

Seventeen Cardinal Rules for Working with Congress

This is an excerpt from the book Working with Congress: A Practical Guide for Scientists and Engineers, 2nd ed., by William G. Wells, Jr.

Whatever mode you use for working with or contacting those in Congress, your overriding concern should be: How can I improve my chances for communicating my ideas successfully and getting them accepted? In operational terms, this means you should keep to the following guidelines:

1. Convey That You Understand Something about Congress.

A recurring complaint among members of Congress and their staffs is that so many who come to see them seem to know so little about Congress. Members and staff don't expect you to be an expert on Congress, but they do appreciate (and have more respect for) those who display an awareness and understanding of what is going on--particularly with regard to the conditions members and staff face. Among other things, these conditions include severe time constraints, competing demands for legislative and budget priorities, and the imperatives of reelection. Citing what may be an extreme case, a staff member explained why one visitor received a negative reception: "This guy didn't realize that representatives have to face an election every two years!"

2. Demonstrate Your Grasp of the Fundamentals of the Congressional Decision-making System.

Members and staff say that one of the most difficult things to get scientists and engineers to understand is the tough reality faced by members in balancing competing interests, building working alliances, and achieving acceptable compromises. Among their comments are that "scientific elites don't acknowledge other legitimate interests"; "there is a lack of understanding that they are in a competition like everyone else"; and "scientists are perceived as just another constituency." Finally, as one staffer pointed out, there is "a frequent misperception that a member will vote against one of his or her constituencies if only you will give them the correct facts." Unlike science, politics can't be reduced to empirical facts and figures. Indeed, it is rare that an initiative is not substantially modified through compromises and trade-offs before a final policy decision is made or a law is enacted. This means that you may lose even if you have a good case and a good relationship with the member. It also means that you should not take it personally and should keep trying. Persistence can pay off.

3. Don't Seek Support of Science as an Entitlement.

This may seem obvious, but it is a problem that occurs with sufficient frequency to require highlighting. Members and staff react negatively when they are presented with arguments in support of science that they see as being cast in "entitlement terms." In their words, scientists and engineers should not "convey an attitude of being inherently deserving in contrast to other seekers of the public largesse," and support for science should be "presented in terms of helping to meet national needs, or to achieve societal goals, not as an entitlement owed to scientists."

4. Don't Convey Negative Attitudes about Politics and Politicians.

Even if you have some inner, private views that are less than flattering about politics and politicians, keep them to yourself while working with Congress. It is the kiss of death to be perceived as having a "holier than thou" attitude, or as one staff member put it, to "convey that the purity of the scientific profession puts you above all of this."

5. Perform Good Intelligence Gathering in Advance.

Intelligence gathering involves learning at least the basics about the member, committee, or staff member you are contacting. As one staff member exclaimed, "Can you believe this person didn't even know which party my boss belongs to?" A good one-stop source is Congressional Quarterly's Politics in America; other sources include hearing records, speeches, floor statements, and conversations with Washington friends who are knowledgeable about Congress (see the [Guide to Congress](#)). In addition, one staff member suggested that, "Too many people make a serious mistake by not leveraging or using the Washington offices of trade associations and companies."

Begin by learning where a member comes from (state/district), their committee assignments and professional background, where they stand politically on various issues, and how they fit into the congressional power structure. Try to learn if the member already has a view on your issue. As one senior staff person said, "Know what is on the member's mind in terms of recent concerns. Check recent hearings and floor debates." For staff, there is less published information, but it is still possible to get reasonably accurate profiles by making a few telephone calls to Washington friends, agency staff, association staff, and the office of your senator or representative, and by consulting the Congressional Staff Directory.

Staying in touch with developments is an important part of gathering intelligence. A good daily newspaper or weekly newsmagazine can keep you up to date on what Congress may be engrossed in at the moment. If a member is spending most of his or her time worrying about the budget or about foreign affairs, your recognition of that fact is important. Your sensitivity to such developments will smooth your road and perhaps your conversation. To stay on top of specific issues in Congress, you may want to read the Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report or the National Journal or check on developments through an on-line electronic subscription service such as Politics USA.

6. Always Use a Systematic Checklist.

One good way to ensure careful, complete advance preparation is to write out a good checklist. Whether for participating in an elaborate meeting, presenting a statement in a hearing, or making a simple telephone call, prepare carefully. Think carefully about what you will want to leave at the meeting. This should include, according to a senior staff person, things right down to your business card with the date and a brief mention of your meeting topic. It was pointed out that "hundreds of cards get collected, at meetings, at receptions, and so on, and it is easy to forget six months from now how and why one has a particular calling card." Put together a simple, clear summary paper of one or two pages--including a brief background--that can be left after the meeting. Know what you want to say, and know when you've said it. Practice in advance with a dry run of your presentation. Demonstrate by what you say and how you present it that you are well organized and worth listening to. Such an approach will help you to plan better and to track your progress during a meeting or a telephone conversation. You are much less likely to get lost or to forget an important point.

7. Do Your Homework on the Issue or Problem.

It's obvious that you should know the technical side of your issue. Not as obvious, perhaps, is the importance of translating your message into terms relevant to Congress. Know which bills (if any) are pertinent. Know which committees are involved and what they are doing (e.g., holding hearings, planning hearings, and holding the issue in "deep freeze"). Know which other members are involved and what their views are. Tie your issue to member interests if possible. Look for connections between your issue and the member's interests. Such connections might be his or her legislative interests, they might be related to constituent concerns. One senior staff person said that, although it might not always be possible, you should try to "say why your proposal is important to the member's state or district, how current efforts are helpful that way, and why your proposal would be good for the member's constituents." You are on your way if you can clearly show the member how he or she can gain by going along with you. Finally, as one staff person said: "Try to have something to offer--good advice or useful contacts for additional information, for example." Use concrete examples as often as possible. Congressional people tend to be oriented to examples and anecdotes rather than abstractions or broad generalities. Play to this as much as possible without distorting your case. Staff members are always looking for "nuggets" to put into member speeches, floor remarks, and committee hearing remarks. Help them out if you can. As one staff member observed, "Concrete examples seldom hurt and most often they help."

8. Timing Is Vital.

All too often, the message may be great, but it is useless if the timing is all wrong. Keen judgment is required here. Weighing in too late with your opinion can mean the legislative train has left the station. As one committee staff director put it, "It was a good set of suggestions, but we'd already reported the bill out of committee two days ago. They thought we could fix it on the floor. Well, maybe--sometimes. But they should have come three months ago when it was still in subcommittee." On the other hand, coming too early can be just as bad. A good effort can be wasted "if it is too early and other matters are dominating the legislative agenda. We only handle so many things at a time," according to a senior staff person. Also, keep the congressional calendar in mind. While activity in the congressional environment seldom comes to a complete halt, it does vary over the course of the year. A member observed, "There is a much better chance of having an in-depth discussion with me during a recess period, whether

in person or on the telephone." This advice applies to meetings with staff members as well. (See [Key Congressional Websites](#) for links to the House and Senate calendars.)

9. Understand Congressional Limitations.

A recurring theme is that too many people bring problems to Congress and "look to us to devise a solution instead of presenting a plan for us to consider, modify and perhaps adopt," said one staff member. It is important to have a good understanding of just what Congress can do and what it cannot do. A committee staff director said, "We don't have big planning staffs that can sit down and spend days analyzing what somebody drops in our lap--such as a ten-page memo with forty-five appendices." Enormous time pressures from multiple competing interests don't leave much time for original analysis and extensive research. Bear this in mind in your contacts with Congress.

10. Make It Easy for Those in Congress to Help You.

State your problem or issue clearly and suggest what action is needed. In describing a meeting with one group of scientists, a senator said, "They were with me for twenty minutes, and when they left I still had no idea why they had come to see me." Avoid this mistake--get the problem or the issue and your request on the table right away. Work carefully at honing your request or advice or information so there is no doubt about your issue, your position, or what you are asking for. Do this by working out a proposed answer to your request or by presenting a plan of actions to accomplish what you desire. Occasionally this might be seen as presumptuous, but more often it will be seen as well organized on your part. Members and staff appreciate proposals for action that are clear and articulate, and show that they have been thought through before presentation. Congress, if it moves on your proposal, may use your language or specific suggestions. Have the material ready to use!

11. Keep the "Bottom Line" in Mind.

In whatever way you are working with Congress, never forget for a moment what your objective is. Make it clear to them as well. If you have a hidden objective or agenda, this is not the book for you. Go back and read Machiavelli's *The Prince* instead.

12. Use Time--Yours and Theirs--Effectively.

Members and staff are keenly aware of the value of time and resent having it wasted. Plan your efforts in detail and try to make your presentation as concise as possible. Being disorganized or long winded (on the telephone, in writing, or in person) is a sure way to limit your success and future congressional contacts.

A senior staff person cautioned, "You need to remember that staff is generally overworked, is nearly always pressed for time, and generally handles many issues besides the one you are interested in. While interested, they may not have the level of zeal for your project that you have." Do not overload them with details or stacks of paper. It is often useful to have visual ways to make points quickly and effectively. One staff member said, "I look for good ways to brief my boss quickly." A bedrock theme from all staff is that severe pressure on time colors everything they do, including meetings.

13. Remember that Members and Staff Are Mostly Generalists.

While most are "quick studies," you cannot assume that they will immediately understand or appreciate the value of what you are proposing. Do not expect members or staff to have deep familiarity with specific pieces of legislation, or to know their provisions or even their bill numbers. You will lose them if you toss out statements like "Section 222 of Title III of H.R. 4494 will kill us." Be concise, but make clear what you are talking about. Keep messages simple, don't be too detailed, and don't overwhelm your listeners with technical jargon.

14. Don't Patronize Either Members or Staff.

Even if it is clear that the person with whom you are dealing is uninformed or misguided, keep your cool and maintain a steady course. Don't resort to an "I'll show this idiot" attitude. On the other hand, it is not necessary to accept rudeness or insulting behavior meekly. While not frequent, instances of such conduct do occur. A call or letter to a member or chairman is one way to respond. Finally, there is always the "Hill grapevine," which can be available through friends, association offices in Washington, and reporters who cover Congress.

15. Don't Underestimate the Role of Staff in Congress.

While it is important to remember that members are elected and staff are not, staff members generally play influential roles in the congressional setting. Do not make the mistake of looking down on a staff member or underestimating his or her ability to help or hinder you, even if the person happens to be very junior.

16. Consider and Offer Appropriate Follow-up.

Seldom will a single meeting with a member be all that is necessary to achieve your objective. Possibilities range from a simple follow-up telephone conversation or two with a staff member to an extended period of working with staff. Conceivably, other members might become involved. Take this into account and be certain that follow-up commitments can be met before you offer them. Before you leave any meeting with a member, try to have clearly identified the name and phone number of the staff person who will be your principal follow-up point of contact. Finally, it is useful and appropriate to ask such a staff member if he or she thinks you should contact other staff members about the issue.

Remember your friends and thank them often. These are more than simple courtesies; they are also the hallmarks of polished professionals. Keep track of your advocates and look for ways to express your appreciation. Use handwritten notes to stay in contact. Private thanks are sometimes appropriate, but also look for public ways to thank them for their contributions.

17. Remember That the Great Majority of Members and Staff Are Intelligent, Hardworking, and Dedicated to Public Service.

If you approach members of Congress with a positive outlook based on the recognition that on the whole they are competent and dedicated, the experience is much more likely to be favorable and fruitful. They need and want your help: make it easier for them to use it effectively.

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