

Influencing Policymakers Companion Guide

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December 2, 2020

I. Target Your Audience

▪ **What level of policy do you wish to impact?**

Policy is made on many levels and different strategies to influence each level are necessary. Be clear about the level of policy you wish to impact and know that policy changes on all levels, from federal to local, corporate to academic, can have significant impact.

▪ **How are changes made at this level?**

Once you determine the level of policy you wish to impact, you must examine how change is initiated and enacted at that level.

Understanding the process will enable you to consider how and when you may be best positioned to engage.

▪ **Who is empowered to make changes at this level?**

It is imperative you understand the power structure in any given organization. You'll want to craft your message in a way that aligns with the interests of those empowered to make the changes you hope to see enacted.

II. Outreach

a. In-Network

▪ **Who do you know and how well do you know them?**

Leveraging relationships is a hallmark of policy influence. Think carefully about who you know that can help you further your agenda. Ideally, these people will either put you in touch with those you need to know or will have some influence in the sphere and will leverage that influence to help your ideas gain traction. The strength of your relationships with these folks will determine your approach and your ask.

▪ **Who do they know?**

You may be surprised by who people in your network know. Remember, relationships are developed in many ways. People in your network may be connected to others professionally, personally, casually, or tangentially. You never know who may be someone's next door neighbor or in someone's Saturday morning yoga class! Don't be shy about asking for an introduction.

b. Out-of-Network

▪ **Attend a networking event**

Networking events are held for a variety of interests. Find one that either on-topic or in which people you need to know are likely to

attend. Remember to look for virtual events as well. If you are not a savvy networker, there are plenty of free, online resources to help you develop this art.

- **Find a connection**

Think about how you may be connected to a person of influence and leverage that connection when reaching out. For example, are you in the same sorority? Did you attend the same university? Do you go to the same church? Do your children attend the same school or play in the same soccer league? People tend to be more open to those in which they have similarities or share interests.

- **Follow the chain of command**

If you have to initiate a cold call, which should be your last resort, be sure you follow the chain of command. For example, you probably should not reach out to the dean of a college directly if for no other reason than he/she is likely to be extremely busy, in high-demand, and not very responsive. It would be better to reach out to the dean's assistant who will have a better command of his/her schedule, can introduce you to the dean through a quick email, and can put a meeting on his/her calendar.

III. Communication

a. In-Network

- **Brief phone call, followed by succinct email**

When you have a relationship with someone, it is often best to pick up the phone or shoot a quick text to communicate your ideas and needs. Being familiar with someone helps you bypass the small talk and get to the point, which saves you both time. Follow-up your call with an email that provides essential details about your ideas and requests.

- **Over coffee or lunch**

This method works best when you have a relationship with someone that is not very strong or hasn't been nurtured in a while. Use your time efficiently and as an opportunity to gain information about the organization and/or person you wish to influence.

b. Out-of-Network

- **Succinct email, followed by phone call**

When you do not have a relationship with someone, it is often best to email them with the abbreviated version of your ideas and ask. People generally do not like to be put on the spot or asked to make a commitment without an opportunity to think through all aspects of a request. After waiting a few days for a reply, follow-up your email with a phone call.

IV. Position Yourself & Your Research

a. You

- **Credibility**

Establish your credibility by including a one-page CV or accomplishment document in your email to a policymaker or influencer. The document should highlight successes relevant to the research or policy brief you are circulating.

- **Positionality**

When establishing a relationship with a policymaker or influencer, communicate why the issue is important to you and how and why you came to work on it.

- **Interest**

Talk about your interests related to this line of your research agenda. Are you working on any other issues or projects? What are the goals, findings, and outcomes of these projects?

- **Endgame**

Clearly communicate the impact you hope to have on a particular policy or practice. Keep these goals at the forefront of all your efforts.

b. Your Research

- **Stage**

Communicate the stage your research is in and whether or not additional phases are planned.

- **Funders**

Share the funding sources for your research with policymakers. Big name funders can raise the profile of your work while smaller funders can show grassroots investment in your work.

- **Findings**

Focus on what your research shows and how the findings can prompt action and promote change in the area in which you want to make an impact.

- **Limitations**

Clearly convey what your research does not conclude. This will guard against it being used as a silver bullet.

- **Implementation**

Describe how your research has been used by other organizations and if it has led to meaningful change.

V. Set Expectations & Benchmarks

- **What are your goals?**

Set short, intermediate, and long term goals for your engagement in the policy space. If your goals are mutually beneficial, you'll likely have better success accomplishing them.

- **What is your ask?**

What do you want a policymaker to do or change within their purview? What are your requests? Do you need access to organizational data to inform and tailor your recommendations? If so, how will you use the data?

- **What can you offer?**

Remember that you are working on building a relationship with a policymaker or influencer. Relationships require give and take. Think about what you can offer in terms of resources, data analysis, solutions, media coverage, etc. that would be of service to the organization.

- **What counts as success?**

Changing policy can be a long process that requires multiple steps. Try to acknowledge and celebrate small successes along the way. Some successes include: Developing relationships; circulation of your research; adoption of your recommendations; policy changes; measurable outcome shifts; and the creation of new partnerships.

VI. Track Communication, Status, & Outcomes

- **Create a spreadsheet to track interactions and outcomes**

Since changing policy can be a long process that requires multiple steps, it is important to be organized in your communications and actions and to have a record of all interactions. Some things to track include: Name, title, affiliation & contact info of folks you've contacted; date & method of contact; date of and subsequent follow-up or communication; outcome of communication & impressions you were left with; action items & next steps for each party; agreed upon goals & expectations with any quantifying details; outcomes and challenges experienced.

VII. Caution

Avoid being used

- **Assess openness to data and change**

In your communication with policymakers and influencers, use both data and intuition to assess how open an organization may be to using data that they have not before encountered or that may run counter to their way of thinking or behaving. Do they typically use data to inform policy and practice? If not, are they open to doing so?

- **Identify vast philosophical differences**

Are there substantial philosophical differences between you and the policymaker in which you are engaging? If so, are those differences a result of ignorance or asymmetrical information? If yes, can learning from one another help close the divide? If the differences are fundamental and insurmountable, you have two choices: 1. Find common interest and move the needle as much as you can in that area only. 2. Work with a different policymaker or organization

whose philosophies are more aligned with yours and push for more comprehensive changes.

- **Explain the limits of your research and avoid overreach**
Policymakers are accountable to many stakeholders and are often in search of silver bullets to fix problems or to keep stakeholders happy. As scholars, researchers, and practitioners, we know there are no silver bullets in the social sciences and that inequities are the result of complex and compounding issues. It is your responsibility to navigate the tension between quick fixes and systemic changes.
- **Focus on what your research shows and its implications**
Once limitations have been discussed, orient your communication on what your research does show and how it can be used to solve problems in a given context.
- **Don't promise more than you can deliver**
As you are developing a relationship with a policymaker or influencer, you may find yourself wanting to help an organization in more ways or in more areas than you originally intended to. This can be a slippery slope, as organizations will often welcome free, qualified assistance. However, it is imperative that you focus on your primary goal and work to bring that to fruition. If you take on more than you are capable of handling, you risk ruining a relationship as well as your reputation and any possibility of enacting change. If you do more than you planned to do without any compensation, you risk exploitation which can also ruin a relationship and the impact you intended to make.
- **Ask good questions**
In the process of working with a policymaker, stay curious and ask good questions that will help you navigate the organizational culture as you work towards changing policy and practice.
- **Maintain independence**
You do not work for the policymaker or organization in which you are promoting change. Communicate carefully. You can express shared interests and goals but do not embed yourself in their organization or see their specific issues as your own. Do not take on tasks that are best suited for staffers. Always maintain your own voice and ownership of your research.