

Coronavirus and the return of the expert

Written by

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Published

25 March 2020

Category

[Strategy & Leadership](#)

Key topics

[COVID-19](#), [Health](#), [Leadership](#)

Or, what we can learn about leadership from Imperial experts

In 2016, when Michael Gove made his famous statement that [“people in this country have had enough of experts”](#), it seemed experts and expert knowledge were on their way out. The opinion of populist politicians and online influencers were deemed much more relevant to decision making than the findings of scientists or the theories of economists. From the antivax movement to newly resurgent creationists, the spirit of the times was very much against the expert. Science and its evidence-based rationality were in retreat and the trend seemed unstoppable.

Fast-forward four years and the world is suddenly a very different place. Experts like Imperial London’s [Neil Ferguson](#), and [Peter Piot](#) from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine are now central advisors to government and the profiles of experts are the material of front-page stories. With the arrival of a global pandemic, experts are back – and with a vengeance!

The biggest mistakes experts make is to communicate as if they are talking to other experts

So, what has changed? And what can we learn from the recent success of the experts who are shaping government policy on coronavirus? First, the experts who are currently leading the government's policy response to the pandemic are not just experts, they are leaders. They know that simply understanding a topic deeply and having something to say on an issue is not enough.

The expert knowledge these individuals have accumulated over decades is just the foundation of their influence. Their impact depends on a set of leadership skills that let them leverage their knowledge to create impact. They are a special kind leader – expert leaders – who lead using expert power. And their leadership approach works because it is specially tailored to their base of expert power.

So, what are the key leadership skills for expert leaders? At Imperial Business School, we have been working on [how to develop the leadership skills of technical experts](#) and have learned that certain leadership skills are particularly key.

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First, like all great leaders, Ferguson and Piot are superb communicators. They are highly skilled at crafting a message that will appeal to their audience and structuring it for maximum impact. They have one version of their message for the scientific community, another for politicians, and one for the general public; they are all consistent but told differently and positioned appropriately for the audience. The biggest mistakes experts make is to communicate as if they are talking to other experts and make it the audiences' task to make sense of their message. An important part of why these expert leaders have influence is that they do not make that mistake.

Second, they know how to craft a vision – that is, a compelling narrative about the future – that inspires people to act. This can be a vision of a world free of disease or the frightening prospect of [500,000 deaths in the UK](#), but what is important is that it is carefully crafted to be clear, understandable, and relevant to the audience the

expert leader wants to influence. The audience needs to see themselves as central characters in the story with a direct interest in the future that is being described in the vision.

A strong personal brand is crucial to the ability to influence within an organisation, an industry or a society

Third, they are masters of personal branding. A personal brand is like a product brand but associated with a person: it combines distinctive aspects of who that person is, their professional accomplishments, and evidence of their expertise. A strong personal brand is crucial to the ability to influence within an organisation, an industry or a society. Peter Piot, for example, is repeatedly described by the media as [“the Mick Jagger of microbes”](#). He not only has a strong personal brand, but also the personal brand equivalent of Nike’s famous tagline “Just do it”.

Putting this all together, there is an important lesson for all technical experts wherever they work and whatever topic they are expert in: if you are going to be listened to and have real impact, you need to combine technical expertise with deep leadership skills. Simply being an expert is not enough for sustained influence. You also need the appropriate leadership skills to put your expertise to work. What is very clear is that, if experts want to have influence, they need to be leaders too!

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Nelson Phillips was Professor of Innovation & Strategy, Co-Director of the Centre for Responsible Leadership, and the Associate Dean of External Relations at Imperial Business School until 2021. His research interests cut across strategy, innovation and leadership, and he has published widely for both academics and practitioners.