

15 Tips for Being an Effective Legislator

Practical wisdom on coping with increasingly complex issues.

“Listen, think and vote your conscience. Your constituents will not always agree with you, but they will respect you for thinking through the issues and leveling with them.”

—SENATOR LETICIA VAN DE PUTTE, TEXAS



1. HONOR THE INSTITUTION

Thomas Jefferson did it, and so did James Madison, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and other builders of our governmental institutions. They worked tirelessly to make representative government work. Now the well-being of your state legislature is in your hands. Preserve and protect it so it remains a strong, co-equal branch of government. Legislative service is one of democracy’s worthiest pursuits. It is an important duty that deserves our time, attention and dedication. To work well, government requires a bond of trust between citizens and their representatives. Try to appeal to the best instincts of the electorate, talk about what you stand for, what you intend to do during your time in office and then work as hard as you can to fulfill those promises. Remember why you ran for office—to make a difference, a difference for the better.

2. TAKE THE HIGH ROAD

If it won’t “read good” tomorrow, don’t do it today. That’s the best rule to follow when

judging those instances that are perfectly legal, but could look bad. Would you be embarrassed to see your actions reported in the newspaper? Make sure you understand your state’s ethics codes and adhere to them. Avoid even the appearance of impropriety—always take the high road. Understanding legislative etiquette and ethical responsibilities is vital, not only to the institution and your constituents, but to yourself.

3. MASTER THE RULES

Play volleyball or tennis without knowing the rules? You’ll lose. The same goes for legislating. You need to know the rules. It’s a good idea to carry them around with you to read as you see the process unfold. Soon they will start to make sense. Get to know experienced parliamentary experts (legislators and staff) and seek their advice routinely. And don’t ever fool yourself by presuming that 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 members, not only legislative staff but key people in the governor’s office and cabinet offices. Look for expertise among members on both sides of the aisle. Turn to them for advice and counsel. Lobbyists also serve as resource people, but it’s important to ask for information on both sides of an issue. Trust legislative staff. When you have the opportunity to hire staff, surround yourself with the most intelligent, dedicated staff you can find. Set aside 20 minutes or so before every committee meeting to review the bills on the agenda with legislative staff.

5. MANAGE YOUR TIME

It’s the effective legislator’s creed: Organize, prioritize, commit to those things you consider important. If you can do this, you’ll be ahead of the pack. An effective legislator is punctual: Get to the floor on time, get to your appointments on time, get to your committee meetings on time. It’s the little things that trip you up—like 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 in your next opponent’s campaign brochure. So attend to the housekeeping chores.



6. DEVELOP A SPECIALTY

You can’t be an expert in all things. Choose your policy pursuits so you do a few tasks very well. Be selective in the bills you introduce. Decide the issues you are going to specialize in and make a difference in two or three areas. Don’t try to be all things to all people. Pursue committee assignments in your areas of interest, get appointed to a task force and help negotiate an issue even if you aren’t the major sponsor of a bill. By being the point person on these issues, you will be the one members turn to for help and information. You will develop your negotiating skills and build your reputation as a serious lawmaker.



7. VOTE YOUR CONSCIENCE

Your constituents sent you to the legislature, and you must represent them. But you are also a trustee of your entire state. Sometimes a hot issue presents nearly irreconcilable conflicts among these responsibilities. But you still have to come to a decision and vote. The voters have already decided that they approve of your basic philosophies and have chosen to place their trust in you. Communicate with your constituents about how you evaluate issues and arrive at decisions. That allows you not only to represent by listening, but to represent by leading, to help shape opinions. It will give you latitude with people who may not always agree with you, but who will respect you for thinking through issues.

8. DON'T BURN BRIDGES

It's going to happen. You're going to disagree and become upset and sometimes even dislike another legislator. But remember that today's adversary may be tomorrow's ally. So learn how to disagree without being disagreeable. Don't react emotionally or in anger on the floor to something someone has said. The things you say in these cases will come back to haunt you. You might create an unnecessary enemy. People don't have to like you, but if they respect you and know you are going to play it straight, you'll be all right.

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, whether with your fellow legislators or your constituents, depends on their ability to believe what you say. Sometimes after you have promised to vote a certain way, you will get additional information that changes your mind. When this happens, tell the people you've changed your mind. Remember, credibility is key; you can't be effective if you are perceived as untrustworthy.

"There's one easy rule. If you have to ask if it's ethical, it isn't."

—REPRESENTATIVE SHERYL ALLEN, UTAH

10. BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU AGREE TO

The casual co-sponsorship of bills promises minor rewards and major headaches. When in doubt—don't. Be careful not to let socializing on the floor, friendship and trust come before scrutiny of a bill. Too often, you'll end up having to vote against a bill that you've signed on to sponsor. One protection is a 24-hour waiting period. Make sure you understand the bill. Take time to decide. If someone really wants you as one of the sponsors, that person will wait a day.

11. DON'T HOG THE MIKE

When you make a speech on the floor, always prepare in advance and make sure that your topic is something that's important to you. Don't talk about everything. Even if you are an expert in everything, you risk wearing out your welcome if you feel the need to hold forth on every bill. Sometimes, the most effective legislator speaks at the mike only three or four times during the session. Yet when he does, everyone listens.

12. STAY IN TOUCH

Maintain good contact with your constituents. This is an overwhelming task, but it's critical. Return phone calls, answer letters, have town meetings. Let your constituents know who you are and that you are approachable and responsible to them. Besides, it makes the job a lot more interesting if you really know the people you represent. It's hard to build a bond with your constituents simply through press releases. If you have any writing skills at all and you care about policy, it's well worth the time to write a weekly column for your constituents and the news media. It's important to think through the issues before a decision and to explain to your constituents—either before or after you vote—how you got there.

13. BE A PROBLEM SOLVER

Controversial, even inflammatory issues will arise in your district. Use your skills and your office to help the community find solutions. Whether it's a new prison site or road repair, work with the state agencies and local

governments to find the best answer for all. Don't take sides on clearly local issues, but serve as a resource for information to help find the best solution. Call on the experience and knowledge of members who have served longer than you, ask questions, do research, show you can be a positive influence in the community.



14. WORK WITH THE MEDIA

You don't have to treat the media as an adversary. Contact reporters regularly to inform them about your position on issues and the work you are doing. Focus on the policy process and the issues, not just on partisan differences and conflict. Present information that is easy to understand and use. Know your local newspapers' deadlines. Call writers back promptly. Don't expect them to use your press releases if you avoid their phone calls. When the media do a good job, acknowledge it. At the same time, don't hesitate to ask for corrections of distortions in facts or other errors in stories.

15. STOP AND SMELL THE ROSES

In politics, it's a struggle to maintain a normal private life. Politicians can be tempted to take family members for granted, to treat them as appendages, decorations on campaign literature, free help when envelopes need to be licked. Sometimes it's hard to resist self-importance. The grand responsibilities and acclaim that come with holding public office can be unhealthy substitutes for reflection, ordinary friendships and meeting the simple responsibilities of life. Don't forget to take care of yourself. Eat right. Exercise. And make time for yourself. ■