

What Great Leaders Do

Leaders have an abundance of skills.
Great leaders have mastered these 10.

BY TIM STOREY

You may have read the words above and thought, “Thank goodness. Finally, someone has written an article on leadership.” OK... probably not. The truth is, there’s an ocean of advice out there for leaders and aspiring leaders. Just Google the word “leadership” and you get more than three-quarters of a billion hits! However, only a tiny fraction of them target leaders in state legislatures.

Legislative leadership is different and one of the most complex of all roles. Legislative leaders wear several hats: leader of the state, leader of the chamber and leader of the caucus. And they manage those roles knowing they must always pay close attention to their most important constituency, the voters in their home district. They accept that the needs of, and demands from, these various constituencies sometimes will lead to conflicts that defy easy answers. It’s a complicated juggling act, and, frankly, relatively few people have the skills and experience to excel in the job and become truly great legislative leaders.

Plus, it has become more challenging over the past decade. The slow-growing national economy and budget woes have made it more difficult to address pressing state needs. Public opinion of elected officials hovers at record lows, making it tougher to recruit the best candidates for legislative service. Online critics with sizable followings pounce on every decision with biased vitriol. Pressure to raise campaign funds is at an all-time high.

It’s a tough job.

That’s why this unique role deserves thought and attention. No two legislative leaders approach challenges the same way. There is no one model for great leadership. And yet, truly extraordinary legislative leaders have mastered most, if not all, of these skills.

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1. HAVE A VISION

“In order to lead a country or a company, you’ve got to get everybody on the same page, and you’ve got to be able to have a vision of where you’re going.”

—Jack Welch

Great leaders maintain a positive vision and keep others focused on the big picture and end goals. In the legislative environment, this often means assuring members, staff, lobbyists and the media that challenges are temporary and that there will be a positive outcome if everyone does their job and stays focused. Great leaders remain optimistic that the legislature can get the job done even in the face of seemingly impossible circumstances. They help set the goals that will define a successful session before it even starts. And they keep members focused on those goals despite infinite distractions.

Idaho Senate President Brent Hill (R), who wrote a book on



leadership, recognizes the necessity of keeping his eyes on the end goal. “Sometimes we, as lawmakers, get so caught up in the everyday chaos of politics that it is difficult to stay focused on our most important goals. Unreasonable demands of constituents, biased criticism by the media and pressures from other elected officials drain our energy and generate cynicism. Legislative leaders can either fuel the commotion or provide the vision to see beyond pressing challenges and focus on the objectives that matter most.”

2. LISTEN MORE THAN TALK

“Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.”

—Winston Churchill

A former legislative leader once said that the four most powerful words for a leader to say are, “What do you think?” Successful leaders ask questions two to three times more than they make statements, says Jim Collins, business guru and author of “Good to Great.” And they ask with authenticity. Effective leaders listen before sharing their opinions. They never talk just to demonstrate how much they know. People want to be heard, and great leaders listen. As the adage goes, humans have two ears and one mouth for a reason. That’s a good ratio to strive for—listen at least twice as much as you talk.

Hawaii Senate President Ron Kouchi (D) says listening is key to success. But one should also try to understand what people are hoping to convey with their words. “You have to get buy-in from your members to get things done, and the only way to get there is by listening and understanding what’s most important to them.”



3. COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

“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.”

—Maya Angelou

Leadership pros know not to be too silent and inscrutable. That just creates a vacuum that fellow members must fill by guessing their leader’s positions and motives. The best leaders constantly inform their colleagues what they stand for. They hone the most powerful tool in the communication toolbox: storytelling. Stories inspire people and simplify problems. Effective storytelling reaches people on an emotional level, and that is how people make decisions about whom to follow and what to support.



When leaders have important news to share, they get the word out quickly, increasingly through social media. People respect leaders who share information, even if it is bad news. Delaying bad news almost never works; unlike fine wine, it does not “age” well.

Speaker Bill Howell (R) is now in his eighth term as the leader of the Virginia House of Delegates. He is one of the most respected legislative leaders in the business today, and his success is partly due to his mastery of communication. “Your position is only as strong as your communication is clear,” he says. “It does not matter where you stand on an issue if people don’t understand it. Story telling and real-life examples are compelling tools that allow leaders to connect with constituents and voters in an emotional way. As a leader, it is important to build a narrative, develop a trend and communicate your perspective in a creative way. The clearer you can be, the better off you will be.”

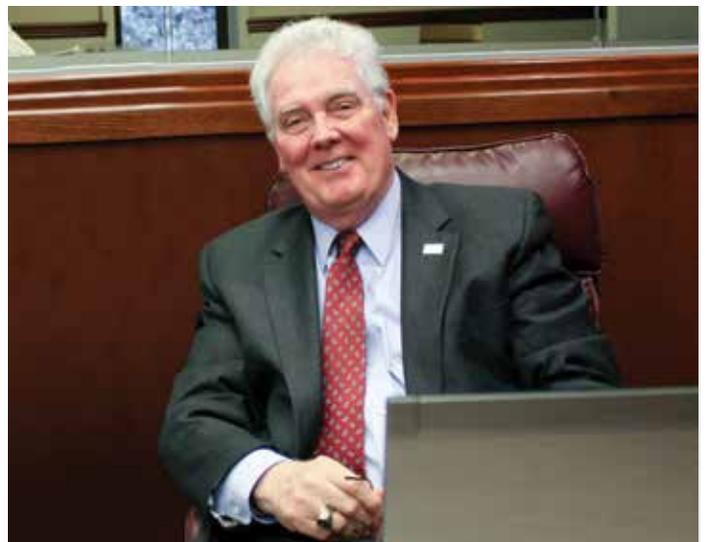
4. ASSEMBLE THE RIGHT TEAM

“The absolute most important trait of a great leader is putting the right people in the right seats in the organization.”

—Jim Collins

Choosing the right advisers, friends, committee chairs and staff is vital. Successful leaders take all the time possible to choose the right people for the right jobs. They find people they respect and trust. It is critical, since these people will reflect on them. Great leaders also purge the toxic team members, those who think they are smarter than everyone else, the whiners and the idea-killers. Effective leaders are strong enough to include people in their inner circle who can disagree with them and let them know when they are getting out of step with their followers. Groupthink in a small legislative leadership team is a fast track to trouble.

After John Hambrick (R) became speaker of the Nevada Assembly, he put together a leadership team based on what he had learned over a 30-year career in law enforcement, including being on the Presidential Protection Detail for the U.S. Secret Service, working as an agent for the Immigration and Naturalization Service and serving in the federal Inspector General’s office. “Any leadership team needs others who can fill in areas where the top leader is not as strong. It’s also an important goal to match the right people to the right job by looking at their past experience.”



5. BOUNCE BACK FROM DEFEAT

“I have not failed; I’ve just found 10,000 ways that don’t work.”

—Thomas Edison



Setbacks are inevitable. Elections are lost; bills are defeated. Great leaders do not let failures define them. They regroup, study what went wrong, learn from it and try again. Much of the business literature about leadership calls this trait “grit.” Exceptional leaders know that weathering hard times and absorbing tough blows will prepare them for the next challenge.

Iowa Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal (D) suffered a major defeat early in his legislative career when his caucus unceremoniously dumped him as its leader. Gronstal spent time reflecting on why he ran for office in the first place. “The whole point is to make a positive difference, and I decided that I could still do that despite such a major setback.” He is now in his third term as the Senate’s leader.

6. SEEK SOLUTIONS

“The person who agrees with you 80 percent of the time is a friend and an ally—not a 20 percent traitor.”

—Ronald Reagan

In this era of hyper-polarization, successful leaders continue to be the ones who build coalitions. Sometimes those coalitions are within one party or caucus. Other times, collaboration requires reaching out further. Great leaders find common ground with those who do not agree with them on every issue, but who might on some, or even one. They don’t burn bridges. When they have to tell people “no” (and great leaders do, a lot), they do it with grace and with an eye toward maintaining the relationship. They know that it is far more important to get something done than to simply prove a point.

Wisconsin Speaker Robin Vos (R) started his legislative career believing his job was mostly to vote no, to stop things from happening. He changed his focus because he wanted to get things done, and that meant working harder to “find out what people can support, not just what they oppose.” He learned that “you cannot accomplish anything by always being against everything.”



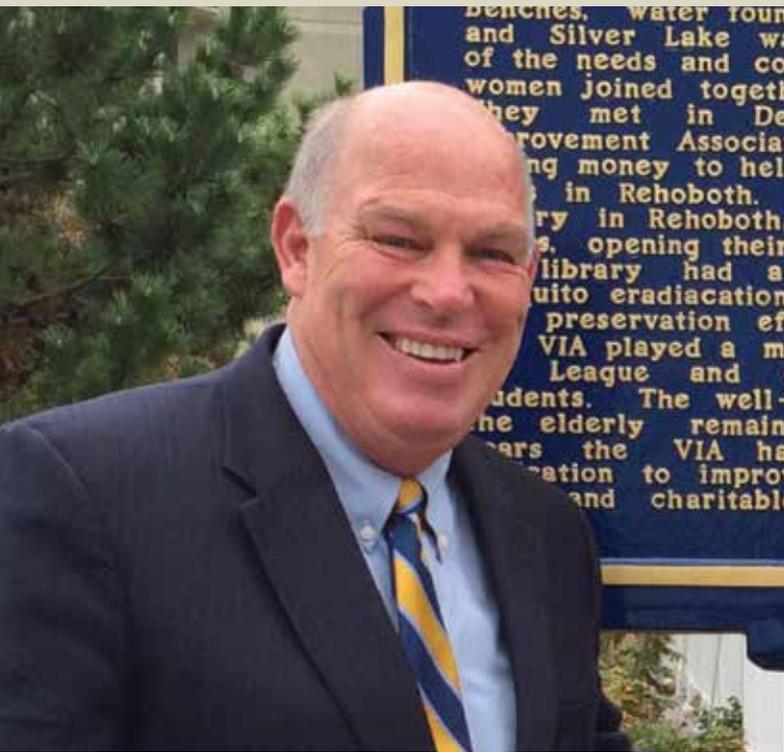
7. REMAIN CALM

“When angry, count to 10 before you speak. If very angry, count to 100.”

—Thomas Jefferson

Great leaders keep their cool when things get hot. They stay calm when others freak out. It gives a leader a distinct advantage. The human brain is hardwired to fight or flee when challenged—in other words, to get defensive. The tendency to get defensive applies whether the challenge is physical, like being surprised by a snake, or verbal, like being slandered. Calm leaders function more efficiently. They are able to see more options to handle challenges, and they avoid doing or saying things they will regret.

Delaware Speaker Pete Schwartzkopf (D) understands this concept better than most because of his 25 years as a state police offi-



cer. During his career, he often had to make snap decisions, sometimes involving life and death. “Nothing we do in the legislature needs to be a snap decision. As a leader, I’ve developed my sense of patience. Nothing gets resolved with anger. You have to be the bigger person, the smarter person. You have to check your anger at the door and maintain relationships, because that’s how you get things done. Anger is counterproductive.”

8. OPERATE WITH HONOR AND INTEGRITY

“Always tell the truth. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest.”

—Mark Twain

Like it or not, leaders’ actions are intensely scrutinized. Leaders set the example and the tone about what behavior is acceptable and what crosses the ethical line. And when a leader brings dishonor to the institution, it is magnified by a thousand and destroys public trust in government. As the adage goes, “Trust is earned in drops and lost in buckets.”

Indiana House Speaker Brian Bosma (R) has seen the legislature suffer as the result of members acting badly. “The confidence and integrity of the institution is fundamental to our freedoms and to the democratic process. It is imperative that we as leaders steer clear of situations that will discredit the institution. We must hold ourselves to an even higher standard of integrity because our actions reflect not only the members of the legislature but the institution itself.”



9. COMMIT TO LEARNING

“Once you stop learning,
you start dying.”

—Albert Einstein



The world of the legislature and state policy is exceedingly complex and constantly changing. Successful leaders understand the importance of learning new information and theories. Learning keeps them sharp and gives them an advantage. Being a lifelong learner is one of the strongest indicators of success in the private sector. Great learners read books and listen to audiobooks; they push themselves to explore new hobbies and crafts; they travel to new and interesting places; they seek out people of different backgrounds. The best legislative leaders are the ones who know they still have much to learn.

When it comes to history, New Hampshire Senate President Pro Tempore Sharon Carson (R), is both a professor and a student. She knows the importance of understanding the past while serving in the present. “People tend to forget history, but I love to study it because we can learn from how our forefathers solved problems and learn how to avoid mistakes that they made.” She also loves to meet legislators from other states and learn from them. “Like any skill you might possess, legislative leaders need to refresh and update their leadership skills. Attending conferences and having discussions with your colleagues from around the nation lets you find out how they dealt with similar problems.”

10. USE HUMOR

“A sense of humor is part
of the art of leadership, of
getting along with people,
of getting things done.”

—Dwight Eisenhower



Eisenhower also said, “Always take your job seriously, never yourself.” The work of legislators is very serious, and usually there is little to joke about. Leaders who know how to lighten the tone at the right moment, however, tend to be more successful than those who always keep a straight face. When leaders are good-natured and lighthearted, it boosts creativity and brings teams together. In fact, the two most admired qualities of leaders are a strong work ethic and a sense of humor, according to a study of more than 2,700 employees by the Bell Leadership Institute. Of course, humor can backfire if it’s demeaning to others.

In addition to being one of Colorado’s most experienced legislators, Senate President Bill Cadman (R) is known for his quick and creative wit. He understands that humor can be an effective way to move forward, if used productively. “Humor shortens the time it takes to build relationships, and success in politics and policy is all about relationships.”

Just the Beginning

Of course, this list could be much longer. Great leaders take care of themselves physically and mentally. They maintain a healthy sense of humility and take all of the praise that comes their way with a grain of salt. Great leaders recognize that their days as leaders are numbered and that they have a duty to leave the institution better for their having been at the helm.

Having the title of leader does not automatically make you a great one, or even a good one. But if you commit to working on the things above, that’s an excellent start on the journey to greatness. 🏆