

# Dealing With the News Media: Message Discipline

*An AFSCME Council 57 Communications Guide*

Every now and then, your local might be featured in the news because of something related to unions (usually if there is a wage or pension dispute between the union and the government agency you work for). If you are ever approached by a reporter for a story, this is your opportunity to let the public know what AFSCME really stands for.

A best practice when dealing with reporters is to practice message discipline. What do I mean by that? If a member is quoted at a press event, make sure that he or she stays on message. There is no “off the record” when it comes to the media. If a reporter asks a question, a sample bridge could be:

- “...I think the important issue is”
- “...I think the real point is”
- “...I think the larger question is”
- “...the reason I’m here is”

Make sure to be quotable as well. Be a character in a story—establish your connection to the issue. Also, keep in mind that it’s OK to say “I don’t know the answer to that” or “I’ll get back to you on that.” Don’t say “no comment.” It makes you look guilty.

## Putting It Into Practice

Here’s a good example of what message discipline looks like in the real world.

Take a look at this Vox clip of Kellyanne Conway ([link](https://www.vox.com/videos/2017/2/13/14597968/kellyanne-conway-tricks)) (<https://www.vox.com/videos/2017/2/13/14597968/kellyanne-conway-tricks>).

After watching this clip, what do you notice? If you follow what the reporter is saying, then you’ll see how Ms. Conway is an expert ninja at dodging questions and redirecting the answers so that she can talk about the topics that she wants to discuss. In essence, she is using these savvy communications tactics to control the message in the media.

You don’t have to be a fan of Kellyanne Conway. But we could all learn some lessons from her approach to dealing with the media. We can certainly steal some of those tricks and use them for good.

**Bottom line:** You don’t always have to try to answer the question with facts. Stay on message and find another angle.

## Exercise

Do the following mock interview with your local or member action team. You will need two volunteers. One person will play the reporter. The other will play a union leader being interviewed for a news story.

*Reporter Question:* “Some people feel that unions are no longer necessary because they take away workers’ choice. If you’re at a job with a union, aren’t you forced to join, and can’t your hard-earned money be taken from your paycheck to advance the union’s liberal agenda?”

*Sample Union Leader Answer:* “**I think the bigger issue is** that, with the Middle Class shrinking and corporate profits at all-time highs, workers have no choice but to organize and demand that we get our fair share. That only happens when you have a union.”

Let’s try it one more time. Pick a different volunteer this time to be the union leader.

*Reporter Question:* “Too many government agencies are facing a pension crisis. Why should taxpayers be burdened with the cost when most public service workers are just lazy...and then they get to retire with six-figure pensions?”

*Sample Union Leader Answer:* “**The real crisis is** when billionaires don’t pay their taxes or when management gets to negotiate their own raises, nobody says anything. All we’re trying to do is what every worker is trying to do: retire with some dignity and respect.”