

Reflections on Speaking Freely

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There are many times when I have refused to use my voice to make a difference within the fraternal community. I have been scared of being the center of attention, of not being thoughtful or articulate enough, and of what others would think of me for challenging the status quo. There have been other times when I've taken for granted my ability to use my voice (and the privileges afforded to me because of the color of my skin, my able body, my socio-economic status, my education level, and my affiliation). I have been, at times, unaffected, disinterested, and lazy.

However, during the 2015 Annual Meeting of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, I finally chose to use my voice for a cause I thought worthy. I had reached my tipping point. Even though I was concerned about the potential consequences, I saw a solution with broad applications to a deeply divisive issue. I went for it with support from an amazing group of colleagues. As a result, I learned a few lessons I hope to share with you.

For those who are unaware, I will briefly recount what transpired last December. It is no secret a faction of individuals became frustrated late last year when several organizations publically supported the Safe and Fair Campus Acts. By my interpretation, the overarching criticism of these pieces of legislation was they did not focus on the victim and did not adequately provide solutions to current interpretations of Title IX and the student conduct processes at colleges/universities. After reviewing the social media posts and having offline conversations with many colleagues, I identified a broader issue: the individuals who were expressing anger, real anger, did not feel heard by organizations for which they had a deep and abiding love. It was my observation they felt organizations were speaking on their behalf and representing beliefs that were divergent from their own personal beliefs and, in some cases, what they felt are the espoused beliefs of said organizations. I believe if this issue had not become the tipping point, it could easily have been another in the future. So, I joined the fight. I brought to the table a symbolic resolution addressing the common ground between our group and the National Panhellenic Conference. I identified our concerns and proposed a solution for seeking feedback on future legislative agendas. This symbolic resolution was presented during the NPC Forum at the Annual Meeting.

As you prepare to use your own voice to make a difference, consider the following lessons I learned throughout this situation:

1. **Consider the political implications.** As a deliberative person, I aim to consider all obstacles I may face prior to taking action. For some, this can cause paralysis by analysis; for me, it's all part of the process. Think of it like a game of chess. When I began formulating my plan to speak up, I first ensured I had the support of the organization helping me pay my bills. Like others I worked with, I also weighed how swimming against the current would affect various volunteer roles I have. A previous supervisor of mine used to ask me: "Is this the hill you want to die on?" In this case, I decided yes, a thousand times yes.
2. **Amass an army.** I knew others shared my concerns; I just had to find them. Unbeknownst to me, they had already started to come together. Using this pre-established network, I shared my plan and began to bring others on board. They offered feedback and improved our proposal. My plan became a piece of *our* plan. Sure, one person can make a difference, but it certainly doesn't hurt to have others supporting your message especially if it ever comes to a vote. Because of our

“army,” the passion in the room was palpable the moment we began delivering our message, which was just the spark we needed!

3. **Prepare to best your opponent.** This is where I failed. I set us down the path of crafting our message in the form of a symbolic resolution without realizing this wouldn't resonate with the organization. They no longer used resolutions to communicate their procedures and best practices. Further, I failed to recognize how the organization sees itself at a basic philosophical level. Using observation and other cultural cues, I assumed they operated a certain way when in reality they operate in a subtly different manner, thus rendering our message irrelevant at worst and misplaced at best.

Rather than consider the structure of the organization I was challenging, I chose a route that would make a statement. And, it did. Unfortunately, this ended up being a dead end. Before choosing a format for your message, determine if you are directing your comments to the correct decision makers and if your format will be recognized as valid. This will take thorough investigation on your part.

4. **Construct your message.** When constructing your message, it is important to not just share your concerns and criticism. You must first establish common ground and credibility. Consider why this entity should listen to you and what beliefs you have in common. After that critical piece, you can then share the philosophical divergences leading to the problem, as well as suggestions for righting the course. If you retain nothing I've written, retain this: you cannot just complain. You must offer a solution to be taken seriously.
5. **Pause and reflect.** As you complete your message, you must pause and remember you are not just preparing to best your opponent. You are hoping to persuade them. Spend time reviewing your message from their perspective. How will it be received? Have you inadvertently suggested something that's taboo and would prevent someone from understanding your point?

You also must reflect on the potential unintended side effects of your message and its format. We live in a small world. In my recent situation, I experienced two unintended side effects. As it turned out, someone I worked with closely in the past and looked up to was appointed to serve the organization I was challenging. While I don't regret what was brought to their attention, I do regret I didn't take the time to speak with her in advance. Mea culpa. Secondly, I received a lot of attention (whether positive or negative is irrelevant), which distracted from my purpose in attending the Annual Meeting. As a focused individual, this did not sit well with me.

Therefore, before moving on with your plan, ask yourself – what have I (or we) overlooked?

6. **Develop a follow-up plan with action items before you lose momentum.** The short-term goal of our plan was met. Support for a certain bill was rescinded before we even had the chance to implement the entire plan. However, there is still work to be done. The goal of providing an accessible avenue for more collegiate and alumnae voices to be heard has not yet come to fruition.

In the aftermath of the Annual Meeting, I reached out to the women in NPC. I specifically spoke with the person mentioned above I feel I let down. While our relationship will never be the same, it is on the mend. I had actually hoped to write this article with her. Unfortunately, our schedules did not allow for

the collaboration. Additionally, we received an official response to the resolution from NPC's leadership. I'm grateful for their response as it has provided invaluable guidance for how we can move forward.

Final Words of Advice: You will not be able to calculate every potential consequence prior to speaking out. Further, there will be times when you cannot plan ahead and must seize the moment when it presents itself. Don't let a fear of standing out stop you from speaking up. Use your voice. Free (responsible!) speech is an integral part of a democratic society, but it does come at a price. Be willing to pay the price when it counts.

Disclaimer: Please consider how my biases and my privilege play into the advice I am imparting as you consider your own plans to speak out. Further, understand this advice is given in the context of speaking out within the fraternal community. While these reflections have applications outside of this specific context, it would be unwise to take this advice on its face without considering additional factors.