

# 15 Tips for Being an Effective Legislator

Here's some practical wisdom on coping with an ever-increasing number of 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. So did James Madison, George Washington and Alexander Hamilton. 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. Tearing down government diminishes your ability to solve problems in the legislature. When you demean the institution, you demean yourself. Try to appeal to the best instincts of the electorate, talk about 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. 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. New legislators are rarely prepared for close scrutiny of their behavior, nor do they recognize the effect of their behavior on the institution. 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.