How To Be An Effective Legislator

Advice From The Experts On: Effective Legislative Leadership

National Conference of State Legislatures
The Forum for America's Ideas
The National Conference of State Legislatures is a bipartisan organization that serves the legislators and staffs of the states, commonwealths and territories.

NCSL provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues and is an effective and respected advocate for the interests of the states in the American federal system.

- To improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures.
- To promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures.
- To ensure state legislatures a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system.

William T. Pound, Executive Director

DENVER OFFICE
7700 East First Place, Denver, CO 80230
(303) 364-7700

WASHINGTON, D.C., OFFICE
444 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite 515,
Washington, D.C. 20001
(202) 624-5400

www.ncsl.org
To order an audio cassette version of this CD please call NCSL at (303) 364-7812.
How To Be An Effective Legislator

ADVICE FROM THE EXPERTS ON:

Effective Legislative Leadership

Guide Book

Copyright NCSL 2005

National Conference of State Legislatures

The Forum for America's Ideas
Introduction

Panelists

- Senate President Dave Kerr, Kansas
- Representative Walt Freed, Speaker of the House, Vermont
- Jo Ann Davidson, former Speaker of the House, Ohio
- Art Hamilton, former House Minority Leader, Arizona

What legislative leaders do:

- Provide a statewide perspective.
- Deal with the other house, governor and press.
- Shape the policy agenda.
- Aim at the big issues.
- Serve and protect their members.
- Maintain the institution.
Initial Advice

**How you balance the good of your district with the good of the state:**

- Commit to the needs of your state and caucus.
- Explain the benefits of leadership to your constituents.
- Be able to ask your caucus to sacrifice for the good of the state.
- Understand the political consequences.

**Advice new leaders need:**

- Don’t try to satisfy everyone.
- Keep working to be inclusive.
- Focus on leading your caucus.
- Talk to your members on their own turf.
- Delegate significant responsibility.
- Be candid on what you can and cannot do.
- Appreciate the wide range of members’ constituencies and political beliefs.
- Keep legislators engaged in work.

**How to move from the minority to the majority:**

- Change the “no” mentality of your caucus.
- Find a couple of early battles to win.
- Realize that the budget is the key test.
- Follow through on what you complained about when you were in the minority.
- Unify the caucus on the key issues.
The biggest challenges facing leadership are:

- Ensuring civility and setting the standards high.
- Seeking bi-partisanship where possible.
- Recognizing the role of the media.
- Understanding the anger inherent in politics today.
- Realizing the trade-offs between short-term and long-term gains.
- Preparing for unpredictability if you have term limits.

How to be a role model:

- Talk to members and the public about responsibilities, not just rights.
- Have a vision.
- Understand the importance of force of character.
- Bring others up behind you.

Importance of Relationships

How to motivate your staff:

- Explain your vision and their role in it.
- Strive to be trustworthy.
- Understand that staff members want to be part of a success.

How to build relationships with members:

- Get to know their families, backgrounds and districts.
- Follow the rule of “no surprises.”
- Understand that everyone has a job to do.
- Emphasize communication.
How to work with the governor:
- Hold regular meetings.
- Find common priorities.
- Talk honestly.
- Push for “one on one” time.
- Understand the governor’s view.

How to work with your counterpart in the other house:
- Meet at the start and divvy up some of the key bills.
- Avoid arguments over duplicate legislation.
- Don’t pass unrealistic bills expecting other house to take the heat.
- Realize that the legislature is adversarial, but need not be ugly, personal or divisive.
- Use anger sparingly.
- Never stop talking with the other side.

How to work with the media:
- Understand the nature of their job.
- Base the relationship on candor.
- Give your answer, then stop.
- Have staff warn you about breaking issues.
- Coordinate with your counterpart leader.
- Remember you are always on stage.
- Don’t fall in love with your own voice.
Toughest Leadership Issues

How to discipline members:
• Realize that discipline is sometimes political and sometimes personal.
• Lead by setting the highest level of personal conduct.
• Understand the different levels of discipline available.
• Handle discipline issues swiftly and decisively.
• Realize that the worst thing is to leave problems unaddressed.

How to make key committee appointments:
• Realize that this will make or break you as a leader.
• Concentrate on getting capable chairs for finance, tax and other top committees.
• Pick the best leader, not necessarily the most knowledgeable about the subject.
• Be prepared to deal with hurt feelings.
• Allow members to request assignments.
• Don’t overestimate the cost of doing the right thing.
• Follow your instincts.
• Know that you will pay the price for a bad committee chair decision.
Final Words

What will keep you awake at night?
• Not getting enough done.
• Grappling with the toughest issues, like school funding.
• Failing to find common ground.

Final points of emphasis
• Seize your great opportunity and privilege.
• Work as hard as you can.
• Maintain the integrity of the institution.
• Concentrate on the big issues.
• Have a vision and significant goals.
• Emphasize patience and communication.
• Remember why you first wanted to serve in the legislature.
• Treat each day as if it is the day on which your career will be judged.