TOOLS OF THE TRADE

LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

During her six years as governor of New Hampshire, Jeanne Shaheen learned a lot about what good leadership means.

BY JEANNE SHAHEEN

Everything about measuring performance and making state government more efficient and effective starts with leadership. Leadership is important. It makes a difference, whether you’re the head of state, head of a legislative chamber, head of an organization or agency, or heading a project or task force.

No matter how we define it, leadership matters. We can practice all the performance management techniques available, but without effective and involved leadership, we won’t be successful.

Jeanne Shaheen was a New Hampshire senator from 1990 to 1996. She then became the first woman governor of New Hampshire, serving three terms. She was director of Harvard’s Institute of Politics at the Kennedy School until she resigned to run for U.S. Senate in the upcoming election.

1. KNOW WHAT YOU BELIEVE AND WHAT YOU WANT TO GET DONE.

Sometimes leadership is described as a sense of purpose. I have a lot of students who come to see me because they want to run for office some day. I tell them it’s important to run—not just because you want to be in Congress or in the statehouse—but because you want to accomplish something, and you know what it is. These convictions not only help you persuade the public about what you are trying to do, they provide your strength when the going gets tough—when you’re criticized and when the obstacles seem too daunting.

2. DON’T EXPECT IT TO BE EASY.

When you become a legislative leader you don’t get the easy questions. The people under you handle those. When I became governor, I got to decide which portraits of past governors were hung in the governor’s office—and that was the last easy decision. You’re in that leadership position to make the tough decisions, so plan on it. When you make decisions, inevitably some people are happy and some people are not. Public jobs are designed to be tough. You operate in an environment where there is distrust of government and people on the “outside.” And sometimes people within your own department don’t understand how government works.

3. YOU DON’T GET TO SET THE AGENDA.

When I got elected, I thought I would be able to pursue the agenda I laid out in my campaign. Of course, it’s never that way. When you’re a leader, you have to deal with the challenges and problems when they appear—whether that’s personnel problems, those time vampires, or an unexpected court decision. The corollary of that is “decide when you need to decide.” Don’t make a decision just because someone else wants you to. Many bad decisions are made because people commit themselves before they are ready and then feel a need to carry out their commitment.

4. BEWARE OF RISING EXPECTATIONS.

Be clear about what can be accomplished and how difficult it will be to get there. I was the first Democrat to be elected governor in New Hampshire in 16 years. Every Democratic activist and campaign volunteer thought my election meant we could do everything on the Democrats’ agenda. Not true.

5. TAKE RESPONSIBILITY AND BE RESPONSIBLE.

People want a leader who can make a decision and then take responsibility—whether good or bad. If it’s bad, you can be sure you’re the only one responsible, and if it’s good, there will be lots of people willing to share it. John Kennedy, for example, accepted responsibility for the Bay of Pigs fiasco and his public opinion ratings went up as a result. At one point Kennedy said, “I don’t understand it. The worse I do, the more they love me.”

Be responsible—don’t pander and don’t take cheap shots. Real issues are at stake.
YOU NEED POPULAR SUPPORT TO GET THINGS DONE.

Don’t get too far out in front of your constituency or you may find they are not following you. Build coalitions and develop consensus. Educate your constituents about what needs to be done. Most change is evolutionary, not revolutionary. It’s not easy.

WHEN YOU SAY “NO” TO YOUR FRIENDS, DON’ EXPECT THEM TO LIKE IT.

You expect your opponents and enemies to be critical, but the harshest criticism usually comes from your friends. Engage and push back.

FIND THE BEST TALENT YOU CAN TO HELP YOU IN MAKING DECISIONS, INCLUDING THOSE WHO DON’T ALWAYS AGREE WITH YOU.

The best decisions usually come from seeking multiple perspectives on an issue. The least effective leaders are usually those who don’t want to hear a contrary point of view and want only “yes people” around them. It becomes even more of an issue when things get tough and the tendency is to “circle the wagons” rather than expand the circle. You must create a climate where it’s OK to raise concerns. You need a climate of candor or trust.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS.

Building relationships helps you trust people when you need to get something done. Remember, as a leader, you don’t have the luxury of not getting along with those who disagree with you. Be nice. You can be tough and still be nice to people. Remember, you see the same people on the way down.

UNDERSTAND WHAT YOUR “BOTTOM LINE” IS.

You need to know when you can compromise and still declare victory. The corollary to this is to know when you can’t compromise without losing either your principles or your policy.

SHARE THE CREDIT.

Recognize that everyone has their own personal interests and if others can benefit from what you are supporting, they are more likely to come along. People usually act in their own self-interest so make it in their self-interest to support what you’re doing. Indira Ghandi once said: “My grandfather once told me that there were two kinds of people: those who do the work and those who take the credit. He told me to try to be in the first group; there was much less competition.”

COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE.

You have to be able to communicate to be successful in your initiatives. You might be able to get things accomplished, but if you can’t get the word out, the perception may not be successful. Ronald Reagan, for example, was known as the great communicator because of his optimism, directness, humor and ability to make fun of himself. He understood the power of words. Reagan had a simple strategy for dealing with the Soviets. He said: “We win, they lose!” When his approval ratings hit their lowest point in 1983, Reagan told his pollster Richard Wirthlin, “I know what I can do about that. I’ll go out and get shot again.”

Of course communication is two-way. It also involves listening. Communication for leaders is a performing art. You must also be aware of your audience.

KEEP LEARNING

Becoming a better leader requires work. It requires looking at what you’re doing now and reflecting on how you can improve. First and foremost, it requires internal change that gets reflected in your external behavior. But, of course, it’s worth the work because it allows you to be more effective in everything else you do.