

Managing competing commitments gracefully

BY MARTY LINSKY

"Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion."

—EDMUND BURKE

This oft-quoted observation from Burke, an 18th century member of the British Parliament, on the responsibility of a lawmaker totally misses the complexity of modern legislative life. Those legislators who quote him self-righteously and defensively often forget to mention that Burke lost his first-re-election. More important, Burke's image of a binary battle between conscience and constituency does not begin to describe the slew of legitimate, competing loyalties and commitments that any state legislator must carefully balance.

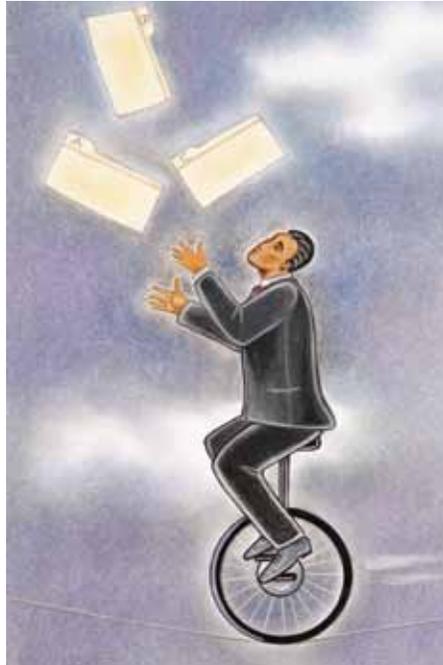
Every lawmaker has commitments to constituency and conscience. There are, however, other pressing commitments as well: to party, to an important subset of constituency called supporters, to funders, to interest groups, to the chamber, to organizational memberships, to schools attended and more. When I was in the Massachusetts House, my wife was an open space planner, and on any issues involving open space, my vote was a foregone conclusion, whatever any of those other constituencies believed.

Intuitively or consciously, legislators spend a lot of time thinking about which commitments to abandon in any particular case. Legislators are constantly living my favorite definition of leadership: Disappointing your own people at a rate that they can absorb.

THE LEADER'S DILEMMA

The complications from the litany of competing loyalties are compounded when you are a presiding officer.

Marty Linsky's column on leadership runs bi-monthly in State Legislatures. Linsky, who has been teaching leadership and politics for more than 25 years on the faculty of the Harvard Kennedy School, is a former journalist and onetime assistant minority leader of the Massachusetts House. He is co-founder of Cambridge Leadership Associates (www.cambridge-leadership.com), a global consulting practice. Contact him at marty@cambridge-leadership.com.



Take Jeff Fitzgerald, for example, the speaker of the Assembly in Wisconsin. Not only does he have the full range of typical commitments enumerated above, but as the presiding officer he also has obligations to the members from both parties. He has a particular responsibility to the reputation of his chamber, and a duty to the governor, especially in his case where the newly elected governor is a fellow Republican.

Fitzgerald has additional unique commitments that make his job even more challenging. His brother, Scott Fitzgerald, is the majority leader of the Senate and was the point person for the governor in the bitter fight over the so-called budget repair bill. The legislation stripped most collective bargaining rights from public sector employee unions and caused Senate Democrats to flee to Illinois where they hid out to prevent a vote, bringing tens of thousands to the Capitol to protest. To complicate his life even more, the secretary of Transportation appointed the Fitzgerald brothers' father, Stephen, to head the state police.

Jeff Fitzgerald has been described as someone who "would like to be a moderate but is surrounded by conservatives." I'm not sure about his ideology, but he sure is surrounded.

Whatever he believes, does he have any

other option but to dutifully carry the governor's water and stand shoulder-to-shoulder with his brother?

What does leadership look like under those circumstances? Of all the competing commitments on his plate, which one or ones should he honor? Are there any enduring values that can provide a guiding star for him?



As speaker, his primary obligation is to the Wisconsin Assembly, to ensure that the public's opinion of his chamber is enhanced and that the Assembly addresses the key issues of the day.

His brother has a tougher job doing this for the Senate in the aftermath of the collective bargaining fracas. The image of the Senate undoubtedly has been severely damaged. Senator Tim Cullen, one of the Democrats who fled the state, has acknowledged he compromised his obligation to the Senate and has filed legislation that would make it unnecessary for any future minority to resort to such action. Senate Majority Leader Fitzgerald has agreed to co-sponsor the amendment. That's a start on the Senate side.

PROTECTING THE MEMBERS

For Speaker Fitzgerald, it will begin by protecting his members' rights and freedom to act in the way they deem in the best interests of the state. How?

First, he can use his own political capital to ensure his Republican colleagues are allowed to disagree with the governor without being punished for it.

Second, since he has been the minority leader and knows what it's like to be in the minority, he can ensure the Democratic minority is treated as he would want his Republicans to be treated if they were in the minority.

It's a guiding principle of leadership that you never know you are exercising it unless you are meeting resistance from your own camp. We'll know Speaker Fitzgerald is exercising leadership when the governor begins to complain to him that he can't deliver his caucus, and when his Republican members complain that he's being too solicitous of the Democrats in the Assembly.

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