

10 tips for making researchers' voices heard by politicians

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Interested in becoming a scientific adviser? Here are some points to keep in mind from Quebec's chief scientist.

For researchers, seeing that their work and expertise have contributed to the development of society is a source of immense satisfaction. To obtain such results, the research community needs to step up its efforts to ensure that the voice of science is indeed heard by the decision-makers who formulate public policy. But for some researchers, operating in the political sphere would seem to require a quantum leap into an environment that does not obey the laws of physics. And yet, many researchers today manage to provide scientific advice in parallel with their research activities. Here are 10 points whose importance has been brought home to me in my six years as Quebec's chief scientist.

1. Establish a bond of trust

This must at all times remain a scientific adviser's priority. Remember that while a relationship of trust can take a great deal of time and energy to build, it can be shattered in mere minutes, especially if one fails to make the distinction between advising and representation. The adviser's role is to do science for politics, not politics for science. Advisers must, above all, present the best knowledge available, regardless of their academic or industry loyalties, and they must especially understand that there is a time for giving scientific advice, and a time for asking for funding. As Quebec's chief scientist, I head the province's main research-funding agency, the Fonds de recherche du Québec, whose budget is set annually by the government. This means I must be particularly vigilant in this matter.

2. Leave the decision-making to others

A scientific adviser must recognize that in a democracy, political decision-makers have a right not to automatically follow recommendations based on scientific data and studies, because they have been elected, or appointed, for the principles and values that they put forward. Advisers must therefore act to help establish a policy informed by facts and conclusive data, rather than press for a policy based on facts and conclusive data.

3. Understand the decision-maker's environment

Researchers who provide scientific advice must be sensitive to the differences between their own environment and that of decision-makers in order to be able to adjust to these differences. First, unlike researchers, elected representatives rarely remain in office for more than a few years, which inevitably has a bearing on their outlook and working deadlines. In only six years of practice as chief scientist, I have worked with three different governments and six different ministers!

Researchers operate in an environment where objectivity is key, whereas decision-makers regularly receive visits from groups of citizens, lobbyists and union representatives, each of whom bring a different message, representing different interests which the decision-maker must take into account. And while doubt and questioning are the main drivers of a researcher's activity, a decision-maker tends to be uncomfortable in the face of uncertainty. For this reason, when talking to a decision-maker, a researcher must always be very clear about what we do know and what we do not know. Lastly, while researchers are very open to publicly announcing the progress of their work, decision-makers prefer discretion. They will appreciate hearing scientific advice on their policies behind closed doors, rather than reading it in the morning newspaper.

4. Understand the political decision process

The process of political decision-making is anything but linear: it is mobile, and is influenced by multiple factors and

many players. Some might call it a disorderly process. Scientific advisers must deal with the relative unpredictability of this process, and study it—so that they can intervene at the right time with the right people. Do the issues fall under municipal, national or international jurisdiction? Are there resources associated with a particular issue? Has a budget been allocated? Which government departments are involved? Is it an electoral issue? The world of politics is anything but simple – but that is exactly what makes it so stimulating.

5. Never act alone

In environments that are subject to numerous influences, acting alone is not always the best course. Researchers who convey the same messages can consider banding together on the model of think tanks, or associating with academic institutions that already advise governments. If government or international commissions on the issue at hand have already been created, joining them is always a possibility. Citizen consultations or mobilization of non-academic communities are also ways of gaining political weight and credibility. In this respect, chief scientists, because of their strategic position in the government apparatus, are ideally positioned to support scientists in their approaches to governments. I personally have researchers stop by my office for this purpose on an almost daily basis.

6. Don't leave the facts to speak for themselves

Politics has always been a “post-factual” world in which facts are not the only elements that carry weight; they must jostle with public opinion, values, principles and personal experiences. In this environment, facts do not speak for themselves. This is why setting out scientific information in a written document or in a lecture is not enough. Any written document must be backed up by a personal meeting in which the researcher can demonstrate the scientific value of the information the document contains.

7. Get the message across

Nothing succeeds in grabbing a decision-maker's attention as effectively as starting from a political concern that the decision-maker himself or herself has expressed. This is in fact the process we use to determine the themes of the scientific breakfasts that we regularly hold for Quebec MLAs. . . And we receive many proposals!

Decision-makers don't expect to have to listen to a lecture. They will appreciate a very brief presentation (take inspiration from the Three-Minute Thesis contest), and will not keep their questions to the end. Rather, they will try to discuss options on concrete solutions that have been presented to them. By the end of the meeting, decision-makers must have a clear idea of what they can undertake in light of the information conveyed by the scientific adviser.

8. Maintain your scientific credibility

When scientific advisers have the status of a researcher (which is most often the case), they must consistently safeguard their credibility, which is essential for their career advancement. This is why it is vitally important to stick to facts and conclusive evidence, and information on which there is consensus within the scientific community. To avoid obstacles to the interpretation of scientific evidence, you must urge decision-makers to consider information in context, and to beware of “cherry picking,” oversimplification and other such traps.

9. Adopt a crosscutting view

It can be difficult – even hazardous – to grasp all of the scientific aspects of a political issue alone. The great challenges facing society, such as an aging population and climate change, call for expertise in social sciences and health sciences as well as engineering. This is why a scientific adviser should never hesitate to call on researchers from different disciplines to develop a broader view of the matter at issue. For example, when the government turned to me on the phenomenon of radicalization, I found that my own area of specialization – neuroscience – gave me neither sufficient competence nor sufficient credibility to issue an opinion by myself. However, my position as chair of

the board of directors of three Quebec research funds enabled me to quickly mobilize a solid network of researchers in the relevant disciplines.

10. **Be resilient**

The work of scientific advisers requires great resilience. More often than not, they will come up against closed doors. When this happens, they must consider knocking on a different door, or simply waiting for more propitious circumstances. There is always another way.

The position of chief scientist facilitates providing scientific advice to government. Moreover, in Quebec, we are developing spaces for strengthening the links between researchers and decision-makers, in the national assembly and in various government departments. But other players other than me must work towards this end. Researchers hold knowledge of great value, and it is their social responsibility to share it in order to contribute more directly to the improvement of our public policies. In this new post-factual era, in which the workings of democracy are being put to harsh tests, the value of scientific information has never been so great. Never before have researchers had such an important role to play in building a better-informed society. We must now play this role to the fullest, and the task falls to each and every one of us. Now that you have taken note of these tips, and looked at other resources such as INGSA, I urge you to meet with your MLA, participate in a parliamentary commission, or offer your support to the development of policies in your city. In short, get involved.

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