

DEALING WITH BUREAUCRATS

A CORE ELEMENT FOR EVERY ACTIVIST GROUP

As you might be able to imagine, if you're opposing the City Council, you come up against a lot of bureaucracy! You may also face similar bureaucratic barriers in activist work within your university, union, or place or work too.

The key thing to remember is that bureaucrats and decision-makers will try to conceal information, or slow down the delivery of information, until after a decision has been made. Then they can say "sorry, it's too late, it's out of my hands."

It is nothing personal, it's just what they do. Or rather, what they TRY to do. More specifically...

Bureaucrats will push important agenda items to the bottom, so there is less time to address substantive points and more time for irrelevant/side issues.



Keep a close eye on the agenda, and demand as part of the initial "code of conduct" that agendas are

- always circulated a week in advance as a DRAFT agenda that can be changed before the meeting, following representations,
- that there are mechanisms both before and at the start of the meeting for the agenda to be re-ordered
- that both the agenda-setting and chairing of the meeting is rotated between the organisation and those in attendance

So, when you receive the draft agenda and it relegates the most important/uncomfortable-for-the-organisation item to the end, where everyone is tired and out of time, with a bunch of "fluff" items at the top, you could write back with something like:

*Dear x,
Thank you for circulating the agenda for next week's meeting of the Carbon Reduction Advisory Panel. We the undersigned, as members of CRAP, have looked closely at it.
We all are very strongly of the view that items 2 "the precise shade of green ink to use for the next sustainability statement", and item 3 "the time on June 31st when the press release should be put out about the sustainability statement" should be moved to the bottom of the agenda so that item 12, "the organisation's commitment to reducing the amount of flights its staff takes" can be properly discussed and scrutinised, given that it has been dropped from the last four monthly CRAP meetings.
Please let us know that you have received this communication, and send us any revised agenda.
Thank you
[as many people as you can get to sign]*

CONTINUED

DEALING WITH BUREAUCRATS (CONTINUED)

Bureaucrats will try to exhaust you and to demoralise those who care most about an issue. One way they will do this is to call too many or too few meetings, often at short notice.

Advice: Make sure the bureaucrats can't call meetings at short notice when they know some 'awkward squad' people won't be able to attend. Have regularly scheduled meetings, planned months in advance. Don't let the bureaucrats cancel or reschedule them. So, within any meeting, whenever there is a promise of delivery of information, get it agreed (and minuted) that:

"Information about x is going to be delivered to everyone on this panel by date y in format z [e.g. pdf] by named bureaucrat a. If this deadline is not met, it will be escalated to bureaucrat a's boss, bureaucrat b."

Inconvenient commitments will get mysteriously "forgotten" from the official minutes and "attritional evaporation".

If you're only meeting once a month, it can often be the case that memories have faded, scraps of paper on which you jotted down notes have been lost. The chair of the meeting says "can we take the minutes as read?"

If you say "er, no, chair, there was I think a commitment that bureaucrat a would do x by y" then the bureaucrat or chair can smile and say "well, that's not our recollection/it wasn't there in the draft minutes".

And so a commitment that was made gets dropped, and this demoralises those who fought for it, and makes them more suspicious of the whole process. They then probably drop out, leaving ever-more-pliable people still on the committee... This is an attritional "evaporation" process.

Advice: Those attending the meeting should write their own version of the minutes, and circulate it straight away. A basic outline is as follows:

*"Hi, bureaucrats a and b,
Thanks for meeting with us earlier today/last night. Attached please find our minutes of the meeting, structured around a series of agreed actions, with named individuals and deadlines.*

This is to the best of our ability an accurate account of what was agreed. If you feel that it was NOT, please let us know straight away. If we do not hear from you, we will regard this as an agreement that our account is in fact accurate."

*Yours sincerely
[xxx]"*

Also, members of the community/student groups have to know how to use the Freedom of Information Act, and be willing to use it if the organisation plays silly.

DEALING WITH BUREAUCRATS (CONTINUED)

Bureaucrats will try to baffle you with irrelevant information - long words, jargon, irrelevant facts based on shifting-baselines.

Advice: Learn how to decode their language, and push for plain, simple language in the “code of conduct” as well.

Rewrite their reports as short briefing papers, highlighting

- a) what has NOT been answered
- b) what has been buried and
- c) how much more succinctly and clearly the reports could have been written.



Bureaucrats will try to stack panels with clueless and/or vulnerable people, to deliberately dilute the voices who are demanding proper action

You can spot them easily enough - people with few or no connections to everyone else on the panel, who are employed directly or indirectly by the organisation. They tend to make long vague speeches which then get enthusiastically backed up by the bureaucrats, wasting time and energy.

This is a tricky one to deal with, because you can end up getting into fights about who is “representative” and the fight demoralises and de-legitimises everyone. These sorts of people are best just “contained” - asked to keep their irrelevant comments brief, and invited to either educate themselves or go away .

Bureaucrats can play a long-game, waiting to “take back control”

Members of the community group have to continually explain to new members how the bureaucrats slow things down. Otherwise, as there is turn-over of membership in the panel, the bureaucrats can simply resort to their old tactics.

Why not finish talking about something that’s often quite boring (bureaucracy) with a relevant quote from something a lot more interesting? (Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy)?

“But the plans were on display...”

“On display? I eventually had to go down to the cellar to find them.”

“That’s the display department.”

“With a flashlight.”

“Ah, well, the lights had probably gone.”

“So had the stairs.”

“But look, you found the notice, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” said Arthur, “yes I did. It was on display in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying ‘Beware of the Leopard.’”

— Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*