

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.

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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.

Advice on leadership is abundant in books, online and electronic resources. But for the lead officers of the 99 chambers in America’s state legislatures, they operate in a unique environment.

Tim Storey, Director of State Services for the National Conference of State Legislatures, is with us today to share his top ten things that great legislative leaders do. So Tim, how is leadership in the legislature different than in other fields?

Tim: I think legislative leaders have one of the most challenging and difficult jobs of all leaders. It’s an incredible combination of influence, the ability to motivate people, relatively little sort of command and control leadership devices like you might see in a hierarchical corporation where it’s very clear: the CEO says jump and people ask how high, or in a frontline battlefield situation and if the platoon sergeant yells at the soldiers, then they’re going to do what he says to do.

But that’s not the case in the legislative environment. You are chosen by your peers and you are really, one, the chief among equals at that point. So they’re elected by the people. You’re not their boss. Their boss is the people of their district, the people who voted them there, the people who return them to the legislature.

Being a leader in the legislative environment means you have to focus really carefully on those skills of consensus building, of rallying people to your cause or your communication skills, persuasion – I mean, you have to persuade that it’s for the better of the team, and you have to

define team in many different ways. Who are you working for? You're working for the state, you're working for your chamber, the legislative institution, and you're certainly working for your caucus and also the voters who may or may not return you to that seat.

Legislative leadership is different because the team picks you; you don't pick the team. You get the team you're dealt and you can't necessarily walk out and fire somebody if they're insubordinate. You can't send them packing like in a corporate environment.

So there are many different challenges to being a legislative leader. It's an extraordinarily challenging job, grueling at times to move policy agendas; you have to be thinking about political considerations always because if you bungle the political considerations, then your leadership is going to be very short-tenured, because at the end of the day you have to convince the voters to send your team, your caucus team, back into the majority. So that's another big role that you play and that ties into fundraising and campaigning and all of those things, which is just a completely different hat.

So you wear many different hats. You have... your direct authority is sort of limited in a lot of ways. Your greatest power comes from your ability to convince people that you have the right direction, that they need to follow you, and it's in their interests.

Gene: You recently wrote an article for State Legislatures Magazine on the top ten things that great leaders do. What criteria did you use for making this list?

Tim: There are innumerable lists of what great leaders do. If you put leadership into Google, you'll come up with almost a billion return hits, so there's no lack of advice on what it means to be a leader. And because the legislative environment is so different, and I have been able to observe and talk and interview legislative leaders; I've been working in this field for nearly 30 years; I've been working directly with leaders for a shorter amount of time, but have certainly been aware of the good ones and the bad ones. And I thought: Well, what do I think are the traits that good leaders have? And I came up with this list of ten. There are probably ten more that I could put on the list, maybe more. Sometimes you see a list on the Internet of 99 things leaders do among those billion pages about leadership.

So, yeah, these are ten things I think are particularly applicable to the legislative environment, and legislative leaders may be stronger on some of these things and not on others. But you find those stellar, those outstanding, those A++ leaders really carry through on almost all of these traits. So this is sort of my opinion, one man's opinion from observation, interviews and listening as much as I can to these are things that great leaders do. And I'd love to talk about them one by one. So let's go.

Gene: Okay, let's go through the list and start with: remain calm.

Tim: It's interesting... there's some neuroscience behind this, and I often try to tell people that when you are challenged, and this really applies to all legislators, not just legislative leaders... when you are challenged, your amygdala part of your brain fires a big jolt of adrenalin into your brain. It takes your body, by the way, about 20 minutes to flush that out. So for around 20 minutes, you're operating on a very different plane from a neuroscience perspective.

So when you're challenged, I really encourage legislative leaders, and I've seen this happen over and over and over again – the ones that don't take the bait when they're directly challenged, who just stay calm, are the ones who are going to appear the most distinguished, the most leader-like, and it has this great added bonus that you see more options.

So when you're not just in fight-or-flight mode, when you don't just respond to that amygdala surge of adrenalin like, you know, what do I do – because that's when you say things you regret. And I've told leaders this over and over again. Don't get trapped into saying something you wish you hadn't said, and this is what happens when you're challenged.

Another amazing thing about the neuroscience is that when you're challenged physically – if I were to come up and punch you or pull a weapon on you – the part of the brain that is triggered by that physical challenge is the exact same part of the brain as if somebody walked up to you and insulted you just out of the blue and called you a jerk or a bad name, then the brain reacts just as if it's being physically assaulted. So you can be verbally assaulted in the legislative environment. Don't take the bait leaders. Keep things calm. Try to tone down the drama when things get overheated.

I love... the guy who figured this out is renowned neuroscientist Thomas Jefferson over 200 years ago who said: When I'm angry, I count to 10 before I say anything. And if I'm very angry, I count to 100.

Gene: Next is: operate with honor and integrity.

Tim: Obviously great leaders and any legislator, it's all about your word, and that's the coin of the realm in the legislative environment. If you don't have integrity, if you don't back up your words with actions, your credibility, your influence will drain away rapidly. "Trust is earned in drops and lost in buckets" is the old saying. I think great legislative leaders understand this maybe better than a lot of other rank-and-file members.

But we've gone through the vast, vast majority of state legislators. State legislative leaders operate with integrity, they do what's right; they understand that when they step out of line, when they do something that's unethical or wrong, it casts incredible skepticism by the public on the institution, and they know the damage that does.

But there are a few examples, and too many frankly, of legislative leaders who in weak moments, I think oftentimes frankly when they're tired, when they're not making good decisions, they haven't eaten right, they haven't gotten enough sleep, they make bad decisions, decisions that dishonor the institution, they step across the ethical line.

So I just think it's important to underscore: always be attuned to how easy those temptations are. Realize you represent the institution more than anyone else in that body, and you have to do what's right. And that means don't give in to these temptations, whether it's a corruption situation, which unfortunately has happened in some rare cases. So I just think it's important to underscore that. Keep your honor and integrity. You set a tremendous example as a leader and you have to maintain that.

Gene: What about: commit to learning?

Tim: I've always thought that the most interesting people and the most thoughtful people are those who are curious, who are always... you know, they show up for sessions that we hold at NCSL meetings and just try to learn something. They see every encounter as an opportunity to learn from somebody.

And as I studied some of the leaders that I really respected like, for example, Senator Brent Hill from Idaho's... the head of the Idaho Senate, no one embodies this more than Senator Hill – always curious, always looking for ways to learn from situations; goes to every session on leadership, and this is a man I consider one of the most outstanding leaders in the country today of a legislative body – but he always comes to the leadership training sessions eager to learn more, hungry to learn more. And you find out: those are the people who get it right. They're always trying to fine-tune, tweak, find out something new. So being a lifelong learner is really critical to constantly revisiting what you know, what you think you know, and what you need to revisit.

The greatest quote on these lines is a guy once said: When you stop learning, you start dying. And that was Albert Einstein who we all recognize as one of the most incredibly intelligent and knowledgeable people of all time. You know, so if Einstein said he was going to go to his grave learning every day, I think that's a good thing for leaders to follow.

Gene: And you have one other one here that often gets overlooked in my opinion: use humor.

Tim: You know, this is a tricky one because some people are adept and sort of naturally funny I guess, and I think it's a dangerous thing – you can, you know, sometimes humor can be misinterpreted. But I've found over and over again that the leaders who know... use it somewhat sparingly, you know, you can't always be the clown and the funny person... the leaders who are able to at just the right moments sort of draw down the drama and the tension with the right comment – sometimes you've got to let that tension build up and you have these tense moments in legislative meetings, caucuses, even on the floor. But the ones who, I think, sort of try to keep things in perspective...

The work of the legislature is unbelievably important; it's the cornerstone of democracy, legislative work. Having said that, you've got to take the work seriously, but don't take yourself seriously... The leader of the Allied invasion of Europe, Dwight Eisenhower, he said that. He was known... people think he wasn't a funny, easy-going guy. It's actually quite the opposite was true. He loved being in the field with the troops and was easy-going. He said: Take your work seriously; don't take yourself seriously.

And I think leaders that get in trouble are the ones that take themselves too seriously. Yes, the work you're doing is super important, but remember to lighten up sometimes and try to defuse tense situations with just a little bit of humor.

Gene: So there are four out of Tim's top ten list of things that great leaders do: remain calm, operate with honor and integrity, commit to learning, and use humor. When we come back, we'll get three more items on Tim's list.

(Break)

Gene: We're with Tim Storey, Director of State Services for the National Conference of State Legislatures, and working down his list of the top things that great leaders do. But before we get to that list, Tim, I have a question to ask. It's no secret that we live in a very partisan country right now. Is leadership more difficult in this age and time?

Tim: I don't know if leadership is more difficult. It's certainly different. It certainly has changed in our times. I think the pressures on legislative leaders from their party organizations are more difficult. You've got internal party conflict in both parties; I think that's made it more challenging to lead a caucus and to lead a chamber. So I think the partisan environment has made it difficult. Leadership has always been difficult. Getting big things done is hard.

Plato in the cave, you know, he talked about how hard it is to get people to travel to new territory, to leave the cave and the safety that that entails. And one of the definitions of leadership is disappointing your followers at a rate they can absorb – that comes from Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky and their adaptive leadership work. And I think when you operate in this hyper-partisan environment where everything you do is being analyzed, talked about on talk radio, blasted across thousands if not millions of Facebook pages, you know, that changes the dynamic of how hard it is to get people to go along sometimes with something they may not quite understand fully, and that puts more pressure on you as a leader to do it in these partisan times.

So I think that's what's more difficult – the media environment that leaders operate in and, you know, leaders have the best perspective in convincing your members and the public that they need to have a broader perspective, especially in a time when you're being held to partisan purity at every turn. Both sides of the aisle and the talk radio environment that facilitates that and the social media environment that bolsters that, that's what's made it more difficult.

Gene: Great. Let's get back to that list. Next we have: assemble the right team.

Tim: Jim Collins talks a lot about this, the business guru who wrote the seminal leadership book, *Good to Great*, about corporate America. But I think his point is you get the right people, you can trust them; they're going to get the job done. The leader can't do it all – that's the bottom line. And leaders get into trouble when they try to hyper-manage, make every decision. You've got to let other people make decisions. That means you've got to trust the people around you and get the right people around you.

I mean it seems fairly obvious, but you'd better get chairs that you trust, you'd better get chairs who have positive attitudes frankly. I mean, I think there's a lot of terrific research in the leadership literature that if you have saboteurs and people who are only out for themselves, aren't seeing the bigger picture, they may be high performers, they may be able to accomplish some things, but the long-term damage they do to the team, and whether that team is your committee chairs, your caucus, your whole body... and you'll have different teams that you're the head of – you need to make sure you've got the people who are constructive, positive, have the right skills.

But think very, very long and hard about those decisions of who you put in the different committee chair roles and who you put on your leadership team. They're a reflection of you and

their values are a reflection of you, and sometimes you have to make political decisions and we're not so naïve as to assume not. If you can choose those team members, those top team members very carefully and purge the toxic people, give them an assignment that lets them operate on their own, the idea killers and the whiners and the ones who think they're smarter than everybody else, those will destroy your team.

Gene: Tell me more about: bounce back from defeat.

Tim: It was maybe the last decade or so as the leadership scholars have looked at how people emerge and become outstanding leaders, one of the things they realized was that failure is a key part of it. Great leaders have failed. They've tried things, they've been knocked down, and they get back up. I mean, we've known this for centuries; humanity has known this for centuries.

John Wooden, the legendary coach at UCLA, he once said: Failure isn't fatal. The failure to change might be. So don't be afraid of failure. Know that you can bounce back.

I like to also quote J.K. Rowling who sold over a billion books. She's one of the top ten best-selling authors of all time. Of course she wrote the inimitable Harry Potter series. And she said: Failure is so important. We speak about success all the time, but it's the ability to resist failure or use failure that leads to greater success.

And I think this is true in a legislative environment too. You're not going to win them all. You're going to lose some bills; you're going to lose some legislative priority items. That doesn't mean you go curl up in a ball and give up. Great leaders retool, learn from their mistakes, and try again, and try again, and try again. And also are self-reflective, self-aware, realize that maybe I'm not right here; I've got to listen to some people. So I think having grit is super important to being a great leader.

Gene: And next is: seek solutions.

Tim: Great leaders are compromisers. They're people who try to find common ground. The issues that face legislatures today are extraordinarily complex. You know, the easy issues don't get to the leader's desk. Those are taken care of. So the things that get into your office as the Speaker of the House or the President of the Senate, those are the most challenging issues, which means that there are interest groups and your friends and your enemies on all sides of those issues. And most issues are not binary. It's not black and white, good, evil, right, wrong. Most issues are multi-variant; they've got multiple solutions and extraordinarily complex complications.

So I think the good leaders are the ones who say: We're going to find a solution for this and we're going to talk to everybody. We're going to seek out common ground with everybody. I've heard over and over again that some of the most successful legislation is often working with the people who appear to be your opposite, you know, the person in the other chamber who comes from a completely different background. And then you go and talk to them and it turns out you've got a few things in common. And leaders seek out those voices that may not be all... they don't sound like them, they maybe think differently. So you go and you talk to them and you'd be surprised at how much you find out.

And realize that you're not going to agree with everybody all the time. If somebody agrees with you 100% of the time, there's something wrong with that person. They're lying to you more than likely. But that doesn't mean that the people who disagree with you can't be a constructive part of your solution approach.

Ronald Reagan said: If someone agrees with me 80% of the time, he's my 80% friend, not my 20% enemy. Go out, talk to those people who may think differently than you, seek compromise, seek common ground. I've seen leaders do that and it's a key to success for them.

Gene: Tim just shared three more items on his top ten list of things great leaders do: assemble the right team, bounce back from defeat, and seek solutions. We'll get his top three items after this short break.

(Break)

Gene: We're back with the Director of State Services for the National Conference of State Legislatures, Tim Storey. Tim, what are the best ways for state legislative leaders to learn about leadership?

Tim: There are a number of groups like NCSL. We have tremendous leadership programs. We bulked them up in recent years and we've really been refining them constantly. So we have leadership training throughout the year. We have leadership development materials on our website, so you can go there and just search for NCSL leadership and find things there.

I think it's the workshops; I think it's getting out of, frankly, getting out of your own state sometimes and talking in an environment with people from other places who may have some of the same challenges, but see it differently, and getting out of your own echo chamber.

And there are other organizations like the State Legislative Leaders Foundation, the Senate Presidents Forum. I mean, they're particularly for legislative leaders who are putting on special training. So I think because legislative leaders have been so unique, you want to come to NCSL because the work we do around making you a better leader, a more effective leader, is designed specifically for that unique environment of the legislature.

And I'll make one last point – NCSL's mission is to strength the legislative institution, to provide a network for legislators and legislative staff, to share ideas and solutions, and to represent the states before the federal government. The first part of that mission is to strengthen the institution of the legislature, and I think if you're striving to improve your leadership chops, that strengthens the institution. That's what NCSL is about; that's what we're about. We're trying to make you better as a leader, whether you're just a rank-and-file legislator who wants to move into leadership, and, by the way, all legislators are leaders in their own way. You lead all kinds of efforts, whether it's legislation or back in your community, or groups within the legislature. You can use NCSL's resources and the programs that we have, the special leaders meetings that we hold throughout the year, to bulk up your leadership skills. That means the institution gets stronger, and that means NCSL has fulfilled its mission, and that's we're all about.

Gene: Okay, let's get back to your top ten list of things that great leaders do. So far you've revealed seven pieces of advice: assemble the right team, bounce back from defeat, seek solutions,

remain calm, operate with honor and integrity, commit to learning, and use humor. Next on the list is: communicate effectively.

Tim: You cannot communicate enough. I mean, I think there are some people who think the sort of super quiet, let them guess what you're thinking style works. I'm not sure I agree with that. I've seen it not work too many times. I think the key as a leader is to always be telling the people who are on your team where you're headed, what you're thinking, no surprises. There's almost no such thing as over-communication. I think the style of communication and, you know, some people talk too much – there's that part of it. I'm not saying just talk a lot. But I'm saying make sure people know what you're thinking, where you're going, and then not guessing what your priorities are and what your values are.

The great Winston Churchill said: The difference between mere management and leadership is simply communication. Great leaders communicate and they do it effectively, and they work at it; they hone their communication skills.

There's another saying in the leadership field: "What got you here will not serve you well." So sometimes the communication skills to get to be the leader are much different than what you need to be a successful leader. So I think even when you get to that point, you've got to continue to refine and make your communication skills even stronger.

And I think another part of communication is realizing that if you really want people to retain and believe what you're saying, you appeal to the storytelling side of people, their emotions. Emotions in communication have tremendous power. The great poet Mia Angelou said: I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. And if you look at the great leaders across time, they all had the way to inspire people, make them feel like they belong on the team and that they're part of the cause and buy in to the mission of what you're trying to accomplish.

So your number-one goal should be to communicate, communicate, communicate, and make sure that people know what that is and they're all on the same page. And by the way, if there's bad news, get that out there. Don't sit on bad news. That's one of the dumbest things leaders do sometimes. They think something will happen and things will get better and, you know, sometimes yeah, you've got to look for other options, but unlike fine wine, bad news does not age well. Get it out there. Tell the people that need to know.

Gene: Okay. Tell us about: listen more than talk.

Tim: A popular saying is that "God gave you two ears and one mouth and use should use them in that proportion." It may be even more than that. In fact, Jim Collins, who wrote *Good to Great* that I referenced earlier in the program, he said: Great leaders ask two to three times more questions than they make statements. Great leaders are always asking powerful questions and then listening, listening, listening.

The four most powerful words that a legislator has are: What do you think? I learned that from a legislative leader in Ohio who said that a number of years ago. And I think it's as true today as it ever was. It's an incredibly valuable skill and it's so over-rated. You know, we're so eager; we have so many great ideas; we want to jump in and tell people what we stand for, tell them what

to do. But people will respect you if you listen to them and we have to authentically listen. It's that authenticity that's really key.

Dale Carnegie, the great salesman, said: You can make more friends in two weeks by being a good listener than you can in two years trying to get people interested in you. And I think that's a big mistake some leaders make that derails them. They want to make it all about them – look at me, let me tell you about how great I am. People want to tell you about how great they are. Listen to them and then you'll find out a whole lot of things that will help you make key decisions when you get in trouble.

Gene: And finally, the number one item on the list: have a vision.

Tim: So having a vision means being able to articulate really clearly where you want to go, and if it's too broad, that's not very helpful. You really need to narrow it down to very specific goals, communicate those over and over again to your team, focus on how it fits into the mission. If your mission is to make the state better than it's ever been before, you know, that's a totally valid mission statement, but a vision is what specific things we want to accomplish to make that happen.

So you're going to get infinite distractions as a legislative leader. Every problem comes through your door as a legislative leader. And you've got to know which ones are exactly that – distractions. Keep focused on that vision.

Another thing is that you're going to be told over and over again that it's hopeless – the budget is a disaster; there's nothing we can do. Great leaders stay optimistic. We've made it through tough times before, which we have. You know, our states have all faced incredible challenges, and you tell people we've made it through these times before, we're going to make it through again, and things are going to be better.

You know the mission, you keep your team focused on it, you underscore it every chance you get. It seems counter-intuitive, but you can't just say this once; you've got to refer back to it over and over and over again. And when your closest people start to feel a little sick of it, you might actually be making some progress. So constantly remind people of why you're there, what you're trying to accomplish, what your goal and vision are, and you might actually get it done.

We'll close with another Ronald Reagan quote: To grasp and hold a vision – that is the very essence of successful leadership, not only on the movie set where I learned it, but everywhere in life, said Ronald Reagan. And I think that's absolutely true. Know where you're going, stay optimistic, and you're going to accomplish really great things.

Gene: Any final thoughts on legislative leadership, Tim?

Tim: Everybody is like oh, what we need here is more leadership. We have great leaders and I think the challenges are extraordinary, as they always are. We always think our times are the most challenging and difficult and we certainly live in challenging and difficult times. But I've met so many men and women in state legislatures in leadership roles, and there are just some tremendously talented people out there who are working tirelessly at great self-sacrifice. I don't think... sometimes other legislators don't appreciate it. Certainly the public doesn't often

appreciate the hours and the struggle that these people go through and the sacrifice that they make.

So when it comes to legislatures and our democracy and our legislative institution, I feel very good about things because I know the people who are working on it, and they have tremendously good motives and intentions. They have lots of different ideas. They all have the right goal, which is to make life better for the people who live in their states. If they keep an eye on that, things are going to be really good for the states moving forward.

Gene: Our thanks to Tim Storey for walking us through this great list: use humor, commit to learning, operate with honor and integrity, remain calm, seek solutions, bounce back from defeat, assemble the right team, communicate effectively, listen more than talk, and have a vision. And that ends this episode of Our American States.

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