Toolbox

5 Tips for Every New Lawmaker

Getting elected was hard work, but now the really hard part begins—representing your district. If you are one of the 1,500 brand-new lawmakers elected last fall, are you prepared? We compiled the following advice from several seasoned legislators.

1. HOLD ON TO YOUR VALUES
   Don’t lose sight of who you are. Follow your moral compass. The legislature operates on truth and trust. Keep your word. And keep your ambition in check. Fellow lawmakers may treat you as an equal, but attention from the media, lobbyists and constituents can go to your head. Don’t let it. It’s easy to start feeling more important than you really are.

2. PLAY BY THE RULES
   Obeying the law should be a given, yet most ethics scandals occur because this advice was ignored. When in doubt about an ethical gray area, find a mentor and seek his or her opinion. Know your state’s constitution and master your chamber’s rules. Clerks, secretaries and seasoned legislators are excellent resources. Use them. Do your homework and you’ll build your credibility. Cavort with the enemy! Remember, you no longer are campaigning, you are now governing.

3. SERVE YOUR CONSTITUENTS
   You are there to serve, but don’t promise more than you can deliver. Know where to draw the line with constituents and where to send them for answers. Always follow through to make sure they were served. Invite people to the capitol, do surveys, write newsletters and attend community meetings. Send out email blasts before big votes. Schedule town meetings and pop into local cafes. You were elected by a majority of voters, but you represent everyone in your district.

4. GET SMART
   Specialize in a policy area or look to fill a void, then team up with experts. Give clear instructions to bill drafters. Focus on your committee work as this is where the in-depth work on bills is done. Remember, state budgeting is driven by service, not profit. Be honest and forthcoming with the media and lobbyists and avoid grandstanding. The press may want a good story, but you don’t have to be the one to give it to them.

5. AVOID (THE MANY) FRESHMAN TRAPS
   Be aware of first impressions. Too many freshmen introduce bills with great ideas of how to spend money, but with no idea of where the money will come from. Don’t commit too early to other people’s bills. Keep your eye on long-term policy goals. Draw a line between the needs of your constituents and personal relationships with colleagues and lobbyists. Avoid a quid pro quo mentality.

Parting thought: This comes from former Wyoming Representative Rosie Berger (R), who would walk the capitol’s vacant halls in the mornings before business started: “Be grateful for your opportunity to serve the public. Find some quiet time to collect your thoughts and gain appreciation for your experience as a legislator,” she says. “In the quiet of the morning, I absorbed the history of the building. It reinforced why I chose to run and serve.”

These tips, which have been updated, were first compiled by NCSL’s Peggy Kerns and published in February 2013.