



Katie Hannan

## Sustainable Activism and Advocacy

If you have a social conscience and are interested in justice or sustainability, you could be an activist. Often people who are enthusiastic about sustainability or social and environmental justice get involved in advocating to colleagues and library customers and come to be seen as an activist.

For some people, being an activist is a positive thing, for others, feel that their workplace might not treat them the same if they know that they are advocating for an organisation on issues such as social justice, humanitarian issues, refugees, climate change, poverty, food security, or water management.

Often, being an activist involves being passionate and committed to your cause. Activist and advocacy groups, such as Oxfam, Animal Liberation, Amnesty International, Trees for Life, Urban Landcare, etc. are commonly run by volunteers and require people to have skills in chairing meetings, taking minutes, event management, fundraising, and lobbying. Activists are often 'big picture thinkers'; they are community minded, understand, and engage in the principles and practices of participatory democracy. For some activists, there is the opportunity to gain experience in writing grant applications, developing vision and mission statements, being involved in contributing to government policy, governance, and strategy documentation, and creating positive change.

Some activists or advocates are tackling some huge issues within their educational, workplace, and residential communities. Chances are high that if you spend a lot of time and energy working for your cause, you may experience burnout symptoms. Perhaps you have been questioning the purpose behind what you are doing. Maybe you've experienced a setback such as a new political management decision that changes your workplace landscape. How do you stop from feeling defeated? How do you overcome activist burnout? How do you sustain your commitment?

As an activist I've been involved with a variety of different groups, from student politics during my undergraduate degree, lobbying for recycling programs at various workplaces, through to climate change activism at a national level. During this time there have both big and small wins, but also my fair share of disappointment and obstacles. In order to sustain my motivation in advocating and lobbying on issues that are pertinent, I've used the following strategies.

*Celebrate the small wins* – often we overlook small achievements. If one person thought about the issue that you have been advocating for, then that's a small win. We tend to get sidetracked by trying to create huge changes and secure funding for big projects. If your workplace lets you hold a morning tea and talk about the cause that you believe in, or even promote it with posters on the community notice board, then that's an achievement worth noting.

*Hold a social function, such as a picnic with a topical theme and invite other like-minded activist/advocacy groups along* – This might sound like a bit of a strange idea, but it's amazing how people connect and relax when they share food together. If you're feeling a bit overcommitted or drained due to trying to balance work and volunteer commitments, then the chance to meet others from similar groups can do the world of good. You might discover that other people are facing the same challenges and you can workshop ideas on how to get the most and best out of each day. Alternatively, you might find out that people who are involved in other similar groups are interested in forming a coalition, so that you can share the work around and not have to continuously reinvent the wheel.

*Attend a seminar or a professional development training course that is relevant to the issue that you advocate for* – Meeting other people from other professions who are interested in the same cause as you can help immensely in bringing

yourself back from activist burnout. The chance to hear and learn from amazing speakers might be just what you need.

Revisit what it was that enthused you in the first place (see that film again, read that book, call that friend, look at those holiday photos).

*Recruit new members into your group* – The beauty of volunteer-run organisations is that because you're not paying people, you can recruit new group members whenever the need arises. Recruitment drives for volunteer organisations are great, because you meet new people, you get to raise awareness for your issue, and hopefully you'll end up with some new people to work with that will reinvigorate your group and bring in fresh ideas.

*Choose your fight* – Make the next battle that you pick to fight one that you know you can win. If you're on the brink of activist burnout, then you need to be careful that the next challenge that you engage yourself with is one that you know that you can achieve. This will not only help you with your own sense of wellbeing, but if your entire activist group is feeling a little defeated, you'll help the group to regain some motivation and boost member morale.

*Most importantly, take some time out for yourself* – If you don't have your health, what do you have? If you're an activist or an advocate, chances are you are used to putting other people and issues before yourself. Sometimes, you need to be selfish and do something just for you.

Activists and advocates are important people; they are leaders and motivators and they help minority communities to have a voice.

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