
CASE STUDY

NATIONAL CONSERVATIVE ENERGY SUMMIT

WITH THE CONSERVATIVE ENERGY NETWORK



PRESENTED BY
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Strategic Communications

A photograph of three people sitting at a table in what appears to be a conference or meeting room. On the left, a woman with glasses and a lanyard is partially visible. In the center, a woman with blonde hair, wearing a bright green blazer, is smiling and holding a small object. On the right, a man in a dark suit and white shirt is also smiling. The background shows a wall with some notices and a light switch.

ABOUT THE CONSERVATIVE ENERGY NETWORK

Founded in 2016, the Conservative Energy Network (CEN) connects and supports state-based conservative clean energy and energy efficiency organizations across the country. As a 501(c)(3) headquartered in Lansing, Michigan, CEN describes its mission as championing secure, reliable, affordable, clean American energy.

CEN operates through a coalition of 26 state-based organizations, producing polling and research, delivering educational programming, and serving as a conduit between state-based groups and federally focused ones. Its policy agenda rests on four goals: restoring American energy leadership, saving Americans money, building American, and securing the power grid. The principles supporting those goals include market competition in place of government mandates, consumer choice, property rights for landowners who host energy infrastructure, and permitting reform.

Since May 2023, the organization has been led by CEO John Szoka, who served ten years in the North Carolina House of Representatives, where he chaired the Energy and Public Utilities Committee and sponsored the state's 2017 competitive energy legislation. A West Point graduate, Szoka is a retired Army lieutenant colonel.

Each year CEN convenes the National Conservative Energy Summit, a multi-day gathering that draws the network's state affiliates together with elected officials, energy industry figures, researchers, and advocates working on energy policy around the country. The 2026 Summit took place the first week of August in Boston.

THE CHALLENGE

CEN advocates routinely make their case to audiences that have already decided against them: county commissions, neighbors concerned about property values, and community meetings where inaccurate claims about wind and solar circulate freely. Few of them had ever practiced that work anywhere but in live settings, where the cost of a poor performance is borne immediately and in public.

Specifically, the organization faced several challenges:

- CEN's ranks included a substantial contingent of younger advocates, some with no public speaking experience at all, who were fluent in online argument but unpracticed in face-to-face confrontation
- Their ranks also included executives and senior staff who face the highest-stakes exchanges and have the fewest opportunities to rehearse for them
- CEN had lost ground during COVID, as experienced advocates stopped attending public meetings and went years without addressing a live crowd
- CEN's advocates lacked any structured setting in which to test messages, absorb hostile responses, and adjust before encountering them in the field

CEN's leadership recognized that these gaps carried direct consequences for the network's effectiveness, since its influence depends on the ability of individual advocates to hold their position in front of skeptical audiences. The August 2026 National Conservative Energy Summit was selected as the venue, in what became the organization's first year of programming workshops.

MY APPROACH

The engagement originated with an introduction from Dave Belote, a retired Air Force colonel who, as a base commander, was responsible for putting a substantial amount of solar generation on an Air Force base in Nevada. A native of the Hampton Roads region, he responded strongly to my documentary Tidewater and has served as an advisor for years. He introduced me to CEN's CEO, and the conversation that followed defined the gap the session would address.

I then designed and facilitated "Policy to People: Communicating Energy Effectively," a workshop held on August 4 for an audience of entrepreneurs, business owners, policy advocates, nonprofit executives, students, and investors from across the country. The design placed every participant in the exchange they most avoid, under conditions in which failure would not result in actual professional costs.

- **Grounding in Authentic Positions:** Participants began by listing five to seven clean energy causes they had advocated for or could imagine advocating for, ensuring that nobody spent the session defending a hypothetical position.
- **Character Development:** I wrote sixteen crowd characters meant to mimic real-life opposition, each with a brief establishing its identity, motivations, and central objections — among them the Misinformed Believers, the NIMBY Neighbors, and the Skeptical Commissioners.
- **Taking the Hot Seat:** The room divided into groups, each seating one participant in a chair facing away from a screen. The assigned character description was projected behind them while colleagues played the crowd by challenging the participant with varying degrees of misinformation, interruptions, and heightened emotion. Participants rotated through the seat.
- **Established Ground Rules:** The session opened with an explicit framework for participation: risk-taking was encouraged, and no statements would be attributable to any actual speakers, only to the collective character playing the mob. Players were required to inhabit their assigned character's worldview and to work solely from the brief.
- **Structured Debrief:** The full room reconvened to examine what had occurred in the seat, including which moments proved most difficult, what participants observed in themselves under pressure, and what they would do differently.

Rather than simply delivering instruction on message discipline, the design more importantly reproduced the conditions and stressors under which messages fail, allowing participants to encounter their own limits while maintaining their own poise and comfort.



OUTCOMES FROM THE SESSION INCLUDED:

- Full participation from a room of near-strangers
- Substantial catharsis, particularly among participants who had experienced hostile crowds in their professional work; one described the exercise as considerably more useful than therapy
- Increased sympathy for opposing positions held in good faith, as playing the adversarial crowd required participants to argue those positions from the inside
- Concrete self-observation, including recognition of how heavily body language carries in a hostile exchange
- Immediate application, as participants used the debrief to identify upcoming engagements, both scheduled and anticipated, where the techniques would apply
- First public speaking experience for several younger advocates, who left with a clearer understanding of what a live crowd demands

CEN's events and marketing manager reported that the workshop equipped attendees with tools for translating complex energy issues into clear messages for policymakers, stakeholders, and communities, and noted the value of an approach that moved participants outside their comfort zones — an outcome achieved in the Summit's first year of programming workshops.

CEN's CEO John Szoka followed up with a written affirmation of his own: "Roger's was one of the most original and effective sessions we've ever hosted. Our staff and allied advocates didn't just hear about tough conversations — they lived them, and got better in real time. They learned to build trust with skills they can practice anytime and anywhere."



This engagement reinforced several principles that continue to inform my consultancy practice:

- **Role play creates a clean slate:** Assigned characters require participants to set aside what they think they know about one another, which extends the benefit of the doubt across the room and makes the exercise workable among strangers.
- **Low stakes make exploration possible:** When professional consequences aren't at stake, ego can take a step back and participants become more willing to explore and engage curiously.

For organizations facing similar communication challenges — whether preparing teams to navigate contested topics, building stakeholder engagement capacity, or developing leadership communication skills — simulation training offers a proven methodology for translating real-world communication expertise into practical capabilities that drive results.

ABOUT ROGER SORKIN

I AM A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANT...

...who specializes in helping organizations communicate effectively when business interests intersect with contested public issues like sustainability, climate, infrastructure, defense, public health, and more.

My work includes developing communication strategies, designing simulation exercises that prepare teams for high-stakes discussions, coaching executives on media and stakeholder engagement, and producing content and messaging that build narrative cohesion.

If you're facing communication challenges in a complex environment and need guidance or support, please send an email to roger@rogersorkin.com or check out www.rogersorkin.com to learn more about how I could be of assistance.

