



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, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

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### **The “Why” of Working in the Legislature | May 2, 2021 | OAS Episode 129**

Ed: Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This podcast is all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith.

*“I think the initial interest or attraction, as you described it, for me was how quickly I was able to utilize my abilities and skills in this arena, coupled with my knowledge that what I was doing every single day was directly and indirectly impacting the citizens of my state.”*

*“Providing nonpartisan advice and assistance is exciting, believe it or not, and it’s in my blood. It’s kind of like having seats at the 50-yard line of a really good football game.”*

That was Sabrina Lewellen, Deputy Director and Assistant Secretary of the Arkansas Senate and Eric Nauman, lead fiscal analyst for the Minnesota Senate. They’re my guests on the podcast.

This is a special episode of “Our American States” to observe Legislative Staff Week 2021. This annual event recognizes the enormous contributions the thousands of legislative staffers make every day in state houses across the nation.

Our focus on this podcast is on the “why” of legislative service. As legislatures have grown more partisan and often become more challenging environments in which to work, we asked our two guests, both longtime staffers, to talk about what motivates them, how they deal with the stress and what advice they would offer to their colleagues.

Eric and Sabrina, welcome to the podcast.

Eric: Thank you, Ed. It’s nice to be here.

Sabrina: I appreciate the opportunity. Thank you for having me.

*Time Marker (TM): 01:54*

Ed: Sabrina and Eric, thanks for taking the time to be on the show. As I mentioned in the introduction, I want to talk with you about why you work for the legislature and what motivates you and your colleagues. But let's start with the basics. What first attracted you to working in the legislature, how long have you been doing it, and what's your current role? Sabrina, why don't we start with you in your work for the Arkansas Senate.

Sabrina: This July I will begin my 19<sup>th</sup> year of service with the Arkansas Senate. I'm the Deputy Director and Assistant Secretary. Legislative service was not on my radar when I returned to Arkansas after having finished undergraduate school at Fordham University and law school at Vanderbilt. I was just home for a short break and then planned to return to Nashville.

I had the chance to work for the legislative session in 2003 and I was asked to stay on full-time, and I remain here to this day.

I think the initial interest or attraction, as you described it, for me was how quickly I was able to utilize my abilities and skills in this arena, coupled with my knowledge that what I was doing every single day was directly and indirectly impacting the citizens of my state.

*TM: 03:11*

Ed: Eric, tell us about your work in the Minnesota Senate.

Eric: Thanks. I currently serve as the lead fiscal analyst with the Minnesota Senate and help establish the Senate's version of the state budget. I draft fiscal legislation and manage ten nonpartisan fiscal staff. I've served in this role since about 2012, but that followed about 15 years as the state's education fiscal analyst, or I should say the Senate's fiscal analyst for education.

Prior to 1998, I served the New Jersey office of legislative services for about five years, helping with that office's process of revenue estimating, drafting the state budget and tax legislation.

In my current role I work with ten smart, interesting fiscal staff. That might seem like an oxymoron, but they're really great people. Each of them is incredibly creative and very skilled at solving whatever fiscal problem is served up for breakfast that morning by the Minnesota Senate. And together we work to help Minnesota senators develop the state's budget and then, in the interim, we provide oversight over that budget once it's been enacted.

*TM: 04:18*

Ed: Eric, let me stay with you for a minute. We know having a clear sense of purpose helps employees focus on their work, even during difficult moments. So, what's your purpose or your "why" for working in the legislature?

Eric: That's a great question, Ed. I think it goes to what brought me to the Capitol in the first place. I grew up in California as the son of two journalists. For a time, my father was the Capitol Bureau Chief for the Sacramento B before becoming its ombudsman, and my mom was the managing

editor of the California Journal, which at its time was a monthly magazine that covered state politics.

Dinnertime was a little bit of a classroom of sorts as mom and dad brought home stories about what happened during their workdays, and other journalists from the state's newspapers of record were often weekend dinner guests at my parents' table. So, I developed a pretty healthy fascination for government and politics, but specifically legislatures.

Over time I realized that my parents and their friends found passion in the reporting work of others, but I found a fascination wanting to play a role in the legislative process myself.

My father's later career as newspaper ombudsman created a healthy respect for ethics and the elimination of bias in reporting. So, when I completed my graduate studies at Rutgers, the New Jersey legislature and a nonpartisan fiscal role was a natural fit for me.

I've truly grown to appreciate that nonpartisan staff role in being able to support both parties as each endeavors to respond to public policy questions and to develop Minnesota's state budget. Providing nonpartisan advice and assistance is exciting, believe it or not, and it's in my blood. It's kind of like having seats at the 50-yard line of a really good football game.

But I would like to say that I think it's a little bit of a legacy from my parents' role of reporting all sides of the story. I try to provide quality and reliable information to all legislators to facilitate informed decisions. No two days are exactly the same and my colleagues in Minnesota are wonderful people from whom I learn a lot every single day.

*TM: 06:21*

Ed: Sabrina, how about you? What's your "why"?

Sabrina: There are too many parts to my personal "why" I've been working in legislative service. First, I hail from a family of public servants and community investors and citizen advocates, because (my who??) is a former state senator, an uncle who is a former state representative, an aunt that's a former state representative here in Arkansas.

My father was a minister and civil rights leader for over 40 years. My mother was an educator and a community leader as well. So, my family taught me and all my siblings to give back. They demonstrated through their life's work the importance of giving all you've got and investing yourself in where you live. So, I was raised to believe in service and to do my part.

But second, the legislative ecosystem I think offers a rare chance to do all of those things simultaneously. So, I had my family's teachings, but this is real tangible change. Nothing I do is small. Everything matters to someone somewhere. So, every letter, every phone call, every email, every process, every transaction that I'm facilitating for that day, it matters, and I see it.

This is a nation with a government of the people, by the people and I'm one of those people. And I'm blessed to be here, and I get to do this job. I get to do this job and do my part to help make the legislative branch of our state government work for them.

*TM: 07:48*

Ed: Now, it's no secret to any of us that in recent years, legislatures have become more polarized and partisan. That combined with the events of the past year, a pandemic, a national conversation about social justice and an attack on the U.S. Capitol have made legislatures challenging places to work.

So, Sabrina, as a nonpartisan staffer, can you talk about what continues to motivate you, what keeps you interested in continuing your career in the legislature?

Sabrina: It's so interesting that we're doing this this week because 26 years ago this week in a speech of mine that I wrote for the veterans of foreign wars was read into the congressional record by my then congresswoman Blanche Lincoln. I was the state winner of their oratorical competition and the theme for that year was "my vision for America."

In preparing for this and as I've done this many times over the 19 years I've been in service, I have looked back at what I said when I was young to remember the catalyst for my motivation. And a piece of my speech said, just briefly: we have to realize that in order for any working unit, such as a country, to function properly, each element must make its contribution. So, my vision for America is not one of apathy or self-focus, but of caring and involvement. It's easy for me to sit and visualize a better society, but if I do not dedicate myself to this endeavor, how can I expect others to do the same? So, my vision for America does begin with me.

So, my motivation started young, and it has maintained itself, though I have days when my motivation does dip. And on those days, one of the things I do is I reflect on some wisdom that I received years ago from one of our longstanding state senators who shared something with me that imprinted my brain. And that was that what she's doing, what I am doing every day in our respective roles is for another day. We're building better, we're bringing value as only we can bring to our institutions. Someone came before me so that I could be here today. So, I need to remain humble and mindful of the grace in which I stand to be able to do this job.

So, wow, yeah me – I'm lucky enough to get to do it. And so, I'm going to do the best that I can so I can carry it forward and someone else can do the same after me.

*TM: 10:13*

Ed: Eric, what's your perspective on the work after this past year like no other we've ever seen?

Eric: Ed, that's a real good question. I wish I could be as profound as Sabrina was. What I will say is that this feels like it has been a year like no other than I've seen in my career. The pandemic in Minnesota eliminated the legislative interim for all of us. We had sessions every 30 days to manage through that pandemic, and it was a real challenge for our part-time legislature.

Particularly for nonpartisan staff, what we've seen is a level of increased partisanship and polarization, and that's been sometimes difficult to watch. We discuss these trends amongst ourselves sometimes almost daily as we sort of get on Zoom sessions and talk through the challenges of a given day and what we're watching.

I think some folks on our staff take these trends more personally than others and if it continues, there are some good people that may choose to go elsewhere to work and, if that happened, it would truly make me sad.

What I will say for myself is I've always viewed politics as the way a civilized society manages through conflict, either for better or for worse, and social conflict is very apparent in America. It's impossible not to see that, particularly in this year, and we've experienced it quite acutely here in Minneapolis with the death of George Floyd.

However, legislatures are also... I guess maybe what I should say is legislatures are a place where politics get applied, but they're also regenerative institutions that live, breathe and evolve with changing events in society. Legislatures have never been static and they're always breathing and changing somehow, and they somehow find a way to manage through the challenges of a particular moment.

So, I try to take a longer view when the partisanship feels acute and remind myself about how the legislative institution itself was put on this earth as a relief valve for conflict and I think we're all better for it. As I said before, the legislature seems to find a way and I take heart in that.

*TM: 12:20*

Ed: So, this of course is Legislative Staff Week and that's why we're here talking today. And it's a good time to share advice with other legislative staffers as they try to think about some of these same issues. Eric, what piece of advice would you want to pass on to your colleagues about working in the legislature?

Eric: I look at the legislature as a people-based institution. That's not particularly profound, but I think it's vital that we get to know the other people in the institution. I think this means building strong relationships both with legislators and other staff and frankly, everyone who interfaces with the legislature.

I think it's particularly important to get to know individual legislators and figure out what motivates them, frankly why they ran for office in the first place. And I think if you get to know the legislators as people, it becomes far easier to work with them on a specific problem. Let's be honest – we get to spend pretty long hours with them.

But I think it's human nature as people, and this is one of the hard parts of the COVID circumstance, is that we're all as human beings thriving for that personal connection. I believe if you take the time to really meet and understand members and other staff, it's key to making yourself someone to whom legislators or another staff member would like to turn when they need a piece of legislation on a thorny issue.

We're all salespeople for our own work and I want members and other staff to feel comfortable with me so that they'll call and ask to work with me. When they do, I think it's a compliment. I want each person to have a good feeling about their interaction with me. So, when I get that chance and they make the phone call, that's when I get to show them and ply my fiscal trade if it were, which for me is the fun part.

TM: 14:01

Ed: Sabrina, how about you? What advice would you want to share?

Sabrina: I don't think you have enough time to hear all... (laughter) Oh wow.

Ed: Let's say one piece of advice.

Sabrina: So much; there's so much. But Eric is right on the money. We are in the people business. This is about people and process and policy and that may be partisan at times, but people and their needs I think are quite the same across the board. So, my advice is: be all in, show up, meet yourself where you are in the moment, study from the masters around you, but certainly in light of the last 12 to 14 months, I would say also acknowledge and don't deny.

Don't betray yourself if things are getting tough or you need a moment. Be unabashedly honest with where things are and reach out. There are lots of layers for all of us as legislative staffers. I tell friends of mine: It's one of the jobs that has a different text on what we do than others because yes, we have our job duties, we're professionals, we're well trained, we do a good job in our arena. But we don't divorce ourselves from who we are outside of our respective domes where family members, spouses, daughters, sons, parents, and we care about what happens and what's happening at our job impacts us too.

So, attend to you and all the roles you play in your life inside and outside of your legislative commitment – I think it will help make you a better professional overall.

TM: 15:43

Ed: Sabrina, thank you. We're going to take a short break and then be back with the rest of our discussion.

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TM: 16:29

Ed: I'm back with Sabrina Lewellen and Eric Nauman. Sabrina, I think we've all had a moment in our jobs when we really had to question whether we wanted to keep doing them. I know I have. Sabrina, have you ever had one of those moments and, if so, how did you overcome it?

Sabrina: I have had so many moments to date and there is a good chance I'm going to have a lot more moments between now and my sunset in my professional career, because that's life – it brings challenges. So, yes, I have had moments. And two things I do, I try to do, and I remember.

The first is my mother and my brother taught me the importance of the integrity of one's personal and professional brand. Be a good steward of your brand, be careful to remember the difference between reactions and responses. You don't want to do something in a way with a member, with a staffer that could stain your professional brand in a way that's irrevocable.

So, when those moments have come for me, and often they're not moments, they are chapters, they are days on end, and we are in a session. It may feel like suffering, but it's just challenging. I try to focus on the end game and play the movie to the end and think about what I may or may not do in this moment or the next day or the next day. Control what I can, impact what I can, but do not get stuck in the loop of my emotions or my thoughts or my feelings, because I may have a reaction that stains and is permanent instead of a professional, measured response. The second thing is I have some wonderful mentors in my life. I call them my trust tribe. They're there for me; we're there for each other; we lift each other up and support each other. And, as a legislative staffer, we give a lot perpetually over and over again, hour after hour. There is a lot of sacrificing in ways that few people can understand, and we don't always get it back.

So, I try to surround myself when I can and put myself on my calendar and meet with my trust tribe, get rejuvenated so that I can come back to my job, be all in and be the best that I can be, and get through my moments, which are often much longer than moments.

*TM: 18:47*

Ed: Eric, how about you? Can you think of a time when that question came to mind for you?

Eric: I think it's natural. I think we all feel that way at some point. I will say, however, I feel pretty lucky to be doing the job I've always wanted to do. I appreciate the organic nature of the legislative process and I still find it very, very exciting.

So, when I feel the blues on a particular day, week or session, I try to imagine to myself what the heck else I could be doing that would give me the variety of experiences, the exposure to working with a diverse collection of people that is intellectually stimulating every single day, and I'll be honest, Ed, that usually does it.

So far, I know in my bones there is nowhere else that I could be to ply my trade that would give me the intellectual challenge and excitement that this job provides. So, when it happens and there will come a day when I look at the landscape and I don't see that continued excitement, then I'll know it's time for me to step aside and let somebody else take on my role because, again, I'll reiterate, the legislature itself is a regenerative institution and when I can't feel excited by it, then it's time for me to step aside and let somebody else do it.

That day will inevitably come, but I frankly hope it's a fair ways off.

*TM: 20:13*

Ed: Let me ask you about burnout. I think this must have been an issue for some legislative staffers in this past year. Eric, how do you help avoid burnout and are there strategies you could share that you think help?

Eric: Ed, this one hits close to home because it's pretty current. In late 2020 my mother-in-law passed away suddenly right prior to the state budget forecast, which for us was a really busy time. And then just three weeks ago I lost my own mom. Thankfully, neither was from COVID, but my mom's passing occurred right in the middle of a really busy time fiscally.

The Minnesota Senate was in the beginning of its current budget session and we're all working remotely. It was a recipe for high burnout and pressure and the emotions seemed quite close to the surface. The work side of my life and the personal side collided in a pretty dramatic way and it's something I haven't experienced before.

I've always been hesitant about bringing the personal side of my life into the work setting. However, the circumstances in the past three months made it pretty unavoidable and I struggled with what to do. In the end, I chose to just sort of lean into it. I told legislators, I told colleagues, and I asked for understanding.

I'll confide... I guess I'm not confiding because this is a pretty public setting, but I was pretty scared to do it. It was a time of lots of burnout and stress. But by trusting in my colleagues and legislators, I availed myself of good friendships and support that I'd never asked for before, and the outpouring of support was more than I could have imagined.

Colleagues backfilled for me during my absence. I should say my mom and dad lived in California, so it required several trips west while all this was happening in the middle of session, which I've never done before. But my colleagues sent me good wishes in a myriad of ways that I never expected.

And so, I guess I would say for me it was a really good learning experience and I learned that taking a moment to confide and discuss pressure and impending burnout gave others a chance to step in and help. I talked about human desire before; I think that's part of what we all desire, is to help others, I think particularly in the legislative institution because that's kind of what we do is we're helping others.

When burnout feels present, I think it's important for each of us to find a safe place to give voice to that stressor. That's what I've taken away from the last three months. That could be a chat with a spouse or a colleague or, in my case, the cat, but it was pretty vital. So, no matter what the stressor is, I think suffering in silence is the enemy and I think trying to avoid that is the best recipe that I can think of.

Ed: Eric, I'm so sorry to hear about your loss. I think it must have been a very difficult time.

Eric: Thank you, thank you. Yeah, it was a tough session.

*TM: 23:13*

Ed: Sabrina, let me ask about you and how you view this issue of burnout.

Sabrina: First, Eric, I am so sorry to hear about the loss of your mother.

Eric: Thank you.

Sabrina: I think we as children can think we're prepared, but we are never ready. I lost both of my parents during sessions too and I absolutely understand where you are, so my thoughts are with you and your family in the days to come.

Eric: You know, Sabrina, I'm sorry to interrupt you. I will just add parenthetically, I'm sort of worried about this as a native Californian living in Minnesota. I knew that this day would come, and I always feared that it would be right in the middle of session and, sure enough, that's exactly what happened.

Sabrina: It's not our timing, which is the preparation. You can think you have things in place, but you're never ready, never ready, so I'm so sorry to hear that.

As for the burnout, it is real, it can be raw, it can be unforgiving. So, my advice is that for times when you're feeling saturated with all that's required of your job, I certainly feel that do not betray yourself, be honest about how you're feeling, and own it. And, as I said before, vote for you. No one else is going to vote for you the way that you can, so that means assessing what your needs are.

One example for me is in the almost 19 years I've been with the Senate, I've never taken a week vacation. I've been gone for a week: NCSL, other commitments. But I have not taken a week off. And just the reality of what I do, it's just not something I think I'll do for a couple more years.

But what I am doing a better job of is maximizing our state and federal holidays because when the members are busy and not engaged and the state is closed, it's an actual break instead of me just scheduling a vacation on the calendar and saying I'm going to be gone. Guess what? No one cares that I'm gone.

So, weaving that through gives me all of these vignettes of space breaks instead of just one designated week. So, I highly recommend it.

Also, just assessing what things you can do every day and every week. Maybe you don't work late every day. You do that Monday through Wednesday and you leave on time Thursday and Friday. Or you only work late one day a week. You do better about your weekends and making them just that. All of the things you can do on a daily basis, on a weekly basis, they do add up, so that when something hits such as a loss or an unforeseen illness, you have some energy in your tank to make it through it, because if you are running on Q, way past for E, Q for quit all the time, you won't have it and then you're going to pay a price and you may not like what happens after that. Your body will make you stop.

*TM: 25:57*

Ed: So, Sabrina, let me stay with you for a minute on this same notion of advice. You and Eric are both veteran staffers and I wonder what's the best piece of advice you'd have for someone just starting their career in the legislature.

Sabrina: My advice is to be a perpetual student of the process and the body you work with and for. I think it really helps you to learn it, not just to do it, and students learn, they study, they ask questions, they take notes, they keep their notes. So, look around you. There are lots of seasoned employees and public servants who have been there for some time. Schedule some time with them. They have excelled in legislative service.

If you want to be them, talk to them; they're the masters. So, my advice is to be a student. You do not know everything. None of us do. Eric is absolutely right – this is an organic space that changes every millisecond and certainly with new people because of the nature of the legislative body. With new people comes new stuff and we have to adjust.

So, if you have a student mentality, that you're taking it in and you're growing and learning, I think you'll be successful in what you do.

*TM: 27:07*

Ed: Eric, how about you? If you could share one piece of advice for someone just starting out, what would it be?

Eric: I think Sabrina pretty much nailed it. I think it's important for all of us to remain curious. I think she's more articulate than I would be about this, but I think having a thirst for knowledge, for new things will keep you fresh and excited for the work.

I've stuck around this long because every day is different, and I remain excited to learn new things. I think in the first couple of years it's easy to learn new things because everything is new; literally everything we do as new staffers is brand-new and it's so weird and different from anything else you do in any other work setting.

But I think the challenge is holding on to that energy as you have years under your belt. I have found that it's vital to listen carefully to what members are telling you and frankly what they aren't telling you. I like to ask members a lot of questions about their goals in legislative direction and, after a couple of decades, I've noticed, at least in myself, it's easy to assume oh, we know the answer to a particular problem. And I try to guard against that.

I think of the reaction of oh, I've seen that before; let me apply the typical nonpartisan response to that. I think it's important to guard against that. I try to approach members, get to know them, understand their motivations... I've talked about that before. But try to approach their questions as unique problems.

I think that if I do that, it then keeps that curiosity in my mind and helps it feel fresh. So, I think being curious on the front end is important, but working to stay curious, and I do that by listening carefully, enables me and I think it would help others stay in the legislative context for a long time.

*TM: 28:54*

Ed: As we wrap up, I wonder if you've thought about what you'd like your legacy to be as it relates to your impact on the legislature and on the institution as a whole. Eric, why don't you take a first crack at that.

Eric: Ed, a legacy as staff? I've never really given that much thought. I guess fundamentally I suppose I would want members, staff and colleagues to remember me as approachable and useful to the Minnesota Senate. I'd want to be remembered as a source of solid, reliable information and for my ability to provide unbiased, nonpartisan advice frankly in a calm manner during the hectic and crazy moments of session.

But I'd like to return to that notion of approachability. Members and staff have plenty of sources of information, anything from agencies to lobbyists to the public. If members don't find us approachable and useful, they won't use us and if they don't use us or won't use us, no matter how smart or thoughtful or helpful we think we are, we can't fulfill our value to the members and the legislature itself.

So, from the most senior member of the Minnesota Senate to its first-year staffer, I think I'd want to be remembered by each of them as approachable. And I think if we're approachable as staff, that members and other staff will see that we have something to offer and that we can provide our worth to the legislature. So, for me it truly begins and ends with that notion of approachability.

*TM: 30:32*

Ed: Sabrina, what are your thoughts? You get the final word here.

Sabrina: It's never far from my heart that there may be a component to my legacy that is about firsts. As an African American woman in this role in a job that did not exist before I had it and to have the trajectory that I have had in the Senate, it's all been a first. So, I'm incredibly grateful for the shoulders I stand on and to those who paved the way for me to be able to be where I am today.

And I'm reminded of that a lot when we have girls' date or boys' date or there are tourists in the capitol and young children who look like me come up to me and ask me how I got here. And I'm proud to tell them how I got here and that I am here, and they can be here too.

But I also hope my legacy has been with senators who are no longer in the chamber and their families whom I've gotten to know over the years, with senators in our current general assembly, and the citizens I work with and for. And in the years ahead, I hope my legacy just as a snapshot is a reflection of these three stanzas in my father's favorite hymn and that is: May the works I've done speak for me; may the life I've lived speak for me; may the service that I give speak for me.

I hope that my legacy is that I was all in all the time, and I was here, and I gave everything that I had in every way that I knew how to the Senate, to this institution and to my state of Arkansas.

Ed: Well, I want to thank you both for a very interesting discussion and for sharing your thoughts on the critical work of legislative staff. Take care.

#### MUSIC

Ed: And that concludes this edition of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our episodes on iTunes, Google Play or Spotify. You may also go to Google Play, iTunes or Spotify to have these episodes downloaded directly to your mobile device when a new episode is ready. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, this is Ed Smith. Thanks for listening and being part of "Our American States."