

The Impact of Executive Directors' Political Activity on Public Policy

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Introduction

This paper is in response to my inquiry of the political activity of Executive Directors of private non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations in a medium sized city and the impact this activity has on the organization. I was interested in how much political activity, if any, is necessary for an Executive Director to engage in in order to maintain a successful private non-profit in an industry where each service is affected by public policy. In addition, I have recently experienced the impact that public policy can have on individual clients and wanted to know what impact I can have on some of the policies that affect my clients.

For example, in the shelter system in Massachusetts run by the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), a family must be income eligible in order to secure and maintain a shelter space. DTA has also encouraged families to secure jobs in order to get off of public assistance and be self-sufficient. These two issues create a bind for the families. If the family secures a “good” paying job and goes over income while staying at the shelter, even if they do not have a permanent housing placement, they lose their shelter space. The families must then make some difficult decisions while staying in shelter. They many times have to refuse a full time position or a promotion which may not come up again in order to keep a roof over their children’s head. As social workers, the shelter staff members have to inform the residents of this to be sure they understand the consequences of making too much money. As an administrator, I wanted to know how much influence I can have on the policies that affect our clients in a system where the political activity of workers in non-profits has been limited. Also, I wanted to know

how to have the ability to make those changes without crossing the line that the federal government has set up to limit the activities of non-profit agencies.

Methodology

I conducted five interviews. The original intention was to interview four MSW Executive Directors in the area and one representative from a funding agency that monitors political activity to ensure the agency is following the internal revenue service code for 501(c)(3) organizations. I was able to interview three MSW Executive Directors and one Executive Director who has a background in political science and history. I was also able to interview a representative from a funding agency that coincidentally was an influential person in the Democratic Party in the area. This interview was chosen to see if there was a difference in the understanding of what constituted legal political activity between a funding agency and the agencies themselves.

Six MSW Executive Directors in the area were contacted and interviews were requested with an explanation of the purpose of the paper and that all answers would be confidential. Only the three MSW Executive Directors whom I have an existing relationship with returned my phone calls. The other three either someone else in the organization called me back, even though I was clear I needed to speak to the Executive Director directly, or simply did not return the calls. I then contacted the fourth interviewee who has a background in political science and history who I have a preexisting relationship with.

Each Executive Director interviewee was asked a series of questions including their educational background, the political involvement of the agency, their personal involvement in politics, role ambiguity and the impact that this activity had on the

organization. The representative from the funding agency was asked these questions based on her understanding of the area non-profits political involvement, the role ambiguity from her perspective and the impact it has on the agencies. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Limitations

One limitation was the inability to interview MSW Executive Directors. The original intention was to focus on MSWs. The resistance from the three MSW Executive Directors whom I don't have an existing relationship with demonstrated the power of reputation to me. Without knowing who I was, they didn't feel it was important for them to call me back. This is similar to an elected official. If they don't know who you are, they will not respond to you or they will have one of their staff respond to you. In a small community that prides itself on collaboration, the mere fact that I was not able to access these people in a three week time frame is a powerful example to how politics works in the city. If the person does not know you and you have nothing to offer in return to that person, they will not respond to you. The five interviews I was able to conduct were with five people I have worked with in the past and we have exchanged favors. I am valuable to them and they can cash in this favor in the future. This is why they agreed to speak with me. This is a clear demonstration of local politics and how it affects a non influential person.

Another limitation was the time constraints. If time had allowed, I would have been able to do more interviews and compare more results. Also, an interesting aspect would have been the difference in attitude of MSW Executive Directors and other

Executive Directors towards political activity. The data is based on a small number of respondents, which is a limiting factor.

Results

The responses from the Executive Directors varied greatly. The first respondent, an MSW, focused mainly on her struggle with keeping her board content on specific issues, keeping the providers of service (her employees) content and providing the services needed by the community. This was a balancing act that she needed to constantly maintain and some of the political issues divided the board and providers down the middle making the struggle to provide needed services to the community much more difficult. There were constantly decisions that she had to make that affected all three areas of the agency, each of which is just as important as the others. It also resulted in the limitation of the issues that could be worn visibly by her employees because of the controversy it would bring. Some of the issues were around abortion, the death penalty and many other controversial issues.

Her agency involvement with politics she referred to as educating, not lobbying. She has testified on many occasions around the issues that affect her clients and employees and will educate local officials as to whether or not a particular bill or line item is beneficial to her clients. She does not refer to her activity as lobbying, but as educating legislators on the issues, which she referred to as a non-partisan activity.

She also stated that she is engaged in personal political activity, on a limited basis. Some of her involvement is based on being able to contact the elected official and getting a response. They will only respond if they know who she is. She occasionally attends

fund raisers and makes monetary contributions on her personal time. She also contacts her legislators on the issues that are important to her.

This brought up the issue of role ambiguity and how to manage that. She stated that at fund raisers, she is introduced with just her name and no connection to the agency. However, people know she is the Executive Director of an agency and she does not leave that connection outside no matter how she introduces herself. She did state that sometimes the only place to reach a legislator is at a partisan event. In these cases she stated that she would show up only for the five minutes she needed to speak with the person and leave immediately afterwards. This reduced the role ambiguity. She was, however, careful not to participate in partisan activities during work time.

On the impact this had on the organization, she felt that it was essential to develop a relationship with legislators in order to educate them on issues. She felt that her involvement professionally and personally had an affect on policy, but being a part of an advocacy organization who could focus solely on the legislative issues was more essential and reduced and helped maintain role ambiguity.

The second respondent, an MSW with a doctorate in education, mainly focused the agency's involvement through advocacy organizations to prevent the agency from looking partisan. Most of the politics he engaged in were with local city officials, local legislators and people of influence in the funding providers of the agency. He very rarely testified, but did express his concerns to local officials and legislators.

His personal involvement included making donations to fund raisers for local politicians, but he did not attend the fund raisers. He, however, after being in the

community for many years did develop friendships with legislators before they were elected into office. After these people were elected, the friendship did not end.

This particular person has cultivated the agency he works for. His name is synonymous with the agency no matter what he does. This is where his role ambiguity comes into play. If he attends a fund raiser, it looks as though the agency is supporting that particular candidate. He also commented that a person can visit the agency, but cannot distribute materials or announce their candidacy on the steps of the organization. He tries to keep a distance between the organization and partisan politics.

His involvement in local politics has had an impact on the organization. The agency gets approximately 20% of its revenue from the city consisting of some of the funding that is most political in the city, Community Development Block Grant dollars which funds the management costs that many state and federal grants will not fund. Also, the close friendships he developed with the local politicians gives him a voice in the statewide legislature. The agency being well known gives it an advantage over others which is partially contributed to his politicking.

The third respondent, an MSW, had a much different view on the role of politics for his agency. He encourages his employees to get involved in politics and engages the agency in a variety of political activity. The agency has a legislative committee that develops a political agenda each year and actively works on specific issues. In addition, the agency holds a legislative breakfast each year focusing on a particular issue. The agency encourages its employees to attend lobby days at the state house to show support for the issues that affect their clients. The agency belongs to statewide and national organization, where he holds leadership positions, that focus on specific legislative issues

that affect the agency. He also, once per month, goes to Boston and speaks with legislators on the issues. He also goes to Washington, D.C. to speak with the legislators there at least once per year. The organization doesn't, however, spend more than 15% of its budget on these issues, keeping it in compliance with the IRS code. He does consider himself a lobbyist for the clients he serves.

His personal activity is also more intense than the other Executive Directors. He attends fund raisers and partisan meetings on a regular basis. He also works on campaigns for specific candidates holding signs, holding fund raisers and holding leadership positions. He is well known in the state as a political activist and takes pride in the impact this has had on the organization.

This Executive Director has made it his job to understand the fine line related to role ambiguity. He is aware that he can participate in partisan activity on his own time as often as he wishes. At partisan activities he is introduced solely by his name without reference to the agency he runs. He also has been at the agency for a long period of time and his name is synonymous with the agency. However, as long as he doesn't refer to himself this way, it is his own time. He simply manages this ambiguity and does not try to ignore it.

His involvement and reputation has had a significant impact on the agency. It has grown substantially and he has had to refuse contracts that have been offered to him. He has been able to provide more services and maintain quality and he has been able to successfully complete fund raisers to support the agency based on his reputation. He is also able to contact the legislators statewide and get an immediate response. He is able to

influence the legislators on issues because he is a key player in the system. He has learned how to play the game and get the services for his clients and maintain quality.

The fourth respondent, whose background is in political science, is also actively involved in politics though not as intensely as the third respondent. Her agency is service and advocacy oriented. The board every year develops a political agenda on specific issues and the staff members are actively involved in following the bills and following up with legislators who promised their support. They also belong to advocacy agencies who are more focused on legislative issues to maintain their non-partisan activity.

She had started out as a grass roots organizer who worked on a number of political campaigns. She still attends fund raisers and gives monetary donations. She also works on campaigns for candidates as well. However, her efforts are more focused on the local candidates as opposed to the statewide candidates.

She had a similar response to role ambiguity as well. She makes sure her personal activity does not cross over into agency time. She ensures that political campaigns are not performed at the agency and does not allow the agency to support a particular candidate. It's very similar the other respondents.

She also felt that her involvement had a positive impact on the agency. It has allowed for positive changes in policy that affects her clients and has allowed the agency to grow throughout the years. She felt having a relationship with local legislators provided a means to assist in policy changes that affected her clients.

The most interesting respondent was the one from the funding/monitoring agency. She had recognized the levels of involvement of different agencies. She mentioned that some agencies got involved locally which is the most difficult group to be accepted in

and others got involved statewide and others didn't get involved at all. Being active in the democratic party, she saw the involvement and the impact.

She didn't see role ambiguity to be a problem. The agency representatives were never introduced as an agency representative, simply with their name only. She stated that the people at the events were aware of the fact that the roles had to be separate and accepted this. It was on personal time and there was no question to that.

She commented that the more involved the Executive Director in politics, the greater the impact on the organization. She stated she was amazed that people didn't recognize the connection. The agencies whose directors were most involved grew the most within the past few years. She stated that in order to be competitive, you have to play the game. That means getting involved, developing a reputation and manipulating that relationship in order to get what your clients need. Those that are the most involved are able to make the biggest difference in the lives of their clients. Even if you don't agree with the system, you have to be a part of and learn how to be a major player if you want to make large scale change.

Discussion

Many different issues impact the involvement of Executive Directors in politics including the exposure they are willing to endure. The first respondent demonstrated this with her balancing the board, providers and client needs. She also mentioned that she takes into consideration whether or not another local organization is providing the needed service. If so, it makes it much easier to set up a referral process as opposed to taking a stand on an issue. Pawlak and Flynn (1990) support this stating that Executive Directors

many times are being pulled from many different directions when it comes to political involvement and must engage in difficult decision making every day.

As is evident from this effort, there also is no norm to political activity and people approach it from a very personal perspective. From the results of this study, the Executive Directors had very different involvement, professionally and personally, in the political process. All of the respondents contacted their legislators, gave monetary donations and advocated for their clients. However, only two actively participated in campaigns and developed legislative agendas within the agency each year that affected their clients.

Although all the respondents emphasized the importance of getting involved, only one makes it an essential function of his job. One other takes a very active role, but not as an essential function of her job. The other two are involved, but on a much smaller scale. One respondent commented that human service agencies are client focused and generally do not have the means monetarily to take such an active role. Two other agencies have found the means to do this. If there is a will there is a way. Domanski (1998) and Pawlak et al. (1990) found in their study as well that the more time and effort a particular activity takes, the less involvement there is from Executive Directors and CEOs. Each of the Executive Directors wrote letters and talked with elected officials, but as involvement got more time intensive such as attending public hearings, serving on committees and getting involved in campaigns, participation dropped.

The question remains in the impact that the activity has. Is it worth the time and energy? Does it have a significant impact on clients? The most interesting response was from the representative of the funding agency. She was clear in saying that those who get

involved are able to make the large scale change for their clients. She was amazed at the lack of activity of some of the Executive Directors and felt that these agencies would never be able to make the changes that are necessary to help the most amount of people. She commented also that the labor organizations have so much power in the state because they are unified and participate in the political process.

This last statement brings up another issue. It is likely that if all the human service agencies participated in the political system as a group and held leadership positions, they could be as strong as the labor unions in the state. The human service agencies, like one of the respondents commented, especially social workers have looked at politics as “dirty.” The social workers are working to make change without bringing politics and money into the picture. She stated until she worked for a human service agency, she despised the inactivity of social workers and couldn’t understand their apathy to politics. As another respondent stated, whether you agree with the system or not, it’s how change is made. In order to make the changes you have to get involved. Until we get past this moral stance against politics and the political process and start joining the fight, we can’t unify and become a strong force in the system of change.

Another impact the political activity of the leadership of the agency has is the growth of the organization. From the responses of the interviewees and the knowledge of their recent growth, the Executive Directors that are most involved have grown the most. The political involvement seems to be the means to agency growth. This also relates back to the personal goals of the Executive Directors. If the person is not looking to expand and is content with a small community based organization, then the activity is not as important. On the other hand, if the person is interested in large scale growth, the

person can have more of an impact on public policy the more he/she is involved. The impact one can have is directly related to the level of political activity one engages in. Thinking on such a small scale is what has inhibited the human service arena from becoming a political power able to make needed change.

There also was no defining difference between what the funding agency expected and what the Executive Directors did. The funding agency representative was actually surprised at the inactivity of many Executive Directors. This is opposite to my expectation. Although the human service providers think the line between allowable and unallowable political activity is rigid, it is not. As long as there is no partisan political activity in the agency, almost all the activity is allowable as long as the agency does not exceed the 15% limit.

Conclusion

The answer to my question I originally asked is clear. The level of involvement needed depends on the goal. If a CEO is trying to make a change that affects clients from all over the state, he/she has to get involved in statewide politics. The same goes for local change. That requires local political activity. Eventually, after getting involved locally and statewide, the reachable goal expands to nationwide policy changes. Most importantly, supported by the advice given in Pawlak et al. (1990), a CEO has to get involved at some level in order to make policy changes. We live in a participatory democracy, if one doesn't participate, he/she can't affect the system.

From this study I've also learned that we have to get over the idea that we are above the political process. Politics occurs within our workplace, within our communities and even within our families. This was demonstrated when I tried to get in

touch with some Executive Directors. I am not a power player in the community, so there was no need to call me back. In order to make any type of impact you have to learn who the power players are and how to get access to them. Eventually, some even strive to be a power player. Before you can do this, you have to get involved and figure out how to make change. Whether you agree with how change is made or not, without getting involved in the process, you can never have an impact on the system you are in.

This has significantly changed my attitude on political involvement. When I first started in human services four years ago, my supervisor had told me that under no circumstances were I to attend a partisan activity on work time or my own time because the agency could be affected by this. After doing this study, this is absolutely untrue. Now holding a leadership role in the agency, I would encourage my employees to get involved, on their own time, in politics. This is the only way that change is made.

It has also strengthened my personal interest in getting involved in politics. My goal is to make large scale change for many people. The only way to even attempt to do this is to develop a reputation. Developing a reputation, according to one respondent, is the ability to raise money for the candidate. This has the biggest impact in a society where the person with the most money usually wins solely based on the media coverage – we all know the impact the media has on voters, regardless of the issues, people vote for the person whose name they know. This, however, takes time and effort. I can't develop a reputation and become a power player without starting locally. This is ultimately where this study has taken me. I've now contacted my local democratic committee chair. A huge step for someone who hated politics a year ago.

Reference List

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