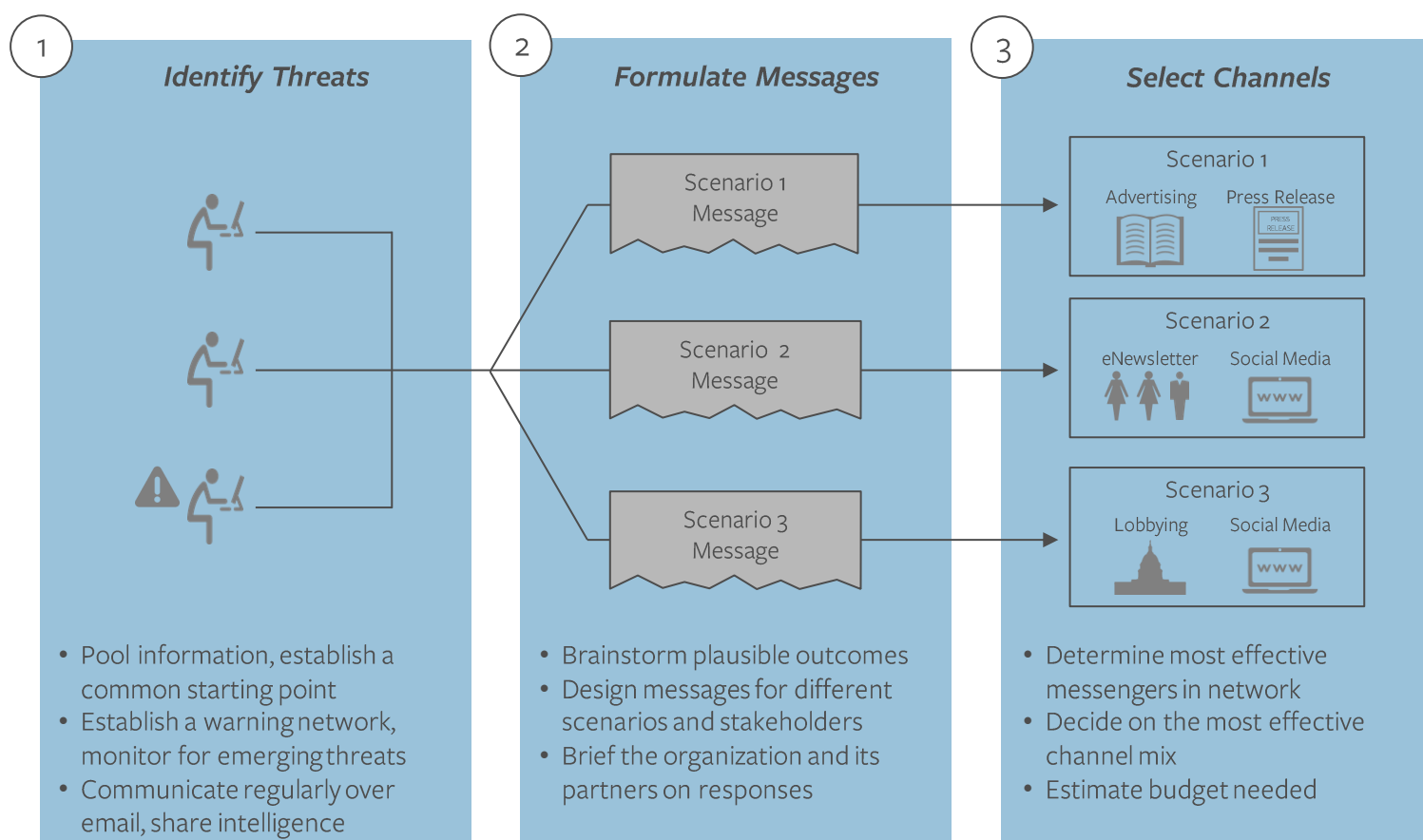
Source: National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis; Images from the Noun Project.



- ❑ Imperative #1: Challenge projects must be designed so that successful completion hinges on significant contributions from each department; the specific focus of the project has little bearing on the ultimate outcome (internal collaborations), though leaders are encouraged to focus the team on a topic that will benefit the organization in ways that are material and immediate
- ❑ Imperative #2: Challenge projects should deconstruct, naturally, into work phases; the experience of interacting with peers through multiple (difficult) stages, each resembling real-life decision points and processes, provides more complete exposure to internal partners and improves the likelihood that project creates a legacy of collaboration—one that pays dividends for some time afterward

## REQUIRE VARIED EXPERTISE

### Example Project: Process for Developing Risk Preparedness Plan



Source: National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis; Images from the Noun Project (Bauer, Juergen. Alert. 2010; Tannoia, Michaela. Paper. 2013; Boatman, Edward. Man. 2010; Keating, Jonathan. Capital. 2012; Simplicio, Julia. Book; Elzahara, Ahmed. Laptop. 2014).



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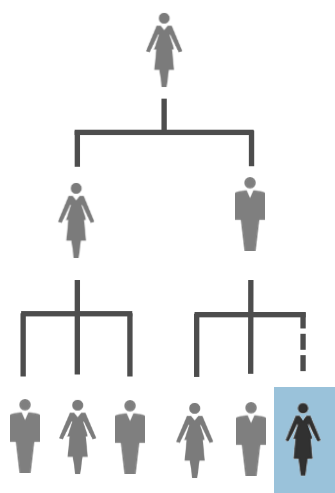
### Concept #5: Communications Embed

- ❑ Some organizations believe that the alignment approaches described heretofore—departmental boundaries, information sharing protocols, and so forth—are inadequate for addressing the bevy of opportunities and threats posed by the differences between the two functions
- ❑ A more permanent solution: Embedding a government affairs staffer in the communications department to serve as a liaison; though the embed sits within the communications department, he/she continues to work primarily on government affairs projects and is paid out of the GA budget
- ❑ With one foot in each department, the embed is well-positioned to translate priorities and needs across work cultures, to ensure that these priorities and needs are reflected in the agendas of both functions, and to gain access to specialized resources and expertise (as needed) for specific GA initiatives

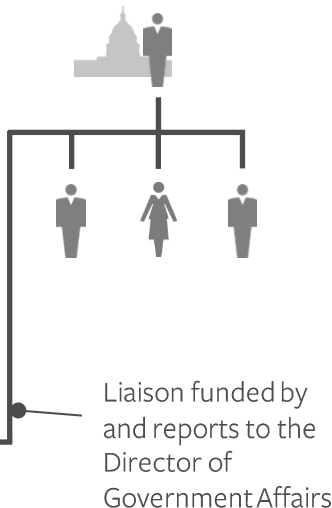
## DEPLOY A DEPARTMENT AMBASSADOR

### Contextualizing Government Affairs Needs and Actions

#### Corporate Communications Southeast



#### Government Affairs Office Washington, DC



#### Primary Liaison Activities

- Represents Government Affairs interests in Communications meetings
- Leverages Communications' expertise, manpower, and tools, as needed
- Educates the broader company on GA function's value to organization
- Visits Washington once every 4-6 weeks to meet with lobbying team

### Case in Brief



Profiled Organization: Alpha Corporation<sup>1</sup>  
Organization Type: Corporation

- Government Affairs seeks improved lines of communication and collaboration between the Washington office and headquarters, as well as a stronger appreciation for GA's purpose/function to the company writ large
- Washington office hires dedicated liaison directly out of Communications function, funding liaison who continues to sit alongside Communications staff and facilitates stronger partnership between two departments

<sup>1</sup>Pseudonym

Source: National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis; Images from the Noun Project (Boatman, Edward. Man. 2010).

- ❑ Physically locating the liaison within the communications department is essential; this placement improves the visibility of the individual as an ambassador to the communications department and also improves his/her ability to actively build the internal brand of the GA department
- ❑ Alternative approach: some organizations go the opposite direction, deploying a communications professional within GA; in addition to providing the communications department with greater context for GA decisions, this model expands communications expertise available (moment to moment) to the Washington office

## FACILITATE REGULAR COLLABORATION

### Relationship with Communications Department

#### Message Consistency



- Ensures policy perspective is accounted for in organizational messages
- Aligns departmental messaging with that of others' functions and their materials

#### Access to Expertise, Resources



- Leverages peer Communications expertise to enhance quality of messaging materials
- Takes advantage of all departmental tools and spare manpower, as possible

### Relationship with Broader Organization

#### Executive Support



- Alerts executives to moments when their voices will have greatest impact
- Helps peer communicators sharpen language used by executive champions

#### Grassroots Mobilization



- Translates inside-Beltway jargon into easily understood language for employees
- Identifies facility-specific channels for sharing policy messages with employees

### Two-Way Benefits Provided by Liaison

“Being based at my company’s headquarters is a win/win for the team. I can be an effective internal communicator for the team and educate employees on what our team is doing in Washington and across our state capitols. And I serve as a “pulse point” to our Governmental Affairs team as someone living outside the Beltway—developing talking points for employees from a factory floor to an R&D facility and beyond.”

Communications Liaison  
Alpha Corp.

Source: National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis; Images from the Noun Project (Boatman, Edward. Man. 2010; Rowe, Michael. Presentation. 2013; Iconathon. Main Office. 2011).

# HOW MAY WE HELP YOU?

## CONTACT US

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Please contact us if you have...

- ▶ ***An idea you would like to share***
- ▶ ***An interest in participating in ongoing research initiatives***

Current topics include:

- Breakthrough Advocacy Campaigns
- Value Measurement and GA Performance Dashboards
- Creating Continuous Grassroots Relationships

- ▶ ***Questions about our research or services***

Direct all inquiries to Aaron Young, Research Director, at  
[ayoung@nationaljournal.com](mailto:ayoung@nationaljournal.com)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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