

# BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

## GENERAL PRINCIPLES

These apply when dealing with any potential ally—civic organizations, your Community Board, elected officials, Parks & Recreation, the Police Department, and anyone else who could help you or your park.

**1. Make yourself visible—both you and your group should be known in the community.**

To raise your group's profile, hold public events and publicize them well. To raise your own profile, get involved with all kinds of groups and issues. The more you and your group do, the more contacts you'll have.

**2. Keep people informed.**

People get very upset when they feel they've been left out of the loop. Call, write, send out notices—whatever it takes to avoid surprising people. An added benefit is that when you let people get involved in something from the beginning, they are more likely to become personally invested in it and want it to succeed.

**3. Build personal relationships.**

Remember that you are dealing with people, not just agencies or organizations. People will be stronger allies if they know and like you as a person. And keep in mind that building a strong relationship takes time and energy; it won't happen overnight.

**4. Be a good listener.**

Focus first on understanding *other people's* needs and priorities. Listen carefully so that you can understand what drives the person or organization you want to enlist. Start with the individual—what personally motivates him or her? Likewise, what is the organization's focus?

**5. Look for win-win opportunities.**

Think of ways your needs mesh with others' needs. How can supporting the park help both you and your allies? For example, having a local bodega owner provide refreshments at your Summer Festival is good for both you and for him/her, if you publicize his/her support—through your newsletter and on a sign at the event itself.

**6. Build a "bank account" of trust and goodwill—and don't make too many withdrawals!**

Keep your word, and do favors for people when asked, if it's not too burdensome. People notice if you stick to your commitments. If you help someone out in some small way, especially if that person is in a pinch, they'll be likely to return the favor. But if you're unreliable or self-centered, you'll burn bridges quickly. Keep in mind how often you're asking for favors, as opposed to giving them. Finally, ask for little things before you ask for big things.

**7. Thank anyone and everyone.**

Send thank you letters, make phone calls, recognize contributors at public events, note supporter on your flyers and newsletters, give certificates of appreciation, and hold thank you parties. If someone helped you in an official capacity, send a letter of commendation to his or her boss. When in doubt, give people *more* credit than they deserve.

## **THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN DEALING WITH GOVERNMENT AGENCIES:**

**1. Be polite, patient, and persistent.**

“You can catch a lot more flies with honey than with vinegar.” Civility counts, and is essential for a good relationship. Screaming, insulting, and demanding may work once, but it rarely solves the problem in the long term. Sure, sometimes you’ve got a right to get angry. But it’s risky, and should be a last resort.

**2. Know who has the power to solve the problem.**

When people seem to be unresponsive, it’s often simply because they really can’t do anything about the issue you are raising. Unfortunately, people don’t always explain that. Know the chain of command in the agency you call, and move up the chain of command as appropriate. If you’re uncertain who’s in charge, be specific in your request, so you can find the person most able to deal with your problem.

**3. Get to know different people at the agency, and distinguish among them.**

Some people at public agencies can be unresponsive or indifferent, but many others aren’t. Just because the agency makes a decision you don’t like, don’t let that destroy good relationships you have built. View someone’s actions in the context of your history with him or her. And keep in mind that many times people would genuinely like to help but can’t because of limited resources.

## **THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN APPROACHING ELECTED OFFICIALS:**

**1. Look Professional.**

Give your organization a name, print official letterhead, type your letters, and keep a membership roster. Make sure the official knows that you represent a larger constituency. But don’t bring your whole group to the meeting; you don’t want to make the official feel he or she is being attacked.

**2. Be prepared.**

Research the official’s voting record on the issues you are concerned with. Bring materials from your group to show that you are serious and committed.

**3. Know the Details.**

Know specifically what you want and specifically why you think it’s worth doing. If you are asked a question you don’t know the answer to, say you will get the information after the meeting.

**4. If the official is unavailable, meet with a senior staff member.**

Elected officials’ staff can often have a great deal of influence.