

15 Tips

As sessions begin, reviewing this sage advice will help you be the best you can be.



1.

Honor the institution.

Thomas Jefferson did it. So did James Madison, George Washington and Alexander Hamilton. They worked tirelessly to make representative government work—one of democracy’s worthiest pursuits. Preserve and protect your legislative institution so it remains a strong, co-equal branch of government. Tearing it down diminishes your ability to solve problems. To work well, government requires a bond of trust between citizens and their representatives. Tell them what you stand for and what you intend to do during your time in office, then work as hard as you can to fulfill those promises.

2.

Take the high road.

Understanding legislative etiquette and ethical responsibilities is vital, not only to the institution and your constituents, but to yourself. Recognize the effect your behavior can have on the

NCSL’s popular “15 Tips for Being an Effective Legislator” has guided lawmakers for more than 20 years with its timeless advice.

institution, and be prepared for the close scrutiny that comes with being a legislator. Avoid even the appearance of impropriety. Would you be embarrassed to see your actions reported in the newspaper? If it won’t “read good” tomorrow, don’t do it today—even if it’s perfectly legal, it might not be proper.

3.

Master the rules.

You need to learn the rules of the game to be a serious player. Get to know experienced parliamentary experts (legislators and staff) and seek their advice routinely. Read the rules. Study them. But don’t ever fool yourself by presuming you have conquered the rules—there’s always someone in your chamber who can challenge you.

4.

Know where to get help.

Get acquainted with staff, not only legislative staff but key people in the executive branch agencies as well. Look for expertise from both sides of the aisle. Turn to them for advice and counsel. Lobbyists can serve as resources, but be sure to obtain information from all sides of

an issue. Surround yourself with the most intelligent, dedicated staff you can find. To help you prepare for committee meetings, spend time with staff reviewing the bills on the agenda. Listen to them, and trust them.

5.

Manage your time.

Organize, prioritize, commit to those things you consider important. An effective legislator is punctual. Get to the floor on time, get to your appointments on time, get to your committee meetings on time. Meet deadlines. If you miss a bill filing, it could be a whole year before you can try again. If you’re late in filing campaign contributions—or don’t file at all—you might read about it in the paper or see it used against you in the next campaign. Housekeeping chores matter; attend to them.

6.

Develop a specialty.

Don’t try to be all things to all people. Be selective in the bills you introduce. Focus on two or three issues to specialize in. Pursue committee assignments in those areas, get on a task force, help negotiate a compromise. You will develop your negotiating skills and become the expert members turn to for help and information. By doing a few things well, you will build your reputation—inside and outside the legislature—as a serious lawmaker.





7.

Vote your conscience.

You are a trustee of your entire state, but you must also represent your constituents. Sometimes this presents an irreconcilable conflict. But by electing you, the voters chose to place their trust in you. So vote your conscience. Then communicate clearly how you evaluated the issue and arrived at the decision. This allows you to represent not only by listening, but also by leading and by shaping opinions. It will gain you respect from people who may not always agree with you, but who will appreciate you for thinking through issues.

8.

Don't burn bridges.

Learn how to disagree without being disagreeable. It's going to happen. You're going to argue, get frustrated and become upset, even dislike another legislator. Don't react emotionally or in anger on the floor. The things you blurt out may come back to haunt you. You might create an unnecessary enemy, one thing you don't need in the legislature. Remember, today's adversary may be tomorrow's ally.

9.

Keep your word.

Ben Franklin was right. Honesty is the best policy—in life and in the legislature. A legislator's effectiveness and reputation are only as good as his or her word. Without truth, there can be no trust. If you promise someone your vote, deliver. A good working relationship, with fellow legisla-

tors and constituents, depends on their ability to believe what you say. If new information changes your mind, tell your constituents why. Credibility is important around the legislature; you can't be effective if you are perceived as untrustworthy.

10.

Be careful what you agree to.

The casual co-sponsorship of numerous bills promises minor rewards and major headaches. When in doubt—don't. Be careful not to let friendship or even trust stop you from scrutinizing every bill you choose to sponsor. If you don't, you'll end up having to vote against a bill you've agreed to sponsor. No matter how much

you like a person and normally trust his or her views, make sure you understand the bill. One protection is a 24-hour waiting period. Take time to decide. If someone really wants you as a sponsor, he or she will wait a day.

11.

Don't hog the mike.

Always prepare in advance when you are going to make a speech on the floor. Make sure your topic is something that's important to you. Don't talk about everything; you risk wearing out your welcome. Sometimes, the most effective legislators are the ones who speak only three or four times during the session. Yet when they do, all eyes are on them and everyone listens.



12.
Stay in touch.

Communicate with your constituents. This is critical. Return phone calls, answer letters, have town meetings. Write a weekly column for the local news media, start a blog, tweet your views, post on Facebook. Get to know the people you represent. Explain to them how you think through issues and decide how to vote. Let them know who you are, that you're approachable and responsible, that you really do want to represent them.

13.
Be a problem solver.

Use your skills and your office to help your community find solutions. When controversial, even inflammatory, problems arise in your district, work with state agencies and local governments to find the best solution. Call on the experience and knowledge of veteran lawmakers and staff. Ask questions, do research, show you can be a positive influence in the community.



14.
Work with the media.

Don't assume the media are your adversaries. Reporters have a responsibility to inform the public. Be proactive by contacting them regularly about your work. Focus on the process and the issues, not on partisan differences and conflict. Present information that is easy to understand and use. Honor your local newspapers' deadlines. Call writers back promptly. Don't expect them to use your press releases if you avoid their phone calls. When reporters do a good job, acknowledge it. At the same time, ask for corrections when they make errors.

15.
Stop and smell the roses.

In politics, it can be a struggle to resist self-importance, maintain a normal private life and not take family members for granted. The grand responsibilities and acclaim that come with holding public office, however, are no substitutes for reflection, ordinary friendships and meeting the simple responsibilities of life. Make time for your friends and family. But don't forget to take care of yourself. Eat right. Exercise. Read State Legislatures magazine.

STATE LEGISLATURES

WINNER OF A 2013 FOLIO EDDIE AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN MAGAZINE EDITORIAL WRITING

“LEGALLY GREEN”

FEBRUARY 2013