

## Legislative Effectiveness Committee

### Meeting Summary

December 2011

**Meeting Session:** A New Look at Effective Committee Chairs

**Overview & Trainers:** We need to emphasize civility and deliberative problem solving within the process of vigorously and assertively debating our different points of view in the legislative arena. Since the critical work of the legislature often occurs in committee, this session used experienced committee chairs and staff in an interactive workshop session to share tips and best practices on striking this balance.

Trainers: Representative Rick Miera, New Mexico

Representative RaeAnn Kelsch, North Dakota

Bruce Feustel, Senior Fellow, NCSL, Colorado

**Summary:** Bruce Feustel introduced the topic and the trainers, who provided advice about:

#### *Importance of Committees*

- Committees are the place in the legislature where people are heard. The committee chair needs to keep this fundamental idea as a priority in committee business.
- The committee chair has to be knowledgeable about the committee's subject matter. The committee must have a good sense of perspective and experience, and the chair needs to lead in that regard.

#### *Importance of Planning:*

- The chair must link the committee's work to the overall agenda for the House or Senate and the priorities of the committee members. Representative Kelsch starts with identifying her committee's top three shared priorities.
- Use the knowledge and talents of all your committee members. Help them to see how they can bring their perspective and expertise to improve the committee work products. In particular, the chair should encourage members to ask witnesses the kinds of questions that identify problems with legislation.
- The chair has to be available to legislators, special interests and others to hone the bills before the committee. The chair should be flexible in making time to connect with the various stakeholders.
- The initial drafting work and refining of requests often falls to the chair. The chair has to work with legal and other staff to make sure the bills and amendments are correct.

#### *Running Effective Meetings*

- Creating the meeting agenda is a critical task. The chair must have the political sense to know how much time each bill should take.

Also, it saves people's time to schedule similar or related bills on the same day.

- The chair must balance firmness and openness. While everyone should feel welcome, the meetings need a formality and structure to enable the committee to do its work and make decisions.
- A chair's most difficult decisions may come around balancing the need to be efficient with giving people the opportunity to be heard. Try to describe any time restrictions or limits before testimony begins. It sometimes works best to give each side a time limit and allow each to allocate speaking time to supporters
- Occasionally the chair needs to take an issue "offline." If problems occur and there is no "ready solution," the chair may need to delegate the work of coming up with a solution to a group working separately and allow the committee to continue with other business.

#### *Additional Tips*

- Members respect a chair who is consistent---the members need to be able to rely on this.
- A chair needs the big picture sense to keep his or her committee addressing the correct priorities, plus the attention to detail to make sure the committee's work is productive and accurate.