



Strengthening the Ties

How Relationships Drive Legislative Results in Washington State

By Katherine House

A few years ago, Kris Johnson, president of the Association of Washington Business (AWB), began to envision an alliance that would bring local chambers and AWB closer together while furthering shared and individual chambers' missions. The key would be finding a passionate champion.

Someone well-connected with Washington chamber executives. Someone familiar with the state's business climate. Someone trusted to articulate AWB's vision. He didn't search long. He made one call to Rich Hadley, CCE, president emeritus of Greater Spokane Incorporated and life member of ACCE, and the very person who launched Johnson's chamber career. And the result of that call? Hadley now spends several days at a time on the road, traveling interstates and rural routes to recruit members of AWB's Grassroots Alliance.

The Alliance is a network of chambers organized and guided by AWB that support a shared set of legislative and economic development goals. In short, says Johnson, AWB is recruiting "an army of advocates" to articulate the needs of businesses at the state capitol. Those advocates come in the form of chamber executives, as well as chamber members. In turn, local chambers get a more powerful platform for raising awareness of and lobbying issues, up-to-date information about legislative action in Olympia, and a streamlined way to disseminate content to members.

Johnson set a goal of drafting 25 members of the Alliance in its first year, 2015. Hadley exceeded expectations by signing on nearly 50. The acceptance rate is about 95 percent, which Hadley considers "pretty good."

"What makes this work," says Johnson, "is the deep, personal connection" he and Hadley enjoy and "the phenomenal trust we have in each other and what we are trying to achieve."

Careers Intertwined

In 1997, Rich Hadley headed the Spokane Regional Chamber of Commerce before it merged with an economic development group to become Greater Spokane Inc. At the time, he hired Johnson as manager of public affairs. After five years, Johnson moved on to become president and CEO of the Tri-City (Wash.) Regional Chamber. Over time, Hadley the boss became Hadley the friend and colleague. As chamber leaders, both men served together on the AWB board.

No matter where Johnson worked, Hadley remained his mentor. After five years at the Tri-City Chamber, Johnson was recruited to be president and CEO of the Saint Paul Area Chamber of Commerce with the support and encouragement of Hadley. It was a job Hadley knew well; he had held the position before moving west to Spokane.

Johnson got the job. During his tenure, St. Paul played host to the 2008 Republican National Convention. It wouldn't be long, though, before the friends would move in the same circles again. In 2010, Johnson moved to Olympia to become AWB's vice president of operations.

2014 turned out to be a pivotal year in both men's careers. In January, Johnson became AWB's president. Hadley retired from GSI that June.

When AWB decided to move forward with building the Alliance, Johnson reached out to Hadley. "Rich is in the unique position of knowing the needs and wants and pressures of local chambers, as well as the state chamber," explains Johnson.

During their time together on the AWB board, Johnson and Hadley shared the same vision. "Rich and I both felt as local chamber heads that there was so much more that AWB could be doing with us and for us," Johnson explains.

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“Rich, in my opinion, was the perfect person [for this job],” says Lori Mattson, president and CEO of the Tri-City Regional Chamber in Kennewick, Wash. “He already had relationships with chamber executives, and he already had a relationship with Kris. He’s well respected, knew the state and the players. And he knows what it’s like to do what we do.” Mattson knows Johnson well; he hired her as membership director in Kennewick.

“Advocacy has always been an area of passion” for Hadley, says Betty Capestany, president and CEO of the Bellevue Chamber of Commerce. That passion is contagious, helping Hadley to get others engaged. “In this arena, it can be hard to get [others] interested unless there is a problem at their doorstep,” she adds. Capestany is also a member of the AWB board.

For his part, Hadley was surprised when Johnson asked him to promote the Alliance. Once he had permission from his “boss,” wife Rita, he was happy to help. “When Kris worked for us [in Spokane], he did a great job,” says Hadley. “He was always so well organized and smart and a great representative—and he still is.”

Making the Alliance Work

To recruit members, Hadley and his wife go on the road for several days at a time. His meetings are a homecoming, of sorts, since Hadley knows most of the people he meets with. During discussions, Hadley reviews the Alliance’s value proposition, which defines the roles of both AWB and chambers. “AWB didn’t ask chambers to invest dollars,” says Hadley. “Instead they asked them to pay attention and pay time and contribute energy.”

Hadley’s Alliance work goes beyond recruiting. He can sympathize with chamber executives’ challenges and happily connects them with peers who have faced similar situations. His counsel on any chamber matter is always appreciated.

Before the 2015 legislative session, AWB used an online survey to discover the topics most important to chamber executives, says Jason Hagey, director of communications. Executives selected three topics from a list of 10 deemed essential to growing the economy and creating jobs.

The top vote-getters – minimum wage, education and workforce training, transportation and infrastructure – became the issues the Alliance focused on during the 2015 session. Finding common ground was essential. “The further away you get from the things you have in common, the more splintered you become,” says Hadley. Nothing about the Alliance prevents any of its members or AWB from lobbying issues deemed important to one chamber.

The Alliance plays a key role in helping AWB find people who can speak convincingly about issues facing businesses in the state. Facts and figures only go so far in trying to explain a position, says Johnson. “At the end of the day, legislators will remember a really good anecdote or story that came from a real constituent,” he says. Through the Alliance, local chambers are helping “bring real and authentic voices” to the conversation, he says.

That means more than coming to Olympia to testify, says Hagey, although some chamber executives and business owners have done just that through involvement with the Alliance. It means having a network of people that both AWB and Alliance players can refer reporters to, he explains. It’s easy for him to find someone on staff to discuss how legislation affects businesses; it’s more meaningful for reporters to hear it directly from a business owner.

AWB’s Alliance task list includes providing pre-written tweets for chamber executives, as well as graphics and posts that can be used on Facebook. This information allows chambers to update members about proposed legislation and mobilize them to contact legislators. “That is a huge benefit to us,” says Mattson. “We’re generalists. We don’t have the staff specialists that AWB does.”

AWB sends weekly emails to chambers summarizing what is happening in Olympia and holds weekly conference calls while the legislature is in session. AWB also helps get chamber executives and their members on the docket to testify and reviews talking points with speakers in advance. Last fall, AWB held a legislative summit for Alliance members prior to a Washington Chamber of Commerce Executives meeting to review the partnership.

A Successful Beginning

With the help of lobbying by AWB and local chambers, a comprehensive \$16 billion transportation package was approved by the legislature last year. Capestany says “the more people are connected and involved,” the better for “getting legislation passed that favors a strong business climate.” Mattson says her chamber “really worked the transportation issue” last year, but “if the Alliance had not been in place, I don’t know if we would have been so active.”

Capestany, whose chamber has a registered lobbyist on staff and is part of the East King County Chambers of Commerce Legislative Coalition, encourages other chambers to get involved. “From our perspective, advocacy is one of the most important things we do for the business community.”

The Alliance offers other benefits. “It validates [chambers’] role as community leaders,” says Johnson. Mattson couldn’t agree more. “It lends credibility to your organization and elevates the stature of your chamber.”

Johnson is both “humbled and excited” about the success and future of the Alliance. “It’s not every day that unique partnerships get built that are successful,” he says. Despite his admiration for Hadley, he concedes that his mentor will likely work himself out of a job one day. As the Alliance grows, Hadley’s job will ultimately need to be handled out of Olympia.

That’s just fine with Hadley. What’s on his list of goals when that day arrives?

“Improving my golf game,” he says.



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