

Local Network Support: Principles and Practices

A Guide for State Network Leaders

It's the State Network's Main Role

As stated in the State Network Operating Model, the main focus of a State Network is to support the success of the local networks in the state. Whereas this is a responsibility then that all state leaders must commit to, the State Liaison in particular is charged with the following responsibilities:

- Oversees Local Network compliance, including development of an annual plan and budget, and provides support where needed
- Acts as the first contact to resolve local operating issues or conflicts
- Coaches Local Network leaders to improve network performance

This Guide offers some commonsense principles and tips for carrying out this role.

It's All About Trust

Taking steps to *proactively* build a positive, trusting relationship between state and local network leaders will provide a solid foundation for handling challenging situations when they arise. Trust is perhaps the most critical factor in the state leader's ability to productively support and guide the local network. But trust must be earned – repeatedly – and is the result of several building blocks in a relationship:

Clarity and Consistency. Starting with an effective orientation, the focus, roles and responsibilities of state leaders must be clear. It should be no surprise that the State Liaison, for instance, is checking in regularly with Local Network Presidents and offering support to ensure local networks can meet operating standards. Procedures and protocols should also be clear *and consistently applied*, such as who local network leaders should contact when there is question or issue, who at the state level will get involved if an issue escalates, etc.

Communication. Open, honest, regular communication not only provides the best opportunity to identify an issue early but lays the foundation for trust in working together to resolve it. Establishing a comfort level with each other and a history of positive interaction will go a long way in the ability of state leaders to intervene productively and help resolve an issue.

A Collaborative Approach. In all interaction with local network leaders the message of collaboration should be clear. Despite the challenges that will arise, there should be no doubt from the local leader's point of view that state leaders:

- want local leaders to succeed
- believe that local leaders are acting with good intentions
- believe that leadership in Women's Council is an opportunity for personal and professional development
- understand that this is a learning environment – a laboratory to practice and grow leadership skill

The Big Picture. Keep reminding local leaders that *as leaders* they are instruments to serve a bigger purpose conveyed in the Women's Council mission – to advance their members' success as business leaders. This is 'what it's about'!

The State as a Resource. -State leaders should always be in ‘support’ mode when interacting with local network leaders, and should be a resource for best practices, ideas that have worked for other local networks, Women’s Council samples and tools available, etc. When state leaders attend national meetings, they should be on the lookout for what is working around the country to share with their local network leaders.

Building Trust: When and How?

Top Tips

- Start early and be present:
 - Attend local planning retreats if possible and help get the network off on the right foot
 - Set expectations at the leadership orientation regarding the local network support role of the State Network and State Liaison
 - Be present at local events and governing board meetings as much as feasible during the year

- Communication:
 - Balance the focus of your communication in favor of what the local network/leader is doing right and the positive impact they are having as opposed to what they are doing wrong or where they are out of compliance.
 - Establish a regular schedule of calls/communications (sit in on the State Presidents calls with the Local Presidents) to discuss needs, issues and to offer support
 - Reach out and congratulate presidents-elect as soon as they are elected.
 - Listen reflectively and demonstrate empathy – start with the assumption that all leaders want to succeed and do what is best for membership and the Council.

- Leadership:
 - Make it a learning experience that has value personally and professionally in the local leader’s journey as a leader.
 - Be cognizant of modeling effective leadership and a leadership team within the State Network.

There’s Trouble: Now What?

It’s inevitable. When working with people, conflict will emerge. Sometimes disagreements are simply over ideas or how to do something. Sometimes they are rooted in different styles, personalities, experience or expectations. These can be tougher to decipher and handle. In the end, ‘conflict’ in and of itself is not negative – after all, our ‘differences’ can bring about better ideas, solutions or decisions. It is the way we manage conflict that can result in an untenable situation and the need to call in others.

Here are some basic steps* to managing conflict that a state leader can follow:

STEP 1	<p><i>Identify the issue or problem and restate it, if necessary</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get at the root cause of the issue (beneath the ‘behavior’ you see) • Depersonalize: separate the people and the personalities from the problem (be hard on the problem and soft on the people!) • Separate the relationship the parties have from the problem (work on the problem and work to save the relationship) • Stick to the facts that all can agree to
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restate the problem or the issue to depersonalize it and to state it in a way that can be addressed productively and positively • In assessing the situation, use open, non-threatening questions (see tips below)
STEP 2	<p><i>Set the issue or problem in context</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress the desired outcome of resolving the problem - the positive result that can be achieved • Remind the individuals of the goal or of their roles as leaders, as appropriate, and the need to focus on what is best for the network and for the members
STEP 3	<p><i>Evoke accepted guidelines</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As appropriate, remind the individuals of agreed upon guidelines that could be used as guidance in addressing the issue (such as network bylaws, network model standards from Women's Council, brand guidelines, laws and regulations governing the network as a non-profit organization, the network budget, the network business plan, etc.)
STEP 4	<p><i>Focus on 'interests' and not 'positions' of the parties</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and understand points of view and what is important to the individuals; try to get beyond or underneath any 'stances or positions' they may take too early in the process) • Acknowledge emotions, feelings and perceptions as legitimate, but do not dwell on them or let them control the discussion
STEP 5	<p><i>Agree to objective criteria to evaluate the best solution</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to find some commonality regarding what is most important to the individuals in the ultimate solution, and then use this list as a way to build solutions that satisfy the criteria <i>and</i> evaluate which solutions might work best • You can offer some criteria from an organizational perspective. Examples include: 'the brand of Women's Council is not adversely impacted' or 'members' view of leadership or volunteerism in the network remains positive'.
STEP 6	<p><i>Develop solutions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure all involved have all the facts and information they need to make the best decision • Focus on solutions that satisfy mutual interests of the parties • Focus on the problem as if all parties were 'sitting on the same side of the table, trying to solve something' • Identify the best solution
STEP 7	<p><i>Moving forward</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree on a plan to move forward, including accountability for certain steps/ actions, a timeline and follow-up conversation(s)

*adapted from Getting to Yes, Fisher and Ury; and Working in Groups, Engleberg and Wynn.

Note: in instances where the state is dealing with a local network model compliance issue, state leaders should be familiar with procedures detailed in the Local Network Affiliation agreement.

Additional Tips for Conflict Management

- Establish and agree on ground rules for the discussion and evoke them necessary.
- Use Women's Council operating values as guidelines for governing interaction.
- Stay objective: focus on the goal and emphasize facts instead of opinions.
- Take time to share information, review the facts, discuss, debate, brainstorm, etc. first, without the pressure of making a decision.
- Find the point where everyone agrees and work from there incrementally to build consensus.

- Determine the root cause of the conflict; oftentimes words are used or positions taken to mask the real issue or problem.
- Validate feelings and experience.
- Listen first to understand instead of to respond.
- Turn a negative experience into a learning experience – ask what can we learn from this?
- Diffuse/restate negative comments as a positive, focusing on exploration and options, not positions.
- If necessary, allow some time for feelings to settle before taking the issue back up again.

Asking Non-threatening Questions

Asking non-threatening questions is an important skill to utilize in managing situations of conflict. These types of questions can help you better assess the situation and get at root causes and interests.

Non-threatening questions are those that:

- Open up discussion and possibilities (e.g., limit the use of 'yes/no' questions')
- Keep the focus on the issue and resolution, not on the individual
- Seek to better uncover and understand feelings and opinions
- Help get closer to the real issue or root cause
- Avoid putting individuals on the defensive
- Are objective, unbiased, and don't presume a certain answer

Tips for asking non-threatening questions

- Pay attention to non-verbal cues as well as what you hear (these can be signals for real feelings, views)
- Rephrase the question if the individual struggles or ask if clarification is needed
- In a group, initially avoid asking specific individuals to answer a question (putting them on the spot)
- Be careful of 'over praising' responses of individuals (others will perceive their participation of view are less valued)