

Fifteen rules for politicians to live by: reflections on legislative service

by Kevin Coughlin

As I leave the Ohio General Assembly after 14 years, it's natural to reflect on my years of service and the many valuable lessons I've learned. Like every other legislator serving in state government, I have had my share of ups and downs, successes and failures, and I have had many learning opportunities along the way. In contemplating all the lessons I've learned, I've assembled my top 15 rules for politicians to live by.

1. People judge you primarily on two things — competence and likability. And they do it in the first few

minutes. BILLD Fellows will recognize this lesson from our very own Arch Lustberg. Never forget the old adage: It's not just what you say, but how you say it. Know your subject matter — and admit when you don't. Communicate with everyone the way you do with family members and close friends. Being knowledgeable and affable will help you win a vote, a debate, an ally.

2. Have the courage to do what is fair and right in all things even when it is not popular.

Anybody can follow talking points and mob mentality. But few issues are as simple as they seem. Statesmanship requires you to think critically as you approach each issue and consistency in your approach will go a long way.

3. It's better to be a thoughtful independent thinker and true public servant than to be a machine politician.

It's like the difference between being a Mac or a PC, Le Bernardin or McDonald's, Letterman or Leno. Sure, the latter has wider appeal but the former is a better product.

4. If you believe you would be the best officeholder of the choices available, run for it. You'll never forgive yourself for not doing it.

Let's face it, politics is a competitive business filled with egos, envy and self-interest. I never decided to run or not run for an office based on what any other candidate was doing or what anyone was saying about my chances. If you think you'd be the best, run. And as long as you can afford to put gas in the tank, you owe it to yourself to get out there and tell people why you're the best candidate.

5. Most battles are won before they are fought.

Prepare to win, and never enter a battle without knowing the ground and what it will take to prevail.

6. To fight the good fight and fail is more honorable than quitting.

Once you're in it, you're in it. Never give up. Never get

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discouraged. As Winston Churchill taught, a good leader is one who learns from his failures and stays with the task until success is achieved.

7. Swing for the fences. Try to tackle the big issues with bold ideas.

Cut your teeth on low-hanging fruit issues for a while but eventually, you'll want to achieve something

meaningful. Even if the outcome falls short of the bold idea, pushing the limits of what is possible may take us further than playing it safe.

8. It's better to be a workhorse than a show horse.

Delve into a policy area and achieve some level of expertise. It's opting for substance over style. Style might get the immediate attention, but in the end, it's substance and hard work that prevails and has longevity.

9. Just about everyone in politics is smart, hardworking and honest.

Occasionally you will meet an officeholder who is dumb, lazy or dishonest. But they are rare. I've gotten to know elected officials across the nation and around the world. The vast majority are in it for the right reasons and truly want to do what they think is best for their state or country.

10. Be more interested in your character, which is what you really are, than in your reputation, which is what others perceive you to be.

This is borrowed from John Wooden's "Ten Rules to Live By."

11. If you have to ask if something is ethical, it's probably not. And chances are that if you are about to ask, you already know the answer.

Every state has its own set of laws dealing with political ethics and they do vary from place to place. But ethical behavior goes beyond the

letter of law, and if something is illegal anywhere, it's questionable everywhere.

12. Have no time for people who raise themselves up by putting others down.

And don't advance yourself by engaging in the same. I've run across a few people like this and I simply uninvited them from my life. It's much more pleasant now.

13. The loudest person in the room is usually the weakest person in the room.

Politics can attract posers and blowhards. I have worked hard at becoming a good listener. It's one of the surest paths to effectiveness.

14. Success is less satisfying than significance.

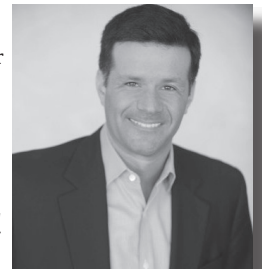
I realized this after racking up elective and legislative victories but finding myself still wondering if anything I was doing really mattered. Reaching beyond mere success and trying to make a lasting difference is something I'll always work toward.

15. Always remember the care and feeding of the people who elected you.

Good constituent work and outreach goes a long way. Create a culture of responsiveness and empathy in your office and with your constituents.

Kevin Coughlin has been a member of the Ohio General Assembly for the past 14 years. He

spent four years in the House of Representatives before joining the Senate in 2001. Coughlin served as chair of the Senate Health, Aging and Human Services Committee for the last six years.



A 1998 graduate of the Bowhay Institute, he is a former chair of the BILLD Steering Committee and served as chair of the CSG's Midwestern Legislative Conference in 2005.

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