



# A Guide to Self- Advocacy

## Table of Contents

A Guide to Self-Advocacy .....	0
What is Self-Advocacy? .....	1
What is Necessary for Self-Advocacy Success? .....	1
Communication is the Key.....	2
Understanding and Preparing the Steps toward Change.....	5
From Point A to Point B.....	6
Policy and Appeals.....	7
Summary.....	8
Works Cited .....	9

## What is Self-Advocacy?

Self-advocacy is defined as an individual's ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs and rights. It involves making informed decisions and taking responsibility for those decisions. It is knowing what you need and speaking up for it. As described in Huffington Post (2011),

Self-advocacy is the ability to say what you need, want and hope for in life. It is the courage to express how you feel in constructive ways. It is having the humility to ask obvious questions and admit mistakes. It is making the commitment to learn and improve through actions. It is about standing up for yourself and others in the face of injustice. Self-advocacy is a skill that will open the door to transformational conversations, build self-confidence and enable career opportunities. Early in a career, self-advocacy helps gather information about how things get done: what process to follow, the right people to get involved, what pitfalls to avoid. Later in life, self-advocacy also helps individual present their work and the work of their team with conviction and purpose when projects compete for scarce resources. Finally, self-advocacy, enables individuals to focus the efforts required to succeed in the position they are in to attain the position where they want to be in the future. (para. 4)

Self-advocacy skills are crucial for independence as they allow for an individual to create change within their own lives and ensure that their personal needs are met. For an individual living with a disability, self-advocacy skills are particularly pivotal to ensure that quality of life, health care needs, and general personal rights are met. As living with a disability is already a challenge to overcome, individuals will need to have a developed self-awareness so that they can understand the entitlements that are theirs in right, and what services they can and should be advocating for on their own behalf.

## What is Necessary for Self-Advocacy Success?

Part of being an effective advocate is having a healthy self-esteem. Having confidence in yourself and your abilities, as well as holding a positive sense of self-respect will allow for you to advocate for yourself with ease and a true belief that the cause that you are fighting for is a worthy one, and that you truly deserve the rights that you are looking to have upheld. Without these traits and a sound belief in your cause, advocacy will be half-hearted and ineffective. If you fight for your cause with power, you will get action.

Power can be defined in many ways. As it is generically defined by Dictionary.com as “the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events” (Power, 2016), one can surmise that power is fundamental in the course of self-advocacy. The forms that power can be held is varied however, and not all types of power lead to success in advocacy.

- **Power over** is exercising control over another, or alternatively when you are experiencing a loss of control to another person in a situation. For a person with a disability, it is important to ensure that another does not hold power over you, as it is all too common to hear of someone being taken advantage over because their age, status or disability.

- **Power with** is a collaborative form of power. It indicates trust between parties, where neither party holds more power or influence than another. This can sometimes lead to a deadlock.
- **Power within** is the most effective type of power as one has control of their self. They do not require validation from others. This comes from holding a healthy self-esteem and positive sense of self-worth. Power within allows you to believe in your cause and yourself and effectively advocate for your needs and rights.

While holding power is a compelling advocacy tool, you must take care not to abuse it, be arrogant about it, or begin to feel that you have power over rather than power within a situation as this can lead to undesirable outcomes or discord between parties in communication. The strongest tool a person can hold when advocating is power within. Feeling a sense of self-confidence in yourself and your abilities will assist you in pursuing your cause and fighting for your rights in an assertive, concise manner, ensuring that you are heard by those that you are advocating to.

## Communication is the Key

A successful advocate will be an effective communicator. Without clear and concise communication, it is difficult for the other party to understand the issue that a person is trying to relay and the cause that one is advocating for. Some of the strategies taken to communicate successfully include:

- Choosing our language with care.

When we are cognizant of the language that we are using and take care to maintain a respectful tone, as well as ensuring that what we are saying is clear, calm, and accurate, we are better able to relay the communication that we would like to get across to another party.

- Avoiding accusations of others and becoming defensive ourselves.

Practice using “I” statements and taking ownership of your own feelings, thoughts and positions. This allows for us to be accountable and for our position to be better considered.

- Expressing our needs, wants, feelings and thoughts clearly.

Clarify if the other party seems unsure of what you are stating. This can allow for mutual understanding on the issue that you are advocating for.

- Being aware of our body language and how it may be interpreted by others.

Being aware of personal body language is just as important as choosing verbal communication with care. How you physically presents yourself can convey meaning just as effectively as spoken word can.

- Conveying confidence in yourself and your cause.

If we are not confident in ourselves and do not believe in our cause, how can we expect anyone else to?

- Practicing active listening.

Active listening involves fully concentrating on what the other party is saying, and really hearing them, not just listening to the words. In doing this, you can avoid misunderstanding and ask for clarification from the other party as needed.

**Listening skills** are equally important as speaking in advocacy, as it is not only about having your issue heard, but hearing the other party's response to your plea that you have presented. You will need to clearly hear the other party's opinions, concerns, negotiations and reasoning towards the issue at hand to be able to properly mediate a solution that will be accepted and fair. Good listening includes the following:

- Making eye contact.
- Sit facing the person squarely, leaning slightly into them if possible. This shows your interest in what they are saying.
- Be open to what the other party is saying. Give them the chance to speak freely.
- Ask questions about what they are saying.
- Seek clarification if you have missed something or if you are unsure of what was said. This not only confirms understanding, but also shows the other party that you are engaged.

Good listening skills should be practiced on a regular basis, but are especially fundamental to self-advocacy. Remember the old "gossip" game, where someone would whisper something into your ear, and then you'd whisper what you heard into someone else's ear, and so forth, with the final person relaying what it is that they heard? It was always interesting to find out what the last person heard as it was rarely what was initially said. This is a demonstration of listening skills and how the information being conveyed can be skewed based on ineffective listening or a lack of seeking clarification.

**Body language** needs to be paid particular attention as it can convey just as much meaning, or more, than verbally spoken words can. If you cannot be aware of your portrayed body language, you may inadvertently convey a message entirely different than what you meant to. Have you ever looked at someone in passing and thought to yourself, "Wow! Look at the expression on their face! They must really be angry about something!?"

There are many differing forms of communication styles, and finding one that fits is unique to each individual. However, there are commonalities within the styles, with three of the common types of communication styles being:

- **Aggressiveness:** Being aggressive means that you express yourself at the expense of other people's rights. Aggressiveness denotes a confrontational and often hostile attitude.
- **Passiveness:** Passive communication allows others to violate one's rights, showing a lack of respect for their personal needs. When one puts their own needs behind everyone else's, they can become a victim.
- **Assertiveness:** With assertive communication, one strives to respect the other party, as well as respecting one's self and one's personal needs.

When practicing assertiveness, one works towards finding a mutually agreeable solution for all parties involved, showing respect to both the other party as well as one's self. Some of the personality traits associated with assertiveness are self-confidence, decisiveness, being self-assured, being forthright, and being emphatic.

A person communicates assertively by overcoming fear of speaking his or her mind or trying to influence others, but doing so in a way that respects the personal boundaries of others. Assertive people are also willing to defend themselves against aggressive people. (Wikipedia, 2016)

Some ways that you can practice assertiveness are as follows:

- Use "I" statements and be clear and concise.
- Be direct.
- Identify your needs/wants/issues as YOU see them.
- Confirm clarity and understanding. Ask for feedback.
- Ensure that your body language is also assertive, not just your words.

Use "I" statements. By clearly stating your needs in this manner, you take ownership of your needs, wants and feelings. This is important in self-advocacy as it will determine how you will be heard, understood, and how your needs are conveyed to the party that you are advocating to. Here are some examples of "I" statements:

- "I feel as if you have not heard me when I discuss my issues with you. I feel invalidated and unimportant as a result of this, and I would appreciate having the opportunity to be clearly heard. How can I help you to understand my needs?"
- "I am upset with the lack of response that I have received. Is there a better way I should be addressing my concerns so that I can ensure a timely response?"

In both of those examples, the statements do not blame. They simply state personal feelings, the issue as the speaker sees it, and seek a solution to the issue without giving direction or accusing the other party. "I" statements are a powerful tool and should be well-received when used in an assertive manner.

## Understanding and Preparing the Steps toward Change

To solve a problem or achieve a goal, you must first clearly understand and define precisely what the issue is from your own point of reference. Then you can begin to figure out what steps are necessary to accomplish the goal or solve the problem so you can then proceed in a logical manner.

1. Clearly **define the problem** as you see it.
2. What steps need to be taken to achieve this goal? **Make a list of objectives** for accomplishing your goal. (Objectives are instructions about what you need to do to achieve a goal. It is always action-orientated).
3. Ensure that your objectives **include conditions** such as how and where you will carry out the activity, and a timeline for completing the objective.
4. **Research your issue** (example: if you'd like to have better enforcement of disabled parking, know the laws regarding disabled parking enforcement currently, find out whom you could advocate to for change, check to see if there have already been proposed changes by another party that would align with your issue, etc.).
5. Clearly identify and **define any barriers** or problems that you can foresee.
6. **Identify your** opponents or allies. Allies can prove to be a great benefit to your cause. If you can find a strong group that are perhaps experiencing the same issue as you and you can advocate together as a group, there may be a stronger chance of success. There is always strength in numbers, and this is particularly true for advocacy on a systemic level. As opponents do not support your goal, they can be a hindrance to your success; watch that those that oppose you do not also have power over you, and that despite their opposition, they are still treating you with respect and fair opportunity to be heard.
7. **Formulate solutions.** There are often many solutions that become transparent as you spend time thinking about the issue at hand. Ask for help from your allies and utilize all of your available resources. Be realistic about your solutions and how successfully they will help you to meet your goal. Know your personal limits, as well as the limiting policy around your issue.
8. Weigh the pros and cons of **different methods of advocacy** before settling on one. You could arrange a face-to-face meeting, send an email, write a letter, telephone someone, petition against a something, etc. Remember that the more personal options, such as face-to-face meetings will be memorable and allow for you to be seen as a person, rather than just an email; putting a face to the cause can help a person to really consider what it is that you're saying. Also ensure that you find out with whom you should be speaking to before contacting the other party. You want to make sure that your information is headed to the right person.

An effective tool for self-advocacy can be to present your problems or issues in writing to the other party. This gives you the opportunity to plan what you are going to say, review your use of language for clarity and time, and ensure that you have presented all of the points that you would

like to make in an organized manner. Emails can also leave a documented trail for your records and further follow-up.

9. **KNOW YOUR RIGHTS!!!** This cannot be stressed enough. In knowing your rights, you can act from a power-within standpoint. Another party will not have power over you and have the ability to take control from you or mislead you if you are well-versed in your rights, both personally and from the standpoint of your issue. This goes hand in hand with understanding policies regarding your issue however, so that you also understand your limitations and your own obligations.
10. **Document** and maintain your personal records. As it is human nature to forget things, document any important items such as meetings, important telephone calls, emails, etc. This will remind you of what you have done, what you still need to do, and what others have done on your behalf. Be sure to include times, dates, names, and subject matter in your documentation and organize the information into systematic order such as file folders, computer folders, notebooks, or calendars. As all people organize differently, be sure to find a system that works well for you.
11. **Persistence** coupled with **follow-up** produces **results!** Always follow up with your service provider after initial communication. When you follow-up in a timely fashion, it shows a sense of professionalism and indicates that you are committed to solving your problem and are taking the matter seriously. This will encourage action and follow through on their part. Plan your method of follow-up just as you would when you plan your method of advocacy. Telephone, email and letter are some of the most common follow-up methods.

## From Point A to Point B

Negotiation is a discussion between parties aimed at reaching an agreement. To properly negotiate, you must know and be able to clearly define your goals and intentions, as well as know the other party's goals and intentions. Being prepared will facilitate this process and allow for you and your negotiations to be taken seriously. Some of the more common negotiation tactics include:

- Unfriendly competition
- Friendly collaboration
- Walking away
- Convincing
- Positional bargaining
- Stalling
- Appealing to a higher authority
- Giving an ultimatum

These tactics may not help with negotiation as they are all based on personal feelings or ideas. Successful negotiations are interest-focused.

When negotiating, be sure to back up your argument. Support your position with facts, evidence, and statistics. This shows that you are prepared and will validate your argument. When stating your position, take control of your emotions and do so in a calm, concise manner. Do not blame the other party and ensure that you use “I” statements to present your situation.

Always be aware of the possibility of a deadlock. A deadlock is a situation in which no further progress can be made between the parties. Learn to recognize this situation and when you see that an impasse has been reached, consider alternative courses of action, such as choosing to use a mediator. Often when the situation is shifted back to interests rather than personal thoughts or feelings, parties can move past their deadlock and reach agreement.

## Policy and Appeals

To advocate successfully, you must understand policy. Policy is a written principle or rule that guides decision making. These guidelines govern the established course of action that must be followed by an agency. In understanding your targeted agency’s policy towards the situation that you are advocating for, you can understand what resources can be expected and how to go about implementing these. You also can understand what limitations can be expected and how to navigate around them. Policy can be influenced by having a voice and clearly expressing your concerns that have been backed up with research. **ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE!**

Beyond self-advocacy, you may choose to get into systemic advocacy, which is working towards change on a larger scale within systems or structures. These issues currently affect, or in the future are likely to affect a number of people in one or more facets. For example, you are unhappy with disabled parking enforcement, so you contact the building manager where you are trying to park and have them figure out how to enforce the issue at their building. After some thought on it, you decide that you will take your advocacy a step further and contact the city to see what bylaws are in place regarding disabled parking, do some research, and begin to go about petitioning for change to overall policy on disabled parking across the city, and eventually across the province. This would be considered systemic advocacy. You may have to advocate to large organizations or provincial or federal governments for example, but you are advocating for the larger picture and for more people than your own personal self.

If you are unhappy with the response that you’ve received at the end of the advocacy process, you can always appeal. You have the right to appeal any decision that is made on your behalf, and a higher or independent power can review your situation and recommend the agency in question to reconsider their decision.

## Summary

- Hold positive self-esteem. Have confidence in yourself and your abilities, as well as in your cause.
- Practice power-within to gain self-advocacy success
- Communicate in a clear, concise manner, avoiding blame and using “I” statements to present your cause.
- Understand the issue and define it as you see it. Research it, identify allies and barriers, and formulate proposed solutions.
- Know your rights.
- Document and maintain personal records.
- Be persistent and follow up.
- Negotiate fairly.
- Understand related policy.
- Appeal if necessary.

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