WHAT BEST PRACTICES BUILD TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS?

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To explore the role of relationships in policymaking, a new University of Wisconsin-Madison study conducted face-to-face interviews of 212 state legislators. The sample included all 132 Wisconsin legislators in the 2015-17 biennium and half of the 150-member Indiana legislature. Both states had a Republican governor and Republican control of both chambers of the legislature. In classifications based on salaries, session days, and staffing, Wisconsin is regarded as a full-time legislature and Indiana as part-time. Yet in previous studies, the time legislators spend on the job varies, and Wisconsin has about three times as many partisan and nonpartisan staff as Indiana. In Round 1 interviews, 123 legislators (60% of the sample) discussed relationships and nominated exemplar colleagues including those known for building trusting relationships. In Round 2, 33 legislators (83% of those nominated as trusted relationship builders) described best practices for building trusting relationships.

**HOW IMPORTANT ARE TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS IN POLICYMAKING?**

To be effective, the vast majority of legislators reported that “relationships are the biggest thing”:

> “I had thought the most effective use of my time would be not to be here at all—to be at home all the time, just being among the people and coming here to vote every so often. I didn't get anything done because I didn't build any relationships here . . . I tried to get a bill out into the Senate. It was a wasteland, because I never talked to a senator about anything.”

**WHAT INTERPERSONAL BEST PRACTICES DO LEGISLATORS USE TO BUILD TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS?**

Legislators take several steps to initiate contact with colleagues. Best practices include listening, showing respect, finding personal connections, and forgiving past shortcomings and focusing on the task at hand. Legislators cautioned against trying to force relationships because, in politics, one’s motives are often questioned.

> “How do we forge relationships? I just schedule meetings with everyone . . . I sit down, go through what they like, what they want to work on, what they're passionate about. I also schedule meetings with members of the other side for all my committee hearings.”

> “I think a [trusting relationship] really is the ability to talk about ‘not work’ . . . Do I know the name of their kids or their dog or where they come from? . . . It’s one of the ways that I try to connect with my coworkers in a personal way . . . We have a connection over some sports team or favorite food . . . [the] human nonpartisan, nonpolitical things that unite all of us . . . We all get stuck in traffic. We all wish we could lose a little bit more weight . . . So, I try to focus on those very basic, very human, shared experiences that would be trust builders whether I was an elected official or an entry-level staffer . . . So, it's almost to put blinders on—to not focus on the building that I'm in—but just talk very human [and] treat it like a normal human-to-human contact.”

> “There is a really healthy balance . . . between, on one side, focusing on the task at hand and . . . on the other side, . . . being real and human—talking about kids and life and work, and being human beings to one another and not just focusing solely on work. It’s okay for us to have a meeting and talk almost exclusively about stuff that's happening in our life and not get to the bill that we’re working on. That’s okay. It's not okay to . . . focus on work and never address what’s really pulling us in other directions in life. I think that balance is the biggest thing.”

> “Representative [name] is the author of some labor bills that I absolutely totally disagree with. But I really like him as a person, as a legislator. So . . . do I let his stance on two labor issues defeat our relationship? And the answer is ‘No! You can't do that.’ Otherwise, I’ll have zero relationship because we’re at odds; we don’t always agree. But it turns out that my spouse and I don’t always agree, and my mother and I don’t always agree. But we somehow maintain relationships beyond those disagreements.”
“Little things I think make a big difference to building a relationship where it’s not just about, ‘What are you going to give me today?’ It’s, ‘Oh, you had a child,’ or ‘Oh, your mother passed away.’ I try to go to every funeral . . . which I would say is just what a human being does but, unfortunately, not a lot of politicians do.”

“When I was first elected . . . I got a call from the governor, wishing me a ‘Happy Birthday’ and I was blown away. So, we put all the birthdays on my calendar. If I have time during the day, I'll text them it’s their birthday, or I'll call.”

“Probably the number one thing for building relationships that I do is acknowledge success . . . Like a bill that I know is important to somebody, that maybe . . . I didn't like it [but I still say] ‘Good job. You got the bill done.’ Or ‘Yes!’ Acknowledge success, and say ‘Thank You’ . . . My penmanship is terrible, but I do try to . . . always say ‘Thank You!’”

WHAT CONSTRAINTS DID LEGISLATORS IDENTIFY TO BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH COLLEAGUES?

“On both sides, we're told by some that you must start out at the very low end—skeptical of someone who has a fundamental belief system different from yours.”

“Sometimes [colleagues] get in trouble for having lunch with you . . . it’s the strangest environment I’ve ever worked in.”

“[With polarization], the parties retreat to their corners and just go along party lines . . . So, if you have a relationship with someone from the opposite party, it really doesn’t matter at that point. That’s awfully cynical, but I think that’s what happens. When there’s polarization, that means ideology has trumped relationships.”

WHAT INSTITUTIONAL BEST PRACTICES COULD HELP BUILD TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS?

Legislators nominated by their colleagues as Trusted Relationship Builders rated 11 changes (identified in Round 1) that the legislative institution could take to build trusting relationships. In Wisconsin, the top four vote getters were:

1. **Building relationships among staff for the purpose of building relationships among legislators**
   “Having staff have good relationships with each other would be fantastic. If I had my staff call someone else and they've had a run-in or something, it can hamper what I'm trying to do. They can serve as the gatekeeper.”

2. **Planning social events, like picnics, softball games, and 5-year reunions**
   “There used to be softball . . . There used to be a standing golf outing with lobbyists and members . . . where you can check your ideology at the door and just be social. It does not need to be sports-related . . . or alcohol-related. People told us it . . . helps incredibly sometimes to team build.”
   “I mean one of the things that I really liked about the Assembly is that you have lunch in the back. It’s all one big room and you get to talk with your colleagues . . . In the Senate . . . we don’t eat together.”
   “The Senate Reunion . . . [happens] only every five years . . . A lot of the current senators were there plus the retired. Some of the old retired folks actually kind of broke the ice because they’re not in day-to-day combat.”

3. **Sponsoring committee tours or trips, such as the corrections committee visiting a juvenile detention facility**
   “Wouldn't it be something for the judiciary committee members to really spend a day at the court house and be hands-on and watch in action what we are legislating? Wouldn't it make sense for the agriculture committee to go to the school of agriculture or to a working farm? . . . It doesn’t need to be televised. It doesn’t need to be politicized. It doesn’t even need to be the most informative thing ever. It’s really more . . . social.”

4. **Organizing gatherings for specific groups, such as new legislators, young legislators, or women**
   “[Receptions are] superficial . . . relationship building. Relationships are generally not built at the big reception on Wednesday night where you’re just going around and you talk to a hundred people. Relationships are more built when you’re working together on an issue, particularly when you’re getting down to the nuts and bolts of an issue . . . So, you’re really working hand-in-hand on trying to make these changes and make it all work together. So, that goes a long way to building that working relationship.”

For further information on this fact sheet or the study findings, contact Human Ecology Emeritus Professor Karen Bogenschneider at karen.bogen@wisc.edu. The study was coordinated by the Family Impact Seminars and funded by the William T. Grant Foundation.