

How to Gain Prominence and Influence in Standards Organizations

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Abstract

This document provides simple guidelines that can make it easier for you to gain prominence and influence in most standards organizations.

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1. Introduction

This document contains simple guidelines that can help you to gain prominence and influence in most standards, and many other human, organizations. It takes only normal communications and technical skills and moderate effort to follow these guidelines.

2. Human Organizations

All organizations composed of human beings give the appearance to newcomers of having an inner clique that runs things. This happens whether there is a semi-permanent cohesive inside group that actually tries to keep all power in its own hands or those in positions of power are genuinely trying to be open and willing to share and there is a system for their regular replacement. It is just the nature of human society. It always takes time and effort to get to know new people. [Carnegie]

All organizations have procedures. It always takes time and effort to learn how things are done in an organization. In an organization of any size, those who happen to be in positions of authority can't spend equal time talking with everyone about every issue in the organization. Their positions mean they will necessarily be in many conversations with each other and fewer conversations with the average member. And there are some types of information that should normally be kept confidential, at least until verified, and sometimes even then. Examples are charges of ethical or other violations against individuals.

But, despite all this, following some simple guidelines can greatly accelerate the rate at which you will become favorably known in an organization. Favorable prominence can increase your chance of being selected for positions such as editorship of documents, secretary or clerk of a group (so you get to produce the record of what *actually* happened), or possibly even some level of chair or deputy chair position.

3. Eighty Percent of Success is Showing Up

It is the simplest thing! If you are absent, how can you have much prominence or influence?

This applies to all venues, email/messaging, telephone/video conference, and especially in-person or face-to-face meetings. You do not need 100% attendance, but your absences should be rare. If possible, only miss less important events.

Attendance is obviously most important at meetings of the specific body in which you are interested. But you should also watch for higher-level or lower-level meetings that are open. Many standards groups have a multi-level structure. As well as attending the group you are interested in, if there are open meetings of various group chairs or the like, attending those can be a fast track, even if you only get to observe and be noticed. And if there are sub-groups of the group you are most interested in, consider attending them also to become better known more quickly. These meetings may be before the beginning or after the end of the regular member meetings, so, if you are really serious, you should be prepared to arrive early and leave late.

4. Sit Up Front

If a meeting is very small, say less than 20 people, it does not make much difference. But for meetings of any size, especially when starting with an organization, sit up front. Do not be afraid of the first row even if it is empty, although the second and sometimes even the third are not too bad. Show up early if you need to, but this is usually not necessary, as most people are extraordinarily reluctant to put themselves in an exposed place like the front row.

After you have some experience, you may decide to sit with some group that sits together. But, in larger meetings, the prominent people generally sit either near the front, or way at the back. (Being in the back, at least in large rooms, may mean you can wander around and talk to people without disrupting things.)

5. Break Bread

All meetings of any length include refreshment and meals. Otherwise the attendees would starve.

If there is a group catered meal, try sitting with different groups or factions to get an idea of the different viewpoints in the organization. Or try to sit at a table and eat with people who have some seniority and experience in the organization, if they seem receptive.

Usually, for multi-day meetings, there is at least one big social event where the attendees can get together. From small meetings (attendance under 100) and medium size (attendance under 500 or so) meetings, it is common for people to go to the social event. Typically some alcohol is available, people are more relaxed and informal. These are good events at which to approach high-level

officials to exchange a pleasant word or two, or even make a small request. But do not expect to engage in detailed technical discussions, although this sometimes happens.

Social events are commonly at noisy locations. Sometimes, as organizations get larger, social events get so large and congested that many of the most prominent people schedule informal meetings opposite them. You will have to see how it works in your organization.

But there will also be plenty of informal lunch, dinner, and maybe breakfast groups (unless they are all catered) and other get-togethers. At some standards meetings, you can more or less invite yourself along to such meal groups, unless they are a small confidential group or a group of employees of a particular company, or the like. Usually people will warn you if the group plans to spend much of the meal discussing some particular issue, and you can then decide if you want to go with them.

6. Develop Friends and Mentors

It is hard to get things done and learn what is going on entirely by yourself. If you can, find a few people with more experience that you can go to with questions.

Introduce yourself to people and be friendly. But do not necessarily link up with the first people you meet. You want people who are knowledgeable and well-regarded within the organization.

If you follow the advice in section 7 below, you should have plenty of opportunity to meet experienced people in an organization.

7. Be Helpful

Within reason, volunteer to do some of the drudgery for which you are competent, such as taking notes during meetings, helping someone else draft a proposal, or volunteering to re-write part of a draft for clarity and consistency.

This sort of thing will get you noticed and put some people in your debt, at least in a minor way. But be careful not to volunteer for more than you can actually do. Failing to follow through will damage your reputation. If you do get over committed, seek help as soon as you realize it. The worst thing is to fail to meet your promises and not let anyone know about it until it is too late for them to recover.

8. Learn The Traditions and Rules

It is quite important to know the traditions of an organization, how things get done, what rules are ignored, how rules are interpreted, and what rules are rigorously enforced.

While traditions are more important, it cannot hurt to also know the official rules and procedures. The probability that low level groups in the organization actually operate according to the officially adopted rules and procedures in detail is quite low, unless the organization has very informal rules.

Do not object to procedure just for the sake of objecting. If you repeatedly invoke little known and rarely used official rules in small matters, it is a sure way to make people assume that what you have to say is silly or obstructionist, until proven otherwise. If you invoke the official rules so as to override tradition in an important matter, be aware that you are playing with a weapon of mass destruction. You may or may not accomplish your immediate goal, but the blowback will almost certainly damage your future efforts in that organization.

While it is always the path of least resistance to follow tradition, knowing the official rules makes you aware of when they could be invoked against you. This may enable you to adopt a path that is reasonably congruent with both the traditions and the rules, maximizing your chances of success.

9. Acronyms and Special Terms

Essentially all technical efforts wallow in acronyms and special "terms of art". It sometimes seems as if no effort or sub-effort is really rolling until it has come up with several non-obvious terms to confuse those who have not been involved for a while. Nor are acronyms constant. Especially in the early part of a standards effort, when ideas are flopping around, acronyms and special terms frequently change, causing further confusion of those not in the most active part of the group.

In fact, if you read an explanation of some deep technical matter written so anyone can understand it, you can be virtually certain that it is not how experts in the field communicate with each other, verbally or in writing. This is true of all fields. Read something about engineering big "air vents" and "water pipes"? Experts use "plenum" and "penstock".

It's a bad strategy to get lost in acronyms you do not know, so you cannot understand what people are talking about and may make a fool of yourself if you guess wrong. The best thing is to find out the meaning of and learn the acronyms in advance. Failing that, ask about acronyms or strange terms as soon as you can, preferably the first time you encounter them. Making a written note of their meaning could not hurt. Usually there will be others who also wanted to ask but were afraid to and will be grateful that you took the initiative.

10. Pick Your Points

Think a bit about the impression you make on people.

If you insist on speaking to every issue, even if you don't have any really strong points, you will get a reputation as a blowhard who doesn't add much and just slows things down. If you only speak occasionally, but have solid points to make when you do, people will pay much more attention to your occasional speeches.

Similarly, if you quibble about everything, you will use up good will you have acquired and may be viewed as an obstructionist who causes needless delay. If an organization is doing or developing something complex, all the decisions are not going to go the way you want. Consider the points where you could try to get your way, figure out how important they are to you, how strong your arguments would be, and how much opposition you are likely to encounter. Keep in mind that your arguments will usually seem more impressive to you than they do to others. Based on this, you can make a reasoned choice of where to really put up a fight and possibly recruit allies or call in favors.

This is not to say that you should ignore minor issues and never speak up about them if you have new information or opinions to contribute. Just do not invest a lot of effort in fighting an issue or making a point unless it is important to you and you judge that you have a reasonable chance of succeeding.

11. Technical and Communications Skill

You may be surprised that I have said very little about technical and communication skills, although in the Introduction above it was assumed that you had normal skills in these areas. You do need to understand the technical aspects of what is going on so that you cannot be easily bamboozled.

If you are very strong technically and can make substantial contributions, you can be helpful, if you can contribute in a way that does not offend too many people. But, especially in a large technical standards body, not everyone can be a strong technical contributor.

If you have strong verbal and written communications skills, this can also be helpful. But if you are not fluent in the dominant language of the organization, you will be at a disadvantage. While the organization should make some attempt to be approachable by those for whom its dominant language is a second language, the best thing to do is to put in the time and effort to become fluent. [Farber] As a stopgap, you can team up with someone with whom you communicate well and who is fluent in the standards organization language. They can speak for you in meetings, if necessary, and co-author written contributions with you.

If you are the rare genius with superb technical, communication, and interpersonal skills, you are wasting your time reading this and might be able to get away with doing exactly the opposite of some of its recommendations. But I would not count on it.

12. Do Not Try Too Hard

Lastly, give yourself a bit of time to get settled into an organization. Then, be reasonably assertive, but do not be too pushy unless an issue is so important you are willing to risk the reputation you have built up. And try to never lose your temper.

Unless you are a genius at inter-personal relations, you will not gain substantial prominence and influence in a standards organization overnight. These things take time and patience.

13. Security Considerations

This RFC raises no new security issues.

14. Informative References

[Carnegie] "How To Win Friends And Influence People", Dale Carnegie, 1990, ISBN 0671723650.

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