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“NREN - And The Interaction With The Political Level”

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National Education and Research Networks (NREN) are prevalingly not-for-profit organizations, parts of universities or government agencies. Their financial resources come significantly, prevalingly or exclusively from the state budget. Their resources, authority and results are strongly influence by their interaction with the political level. Thus the quality and effectiveness of this communication is of large importance to NRENs. In order to answer to this need thee issues should be addressed: what is the reason fro communication with political level, what are the key values of the NREN and how to communicate.

1. Why communicating with the political level ?

Like any activity, communication with the political level should fulfill a concrete and specific need of a NREN in order to be effective (and efficient). Thus the first question is: “Why does a NREN need to communicate to the political level?”

The answer is very simple: because NREN needs something. Basically here are four reasons, four needs: money, power, advertising and prevention and any combination of these elements.

Money or some other resource like people or communication infrastructure are one of the most common reasons to go and talk to the political level. Money for infrastructure and services development as well as fro daily operations often comes from the budget which is controlled from the political level. The right to hire more employees is either coupled with some sort of approval or sufficient financial resources, both being in the domain of political level.

The second reason for communication is power: some sort of authorization to represent national needs or standpoints, to use or establish new infrastructure in a et legally unregulated way, or to impose standards or rules of a kind.

The third thing political level could provide is publicity and marketing, getting partners and users to know about NRENs activities, plans, importance and authority.

In the case that none of the aforementioned reasons exist and NREN can live and develop without any help from the political level, it is highly likely that political level might get in a way of NREN and its projects. In order to prevent this, to properly inform and to preempt gossips and rumors NREN might need to talk to the political level well in advance.

2. The (real) value of NREN

Majority of communication with the political level is a kind of negotiation. As a preparation for the negotiation process NREN needs to make inventory of its own benefits, advantages and assets.

However, they depend on the role of a specific NREN in a country.

If NREN is considered to be (merely) a provider, its job is to provide infrastructure and services upon users request. In that case, it is better to let those users to talk to the political level in name of NREN.

However, if NREN is considered to be a leader in deployment and application of ICT, infrastructure establishment and market and demand creation, it has many assets.

For one, NREN is often the only or mayor national institution with in-depth technological knowledge.

Throughout the years of establishing nation wide communication infrastructure and services, raising funds, promoting technology and educating and supporting users, a NREN has typically gathered significant and valuable organizational experience.

Often overseen or underestimated asset is the user community. In particular its R&D power and political influence. In addition, the academic community educates future “players” professionals in a variety of fields who will enter their professional life used to leverage and implement IT.

Finally, every new technology needs to be tested. Laboratory tests, or tests on limited, selected group of users aren’t sufficient for fast pace, large-scale projects. NRENs users community is professionally and IT competent, demanding while rarely mission critical. Thus is is the ideal test bed.

3. How to communicate

The communication consists of the content, the method and the communicator. Therefore the questions: what to say, how to say it and who should speak need to be answered.

1.1 What to say

There are only THREE possible reasons to talk to the political level, regarding NREN and its activities.

One reason is to inform them what is NREN going to do. This is to keep them informed and in the feeling that they are “in”, not outside of the stream of events. The other reason is to prevent rumors, misinterpretations or diversions. To give them your view and your facts. In order to do that efficiently, have all necessary info (core and supplementary) and forms of communication prepared in advance, before initiating communication.

The second reason would be to ask for the political level approval of or consent to your future actions. In order to get the approval, the planned activities need to be presented in simple, clear and easily understandable way. In particular, benefits, drawbacks and caveats need to be addressed. It is very important to take care not to get in the situation where something vital for the political level has been hidden or “invisible” from them, deliberately or inadvertently.

The third reason to talk to the political level is to ask them to choose the course of action. In this case only options need to be presented (not questions or problems). Each option’s benefits, drawbacks and caveats need to be presented. In addition, it is utmost important to identify YOUR favorite option and the reasons.

1.2 How to say

First, do your homework. Gather intelligence information well ahead: who is in charge of what, who is the most influential, (personal) interests, former voting, affiliations, public statement, campaign promises.

Deliver what you have to say orally, either live or over the phone. Use the power of spoken word and dialogue to initiate, inspire and capture attention. To prepare the field for next action, written document exchange, proposal submission.

Always carry a one page document with you describing what you have to say. In order to leave it as a reminder of what has been said and what will be or needs to be done. Regardless how satisfying answers you get or how big promises you receive, always leave a one-page document that would remind the correspondent of what you’ve been talking about and what is it that you need.

Have a full proposal ready, at hand. To be sent (only) at request. If you leave a conversation and THEN start working on full proposal/report, the achieved effect will be dissolved in time. Do not send these voluminous documents unless you are asked to. No one would read them and they would create a perception of you as a heavy, boring partner.

Be specific. Tell them (politely but) exactly what to do. General statements like “support”, “promotion”, “financing”, “according to your abilities”, would leave your correspondent without the idea about the specific action that he or she should take NOW.

Instead, politely tell them that you need “a budget increase in the amount of XYZ to be proposed to the committee ABC by DD.MM.YYYY”. Or something similar.

1.3 Who should speak

The easiest, fastest way of sending message is to do it yourself. It also avoids all noises in communication channel that would otherwise accumulate and distort the message.

However, this method sometimes is not available (you cannot reach the person or group) and often it turns out to be a very long process.

The alternative is to have someone else speak in your name: directly or indirectly, deliberately or spontaneously.

The most useful spokespeople are your allies. Those are people who will advocate your case because they believe it will help them achieve THEIR goals. Your allies might come from your level: academic organizations, similar agencies/institutions, vendors, etc. Allies might also come from your correspondents level: other politicians, groups, lobbyists, etc.

Another group that could convey your message are your users. They could ask for services, explain strategies and benefits, publicize and educate.

You could never sound credible enough whether explaining how successful you were so far, or how important your proposal is. But this comes as no problem to outsiders or foreigners who already are present in your environment or whom you could bring in a visit. They could be very credible speaking about your achievements. The recipient of (your) message would actually be very pleased to hear the praising of your work or ideas/proposals and become attached to them as being their own.

Often people are tempted to use the public and media to communicate with political level. This is potentially very dangerous and can backfire, regardless whether the public is used to criticize political level or to state a demand. This communication channel should be avoided.

4. Conclusions

It is not possible to give a final conclusion on this topic. Several practical ideas and advices will be given instead.

1.4 Communicate when you do NOT need them

The underlying problem is that (professional) politicians usually have to wide area to cover, so naturally the depth in individual domain is low. This reduces their awareness of key issues in IT domain and their alertness.

In addition, IT being a buzzword, they are exposed to relatively high volume of irrelevant information.

They lack knowledge and time to separate important from noise and they lack knowledge to understand implications or construct solutions.

Thus, it is the job of NREN to provide them with very low volume stream of highly relevant information

as well as educate them (usually in a informal way) to the necessary level.

1.5 Rosentraub's "positive budgeting"

Another, practical technique is that whenever politicians, or opponents, attack you by anciently old weapon: "but, how much would it cost?!",

try using prof. Rosentraub's (Mark Rosentraub, dean of Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs at the Cleveland State University) work as a reference and tell them how much would it actually return rather than cost. You could also tell them or ask them: "how much would it cost if your proposal would NOT be realized."

1.6 Keep them happy

The key issue is that the "political level" has its own plans, priorities, strategies, tactics and PROBLEMS.

Coming to them with more problems and/or expecting from THEM to find solutions and become engaged is a hopeless attempt.

Instead, good intelligence is required to supply us with ample information on every individual's and group's interests and aims, identifying common points with our interests and then elaborating a feasible (and SIMPLE) solution.

If a solution of our problem is, or looks like, the solution for a problem of the political level,

there is a high probability of understanding of our proposal, its acceptance and back-up from the political level.

1.7 Get political

The fact is that too few professionals (in any field) get engaged in politics, while professional politicians lack "domain" knowledge.

Experienced professionals with managerial skills and social influence should, indeed, get engaged in politics, as well.

On the other hand, who else could advocate, promote and push NREN interests better ?