

Our American States | An NCSL Podcast



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

You can subscribe through iTunes or Google Play.

Conversations, Business Cards and Handshakes: Preparing to Engage at Summit | Episode 11 | June 8, 2017

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host Gene Rose.

Gathering information is easy today. We just plug a term into a search engine and in less than a second, we have options to learn about our subject. But many believe we learn more when we make personal connections.

For policymakers it’s relatively easy to find out what other states are doing on a subject. However, being able to talk to people in those states who can put the issues, policy and politics into context makes the information more useful and understandable.

In August the National Conference of State Legislatures hosts its Legislative Summit in Boston. About 5-6,000 people are expected to attend and whether it’s your first time, or if you’re a veteran of the meeting, we’re going to get some advice today on how to get engaged in conversations that you enjoy, how to get the most out of new connections, and even how to end those conversations you want to get out of.

In this edition of Our American States, we’re going to talk with Catherine Johns who understands how to get the most out of the connections we make, particularly at large conferences. So tell us about how you came to be a student of personal communications.

Cath: Well, my first career was in radio and I did that for 25 years. Of course I started when I was 12. (Laughter) I was a “morning show side chick” I call it, so one of those ensemble radio shows where you’re balancing a lot of people’s input and it’s important to say something clever, but it’s also important to shut up once in a while.

And then I was a talk show host, which is even more about not only saying what I need to say, but also drawing out other people and kind of keeping the balls in the air for a conversation, often with a caller and a guest or even two. So it’s that concept of balance.

When I left radio I went into communications consulting and did presentation skills and sales skills and that kind of stuff. And also I’m a speaker. So it’s always nice when you have the floor and you can say as much as you want, and yet even then, I put such an importance on what the audience wants and what the audience has to say, and I like my programs to be very interactive. I think all conversations should be interactive and, sadly, many of them aren’t.

Gene: And why do you think that is, Catherine?

Cath: I think a couple of things – some people are just self-obsessed and they actually believe they are more important than anybody else. But often I think it’s about nervousness, Gene. I think we kind of run off at the mouth because we don’t know how to put a period on it and stop, and for some people that’s about being uncomfortable with silence. You know, if I stop talking, what if there’s a moment where there’s no noise?

Gene: Right. I know that used to be a trick that Mike Wallace would use on 60 Minutes. He would just sit there and stare at the subject and then they would just feel compelled to talk and give him the soundbite that he was looking for.

Cath: Oh, it can be so effective when you’re doing an interview, but also just when you’re having a conversation, especially a business conversation where you want information or context about something. Giving people the space to tell it to you is just really important.

Gene: Okay. So let’s put ourselves in the middle of this big conference that NCSL is going to have in Boston this year. You’re a first-timer, you come there, you see all these people there and you know you want to find out what’s going on in other states, learn about new policy trends and things like that. How does one get a conversation started?

Cath: Well, I think it’s partly about being genuinely interested in other people and asking good questions. And, you know, there are kind of standard questions: Where are you from? What do you do? But I kind of like to go off the beaten path a little bit and ask somebody about their trip or about what they’re doing in Boston besides the conference, or about what is their favorite thing about NCSL, or anything that starts a conversation that doesn’t invite: here’s my name, here’s my title. So something a little different...

Gene: Uh huh... Go ahead, I’m sorry.

Cath: Sorry. And then the next thing is to shut up and listen.

Gene: ...like I’m supposed to be doing right now.

Cath: Well because, isn't that a thing, right? We ask somebody a question and as they're answering it, we're already formulating what we're going to say next and we remove ourselves from the conversation. So a big part of good conversations is really being present with the person I'm engaged with, not in my own head thinking about how am I going to make a good impression in a minute, but actually attending to them and what they're saying.

Gene: And what do you think is the number one mistake people make when they're engaged in conversations?

Cath: They talk too much about themselves, way too much – I, I, I, me, me, me – and the truth is... I tell my clients this all the time, Gene – nobody cares who you are and what you do until you give them a reason to care. And so our conversations should be aimed at giving them a reason and we haven't done that yet when we just launch right into our background or our opinions or our plans or any of that. So I think the biggest thing that people do wrong is "selfing."

Gene: And then there are people that we sometimes refer to as wallflowers; it's hard for them to engage in conversations. What advice do you have for them?

Cath: I think one thing is this notion of asking a question that's something a little different, and not putting pressure on yourself to get any particular results, but to just explore as if every conversation is an opportunity to open up yourself and to open somebody else up.

Often when we go to a conference it becomes kind of transactional. We have a business outcome in mind; we're looking for clients; or we're looking for customers; or we're looking for votes; or we're looking for somebody to side with us on an issue. And if we can set that aside and not be so goal-oriented and just be open to exploring, we can have some really interesting conversations. And, oddly enough, sometimes they do actually lead us back in the direction of what we would have been looking for if we were looking for something.

Gene: So you've written a book called *Show Up and Shine: Simple Steps to Boost your Confidence and Charisma*. Confidence and charisma are things that we recognize in others quite often. How does a person go about getting those qualities for themselves?

Cath: You know, there is fascinating research and I encapsulated it in my book, and Amy Cuddy is a professor at Harvard and has since written a book of her own called *Presence*, but it's about using your physical positions to generate an inner state. I think it's really important, especially for women, many of whom have a tendency to kind of shrink or make themselves small. And the whole focus of her research is that when we do that, we actually change our body chemistry and we increase cortisol, which is connected to stress, and decrease testosterone, which is connected to dominance and confidence and that kind of stuff.

And so she advocates taking two minutes to stretch yourself out and really occupy your space fully. And in two minutes you can actually begin to change your body chemistry so that you have more of those neurochemicals that make you feel confident. What I like about that is it's a really practical suggestion and anybody can do it.

So, of course I want people to read my book, but also if you just want to know more about it, google Amy Cuddy and there are Ted talks you'll find on YouTube that go into some detail about that and kind of give you more background.

Gene: And that's an interesting point too. I think there are a lot of things people can do to essentially prepare for meetings like this and the type of conversations they want to engage in as well.

Cath: And some of that is research: knowing who is going to be there, knowing what topics are hot, and being very clear on my own priorities – Who do I need to meet? What do I want to know more about? What sessions are important to me? And so really giving it some thought ahead of time, to plan for that, can make for a much richer experience, and also it makes you feel more confident when you go into it not feeling like you're kind of floundering around or that everybody else knows more than I do.

Gene: We're talking with Catherine Johns about personal communications, and we're going to take a short break right now. When we come back, we'll ask her what to do with those business cards you collect, handshakes, and about that dreaded elevator speech. We'll be right back after this break.

BREAK

Gene: Okay, we're back with Catherine Johns and learning a lot about personal communication. Catherine, the term "elevator speech" has been around a while and I kind of understand you don't think that's a really good term or something that people should be doing or preparing for.

Cath: I don't, Gene, and it's for this reason: When did you ever get into an elevator and want to hear a speech? Or even meet somebody new and want to hear a speech? So I really like to think about it as an elevator conversation or a quick conversation or an entry-level conversation – you can think about it different ways. But the important part is that it's always two-way and that it's not just me going blah-blah-blah-blah about who I am and what I do and how fabulous I am.

We do at some point when we introduce ourselves need to come up with a sort-of encapsulated explanation of who we are and what we do. So I have a formula for that. You want to hear it?

Gene: Yes I do.

Cath: Alright. I call it "P by 5" because it's five things that start with P, and what it doesn't start with is your name. For most of us, our name doesn't start with P. It doesn't belong here, or it belongs farther in. So I say you start with: Who are the People that you serve – could be citizens, could be youth, could be state legislators. People at this conference will be serving all different kinds of publics.

Who are the People you serve? What is the Pickle they're in? So what problem are you going to solve for them? And it's interesting about starting with the pickle – a lot of people say oh, it's too negative. But it captures people; it's what they want to know about; and it gives you a good focus for explaining why whatever you do is important.

So: Who are the People? What is the Pickle they're in? What would the Promised Land look like for them? If that problem didn't exist for them, what would that be like?

What is your Path to get from the Pickle to the Promised Land? And: Got any Proof?

I work with entrepreneurs who don't have enough clients and it's because they're not very articulate about describing their benefits to clients. And so they flounder at networking events. But they could go to networking events and pick up really good contacts and some of those would lead to client relationships. In order to do that, they have to be able to describe their value really well. And I help them do that in my coaching.

I'm Catherine Johns. I coach business people and public officials sometimes. A good example is a woman who was here just this weekend who really wants to do some small group speaking engagements to attract clients, but she didn't know how to make herself sound knowledgeable. After we worked together, now she does.

So did you hear all the parts there? The People were entrepreneurs, the Problem is they don't have enough clients, and they try to pick people up at networking events and so forth; they don't succeed. The Promised Land is a full book of business. My Path is coaching to help them articulate their value. And the Proof is this woman who was here just the other day who left and is now doing better with her "elevator speech."

Gene: That certainly sounds like a much more interesting way to engage with people and, again, you mentioned that earlier about being more about who you're talking to rather than talking about yourself. A lot of times... yes, go ahead, please.

Cath: It's also that people like to hear stories, Gene. So if I just start out and say: I'm Catherine Johns, I'm a speaker and a coach and I'm certified and I've been in business for 17 years, and I have a 90-day program, or else I do VIP... You don't care about any of that. You don't know me yet. And that's what most people do when they approach somebody at the kind of meeting that we're talking about. They start off with their name, their title, and then a bunch of bla-bla that isn't very interesting.

Gene: Which brings up that situation sometimes people get in – they are talking with someone and they want to get out of that conversation. How do you gracefully exit those?

Cath: (chuckle) Well, I always find the eye roll helps. No, I'm kidding.

Gene: Right?

Cath: It can be awkward; it can be very awkward. So I always think it's nice to just be pretty direct: "It's really been nice meeting you..." You know, when I say that to you, that's your hint that it's kind of finished here. I'm not a big fan of look at your watch, shuffle, all of that kind of stuff. I think first of all, some people are so opaque they don't pick up on it. And secondly, when they do pick up on it, it feels rude.

But if we're at a networking event, we know we're all here to meet people, and so I don't think it's out of line to say, "It's been so great talking to you. I want to be sure I meet that person over there," and just end it. End it politely, but end it all the same.

Gene: At these meetings people are going to be exchanging a lot of business cards and I know I'm guilty of this: coming back from a trip and you see those business cards, you put them on your desk, you think you're going to do something with them right away, but something happens and then you lose those connections. Do you have advice for people on how to follow up?

Cath: Oh my goodness, you know, I have a box of business cards on my desk, Gene. I often ask people if they've expressed an interest in me and my work, I ask them if I can stay in touch with them. And I do that with a newsletter. So Gene, if you're not on my list yet, I want to send you my newsletter.

And so when people agree to that, I enter their business card into Infusion Soft, which is the system I use, and then I can regularly follow up with them.

If I meet somebody and it seems like they probably wouldn't be that interested, you know, it's going to be social, not a business thing, or they don't have something to learn from me, I do put those cards in a box and I often use social media as a way to connect after an event: either Facebook or LinkedIn is probably more typical, and send somebody a LinkedIn request and say that I'd like to stay in touch.

Gene: Do you have other social media advice? I mean, that's definitely a way that people do stay connected now, but there are some appropriate and inappropriate ways to stay in touch with people.

Cath: Yeah. You know, one thing is... this is really not so much about social media, but I mentioned my newsletter – it really irks me when I meet somebody and then the next thing they're in my inbox and I didn't give them permission. I never start sending somebody my content without them expressly asking for it or saying they're willing. So that's one thing, is not to just randomly bombard people with email that they didn't expect.

And I like to use LinkedIn. I love Facebook, but really Facebook is for fun more than for business. So I have disciplined myself to use LinkedIn as a follow-up for people that I've met at events. I think that works, at least to have some connection so that if they want to find me again or I want to find them again, we can do so.

Gene: I promised our listeners that I'd ask you about handshakes and I know I've had some that would break my hand and others where it's hard to feel the person behind the hand. So what advice do you have there?

Cath: So the rule of thumb is: if your palms are sweaty, dry them off first, and the shake should be palm to palm. So a lot of times you'll find people kind of grab your fingers or, as you say, they're sort of limp. You want your palm against their palm and the web of your thumbs should meet.

So when you do that, you'll find that your hands are firmly gripping, and then you pump twice, three times tops, and then you break that handshake.

A lot of people will do things like touch somebody on their arm, like they're shaking hands and then with their left hand they touch the person's arm. A simple handshake is enough. I'm not ready for hugs, shoulder touches, top of the hand touches, any of that stuff with somebody I just met. In my work with clients, with groups especially, I have found that women in particular are kind of sensitive to that.

I did one workshop, Gene, where this woman talked about that, how she doesn't like it when people put their hands on her. And then we went around, everybody shook hands, and one of the guys that she shook hands with shook her hand and put his other hand on her shoulder. And she was creeped out. She was wearing a sleeveless dress, so he was touching skin. And it felt too intimate for the acquaintance that they had. It was really off-putting to her.

So those are some things to watch out for. And one other thing is to look somebody in the eye when you're shaking their hand, like actually take a moment and imagine that you're having a little, bitty connection or relationship here in this short amount of time, and be there for it. I mentioned earlier being present with somebody. Really do that.

Gene: Something I've noticed over the years too is that when you do look into a person's eyes, you kind of get visual cues from them on what is acceptable and what's not acceptable. Would you agree?

Cath: Absolutely. And one other thing about handshakes... some men in particular have a tendency to... they'll take your hand, so your hand is vertical, so your thumb is pointing up and your little finger is down, and they'll take your hand and kind of turn it so their hand is on top as they shake. That is a really transparent dominance gesture and most people don't like it. So it's just something to watch out for if you're the kind of guy who feels like I'm in charge here; it puts people off.

So I would just say that too about the handshake as a quick note. Just keep your hands vertical, thumb pointing at the ceiling, pump twice, maybe three times, and break the handshake.

Gene: Okay, I know Catherine that as I listen to this interview after it's over with, I'm going to say oh gosh, there's something she said that I should have followed up on. So help me out here a little bit. Do you have some other last-minute tips for people or something that deserved a little bit more explanation?

Cath: You know, the big thing... I know it sounds like I harp on this, but if I have a chance to reiterate anything, it's the importance of being other-focused. People's favorite subject is themselves and when you give an opportunity for somebody to say something about themselves and you really come off as being genuinely interested, they will open up in a way that they will never open up when you're just going through the formulaic here's my name, here's my title kind of stuff.

So I guess I feel like if you don't have the interest in having a moment of actual contact with somebody, then don't bother: you're not in the mood to network or you're out of time for networking or you just don't want to talk to these particular people, then that's okay to decide that and don't do it. But don't do it halfway.

Gene: So Catherine, how can people stay in touch with you and learn more about what you're doing?

Cath: Oh, I'd love for people to find me at catherinejohns.com. It's Catherine with a C: c-a-t-h-e-r-i-n-e, J-o-h-n-s.com. And on my website you can sign up for the *No Buts Action Guide to Getting Up and Getting Your Message Out*. That's a gift for people who have an interest in this kind of communication. It really is about: How do I meet people? What do I say about myself? How do I plant seeds so that there's an opportunity for follow-up later?

Gene: We've been talking with Catherine Johns today about personal communication, and we'll look forward to seeing you in Boston, Catherine.

Cath: I can't wait, Gene.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this addition of "Our American States." We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Google Play. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.