



Bryant University

HASSENFELD INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

BACKGROUND

The piece “Five Things Successful Governors Do” was written to help educate candidates and voters on the importance of effective gubernatorial leaders by the Hassenfeld Institute for Public Leadership at Bryant University. It is a part of the Job One: Leadership Initiative in collaboration with the Providence Journal and Rhode Island PBS. This article discusses research and advice on the best leadership practices used by governors that have made a positive difference for their states.¹

MISSION

The mission of the Hassenfeld Institute for Public Leadership at Bryant University (HIPL) is to provide public officials and others involved in the development, management, and execution of public policy with the tools and skills needed to make informed decisions and manage responsive organizations in order to govern and lead public sector and non-profit sectors effectively.

AUTHOR GARY SASSE



The background of Gary Sasse encompasses a variety of roles distinguished by his effectiveness as a leader and administrator, and as a trusted advisor and consultant with broad experience at the most senior levels of both public and private sectors.

He currently serves as the Founding Director of the Hassenfeld Institute for Public Leadership at Bryant University. In 2008, Sasse was appointed by former Governor Donald Carcieri to serve as Director of the Department of Administration and Department of Revenue. He served as Executive Director for the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC), a public policy research organization, from 1977 until 2007. Sasse previously held senior positions as a member of the Governor’s staff for the State of Tennessee. He holds a bachelor of arts in political science from Florida State University and a master of science in public administration from the University of Missouri.



Five Things Successful Governors Do

As states choose their next governor, voters should focus on one fundamental question. Which candidate has the greatest potential to be an effective visionary leader and to make their state a player in the 21st century?

In answering this question, voters should assess the candidates' understanding of the environment they must operate in, their ability to establish and implement an agenda, how they will select senior staff, and their plans to grow jobs and not the government.

This article discusses leadership practices used by governors who have made a positive difference for their states.

Five practices that have characterized successful governors include the following:

1. **Focusing like a hedgehog,**
2. **Controlling the center,**
3. **Not always taking "yes" for an answer,**
4. **Getting the right people on the bus, and**
5. **Using the "bully pulpit" to mold public opinion.**

FOCUS LIKE A HEDGEHOG

The National Governors Association (NGA) advises new governors that "Success in the governorship depends first and foremost on focus. The term should be committed to a limited number of issues and concentrated on them throughout."² It is recommended that a governor select no more than three to five priorities. A survey of governors who were in office between 1980-2010 found that almost 50 percent said their legislative agendas encompassed one to five items.³

The Republican RIPON Forum noted that Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, paraphrased Isaiah Berlin's fox and hedgehog analogy. "Many governors are fox-like, trying to be all things to all people. And they confront many issues. Yet hedgehogs who focus on one big idea can make a big impact."⁴

A governor who focused like a hedgehog and had a major impact on how his state operated was Mitch Daniels (R-Ind). The story of Governor Daniels' accomplishments is told in a case study prepared by the Innovations for Successful Societies program at Princeton University.⁵



Governor Daniels inherited a state with a tepid economy, an accumulated budget deficit, and unaccountable state agencies. When the Governor took office, he proposed and implemented a focused series of reforms to change the performance and culture of Indiana's government. As a result, the Pew Center on the States called the Hoosier State the most improved in the country. Citing improved fiscal management, Standard and Poor's assigned Indiana its first AAA bond rating.

Rosenthal's *The Best Job in Politics* tells the story of a governor who started out acting like a fox but learned to govern more like a hedgehog. Governor Bob Graham (D-FLA) had problems focusing his agenda on a few key priorities. One of his senior staff commented, "We had the biggest fights to try to get him to narrow his agenda down... . In the end instead of sixty things on his agenda, he had eighteen, when he should have had six."⁶

Governors who concentrate on one major policy matter can have a significant impact not only in their home state but also on national policy. Examples include Governor James Hunt's (D-NC) leadership in the field of education and Governor Tommy Thompson's (R-WI) innovative approaches to welfare reform.

In particular, the most difficult challenge facing Rhode Island's next governor will be jobs and the economy. Because economic development is so multi-faceted, national experience suggests that the next state administration should imitate the hedgehog and focus on the one or two priorities that will have the greatest impact on competitiveness.

As Governor Pierre Du Pont (R-DE) so aptly stated, "Being governor is the greatest job in the world. You can do anything you want – but you can't do everything."⁷

CONTROL THE CENTER

Gubernatorial effectiveness often depends on the goodwill and action of others. It is essential that a governor show respect for and establish an effective working relationship with the legislature. This does not mean that the executive and legislative branches should forego their principles and institutional prerogatives and agree on every issue.

Conflicts are inevitable and healthy in a partisan system with separation of powers. How a governor manages this conflict and controls the center will go a long way to determine if his or her leadership will be effective. History is replete with examples of governors who skillfully created win-win situations with their legislatures and those that failed to do so.

The NGA suggests that if a governor assists legislators in doing their jobs, listens to their concerns, and does not needlessly fight over power, good working relationships usually ensue.⁸



Two examples from *The Best Job in Politics* show contrasting styles of governors. Governor William Schaefer (D-MD) showed a disdain for the legislature when he “tried to undermine the authority of the senate president with his colleagues, and suspended communications with the speaker of the house for a period of almost six months.”⁹ Little was accomplished in such an environment.

Conversely, Governor John Engler (R-MI), who was an ideological conservative, did not surrender his principles but led from the center and had a significant influence on public policy in Michigan for over a decade. One of his landmark achievements was reform in Michigan’s school finance process.¹⁰

To lead from the center will require future governors to alter the status-quo while working with an entrenched legislative body. This will necessitate that the governor be able to energize advocates to support his or her initiatives and cultivate support from state house insiders. Governor Sundlun (D-RI) showed this was possible when his administration hammered out a solution to Rhode Island’s costly and chronic workers compensation system, and Governor Carcieri (R-RI) was able to build a broad consensus to reduce Rhode Island’s top marginal income tax rate from 9.9% to 5.99%.

A recent example of a governor successfully leading from the center on key fiscal issues can be found in California. It is reported that since being elected in 2011, Governor Jerry Brown (D-CA) has improved California’s financial position. When interviewed on “Meet the Press”, he was asked whether his fiscal achievement in California had any lessons for national politics. Governor Brown responded, “Well, you’ve got to be tough on spending. No matter how liberal you want to be.”¹¹ As Washington Post columnist Kathleen Parker observed, “Balance is the key, and it would appear that Brown has found his center.”¹²

DON'T ALWAYS TAKE “YES” FOR AN ANSWER

Why Great Leaders Don’t Always Take “Yes” for an Answer by Bryant University Professor, Michael Roberto, contains an important lesson for a successful gubernatorial term. A governor’s leadership is dependent on how well he or she masters the social and political dynamics of decision-making.¹³

Governors should consider the admonition of Cyrus the Great – **Diversity in counsel, unity in command.** “Good to great management teams consist of people who debate vigorously in search of the best answers, yet who unify behind decisions, regardless of parochial interests.”¹⁴ Achieving this management paradigm in a political setting is difficult. Staff can be uncomfortable being totally candid in expressing a viewpoint because a governor can be intimidating and take the



oxygen out of a room. Governors, on the other hand, who are uncomfortable handling internal debates, may not be presented with all viable options.

If Rhode Island had governors that always took yes for an answer some notable achievements may never have materialized. In 1988, the voters said “yes” to a \$28.5 million bond for improvements to the state’s existing airport terminal. Governor Sundlun did not take “yes” for an answer. Instead he decided to deal with the state’s real infrastructure needs.

He rejected the existing plan developed by state agencies and replaced it with a two story, 15-gate, 270,000 square foot state of the art facility. This new airport terminal eventually cost over \$200 million. To achieve this, he took control of airports away from the Division of Airports and created the quasi-public Rhode Island Airport Corporation.

This helped lure Southwest Airlines to Rhode Island and the rest is history. However, none of this would have happened if Governor Sundlun accepted “yes” for an answer.

In the early 1970s, I served on the senior staff of the Governor of Tennessee and as a member of the Southern Governors Conference Staff Advisory Committee. During this period, a group of “New South” governors were elected which included Jimmy Carter (D-GA), Dale Bumpers (D-ARK), Winfield Dunn (R-TN) and Reuben Askew (D-FLA). These chief executives did not always take yes for an answer. As a result, I witnessed the progress that was made as this wave of moderate Southern governors encouraged debate, challenged existing practices, and embraced progressive ideas on education, race relations, and economic competitiveness that moved a region forward and created new opportunities for their citizens.

GET THE RIGHT PEOPLE ON THE BUS

Peter Drucker noted that “no executive has ever suffered because his subordinates were strong and effective.”¹⁵ Successful governors select capable staffs because a governor is usually only as effective as the people around him or her.

A governor’s staff is responsible for interacting with the legislature, state departments, local officials, business, labor and advocacy communities, and the media.

In addition to being well qualified, a governor’s senior staff must also understand and share the governor’s vision for the state. There was a saying in the Reagan White House that “personnel is policy”.

RIPON reported that Governor John Engler (R-MI) selected staff “with a strong ideological commitment to limited government. These appointees helped him carry out his desire to shrink the state’s government.”¹⁶ Princeton’s case study of the Daniels Administration pointed out that “The governor-elect moved first to establish a transition team and identify the people who could help carry out his agenda. Daniels drew heavily from the contacts he cultivated during his years in government and the private sector.”¹⁷



If a governor makes personnel mistakes he or she needs to move quickly to correct them. “Former Governor Dick Thornburgh (R-PA) recalls three appointments that didn’t work out: “My mistake in each case was hiring the resume rather than the person”.¹⁸

An illustration of the importance of personnel decisions to a governor’s effectiveness can be found by contrasting the first and second administrations of Governor Michael Dukakis (D-MA). During the first Dukakis Administration (1975-1979), the Governor seemed to ignore politics and play by his own rules. Former Congressman Barney Frank commented, “Michael has reduced the power of the governor to the formal powers. He can submit. He can veto. He can appoint. But he cannot influence.”¹⁹

When Dukakis was reelected in 1982, his governing style was transformed. Confrontational in his first term as governor, Dukakis later emphasized consensus building.²⁰ The “Dukakis Miracle” was impacted by a critical personnel decision. During his second term Dukakis found a trusted lieutenant in John Sasso. Sasso was appointed Chief of Staff and proved to be an able negotiator and strategist with a keen attention to details and friends on Beacon Hill.

Governors that are strong leaders usually hire people who are more talented than themselves in their areas of responsibility. As Governor Jim Edgar (R-IL) observes, “There is nobody smart enough or who has enough time to do it all themselves.”²¹

USE THE BULLY PULPIT TO MOLD PUBLIC OPINION

Effective governors guide public opinion; they do not react to it. What a governor can do, that nobody else can do as well, is to tell a story to the people about where the state is and where he or she would like to take it. Gubernatorial leadership connects the dots and tells citizens where we need to go and how we are going to get there. As Theodore Roosevelt said, “The leader must understand that he leads us, that he guides us, by convincing us so that we will follow him or follow his direction.”²²

The NGA suggests that, “Generally speaking the bully pulpit is used to focus attention on an issue and the governor’s proposed solution to that issue or mobilize support for action on the governor’s proposal.”²³

When governors use the bully pulpit ineffectively, it can be to the detriment of achieving their policy objectives. Following the lead of some tax policy experts, the Governor Chafee (D-RI) proposed modernizing the state’s sales and use tax. This plan called for reducing the sales tax rate and broadening the tax base. While aspects of this proposal were debatable, the plan never saw the light of day. In part, this may have been the result of Governor Chafee not using the bully pulpit to explain and engender public support for a complex and controversial proposal.



A recent example of the effective use of the bully pulpit can be found in Wisconsin. Governor Scott Walker (R-WI) took on a significantly more divisive and controversial issue and was able to use the bully pulpit and a partisan advantage to achieve his goals. As part of the Wisconsin “budget repair bill” there was a landmark change made to the state’s collective bargaining process for many public employees in the Badger State. Without judging the merits of Governor Walker’s plan, it should be obvious that a governor’s use of the bully pulpit can make a big difference in public policy outcomes.

Governor Tom Kean (R-NJ) summarized the importance of a governor making effective use of the bully pulpit when he remarked, “the most important power the governor has is the power of communications.”²⁴ Governors that do not effectively mold public opinion inevitably lose influence.

End Notes

1. Material for this article comes from reports and papers of the National Governors Association, a review of the literature with particular attention to Alan Rosenthal’s *The Best Job in Politics: Exploring How Governors Succeed as Policy Leaders*, case studies, media reports and personal experience.
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7. Hale, Ripon Forum, 2
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10. Rosenthal, *The Best Job in Politics*, 219, 233
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