



PROFILE: NEBRASKA SEN. DAN HUGHES, CHAIR OF THE LEGISLATURE'S EXECUTIVE BOARD

Nebraska native reflects on the positive impact that legislative service can have on lawmakers themselves, as well as the traits for effective legislating

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

After seven years on the job, Nebraska Sen. Dan Hughes has come to think of legislating as the “ultimate self-improvement program.”

You have to be curious enough to know at least a little about a lot, he says, while becoming a respected expert for the legislative body in select policy areas.

You must learn the art of persuasion and how to become an effective public speaker.

You need the judgment to appreciate why certain policies and practices have long been in place, but also know when to push for change.

And Hughes puts one skill perhaps above all else: the ability to build meaningful, trusting relationships among legislative colleagues, especially in the nation’s smallest state legislature (49 members in Nebraska) and the only one without party caucuses.

“I’m a much better person because of my time in the Legislature,” he says.

Likewise, the chance to better his home state and community is what led Hughes to a life of public service.

“My folks were always engaged in our community and active in our church, so that idea of giving back was really just an automatic to me,” says Hughes, a lifelong resident of rural southwest Nebraska.

“Once you learn you can make a difference if you get involved, it’s always something you want to do.”

He spent more than decade on his local school board, and also became a state and national leader on farm policy through his leadership role on the Nebraska Wheat Board and chairmanship of U.S. Wheat Associates.

For many years, joining the part-time, “citizen” Unicameral Legislature was in the back of Hughes’ mind (his uncle had unsuccessfully sought a seat decades ago). And when his children came home to take over day-to-day operations of the family farm, the time had come to run.

Hughes won election in 2014 and 2018, and is now entering his final year in the term-limited Unicameral Legislature. His last two years of service are being spent as chair of the Executive Board, the powerful committee that oversees institutional issues related to legislative operations and governance.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sen. Hughes reflected on legislative service and leadership, as well as the approach that Nebraska took to continuing legislative operations through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Here are excerpts.

Q You’ve talked about needing that balance of appreciating why things in state government



BIO-SKETCH: NEBRASKA SEN. DAN HUGHES

- ✓ elected by peers in 2020 to serve as chair of Unicameral Legislature Executive Board; previously was chair of Unicameral Legislature’s Natural Resources Committee
- ✓ has been member of Legislature since 2015
- ✓ is a farmer and businessman whose family has had same piece of land in southwest Nebraska for nearly 100 years
- ✓ once served as chairman of U.S. Wheat Associates
- ✓ resides in Venango, Neb., with wife, Josie; they have two children, Ashley and Tyler

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are the way they are, but also being ready to push for change. How have you applied that to your work as a legislator?

A Like everyone, I came in wanting to get certain things done. Otherwise, why would anyone run?

So at first, you want to step up and hit a home run. But you quickly find that on big issues, you’ve got to take singles and doubles where you can. That means sometimes being willing to nibble around the edges. Because if it’s a big problem or issue, the ripple effect of any legislation is going to be huge.

An example of that here is property taxes. I can say, “We’re going to fix the system by doing A, B and C.” But then there is the rest of the alphabet, and that’s the ripple effect. So you nibble around the edges. In Nebraska, our economy has been really good through COVID, so we have had revenue to work with and we have taken that opportunity on property taxes. There will be significant relief for Nebraskans in the year ahead. So that’s been a positive step, even if we haven’t completely solved the problem.

Q Based on your experience, what do you see as the attributes of an effective legislator?

A First and foremost, you’ve got to commit to building relationships with your colleagues. I like to equate it to political capital, and that comes from the goodwill that you’ve built up — from having good friends, from your demeanor and how you handle yourself, from working closely on an issue in committee with colleagues, from lending your expertise to others.

For me, for example, I’m one of only

four or five true farmers in the Nebraska Legislature. So on an agriculture issue, my colleagues will come to me with questions, and I want to give them answers they can trust. That industry credibility helps, and we learn to rely on each other. We’ve got bankers, teachers, insurance professionals. That’s the beauty of a citizen legislature.

That’s how we all build that bank account of political capital, and then we can choose where to spend it. But you have to earn it first to cash it in.

Q What is the approach that you and other leaders have taken to managing the Unicameral Legislature through the COVID-19 pandemic?

A Early on, we decided that we had to follow the health directives of Lincoln and of Lancaster County. So there weren’t a lot of individual decisions on our part. The health officials made recommendations on policies such as mask mandates, social distancing, and what happens if a member tests positive. We followed them.

At the same time, we made accommodations in 2020 to finish our session and developed some protocols. For example, a member who was exposed [to the virus] and who didn’t yet have two negative tests could still participate in debate, in person. But we had rules for the member to be in the balcony, away from the rest of the legislative body.

We also had plexiglass barriers installed during the 2020 session [between the desks of senators on the floor of the Legislature]. Those were removed for the 2021 sessions. By then, the vaccines were available. But we still limited the number of people who could

be on the floor of the Legislature, and interactions with lobbyists were still somewhat limited.

So we’re not back to the old days, and maybe we never will be, but we are now much more back to normal than we were in 2020. And that has been very nice.

Q Are there any new ways of doing business that might continue beyond the pandemic?

A In Nebraska, any bill that’s introduced by a senator gets a public hearing [in committee]. So that means we probably have more interactions with the public than some states. And there is concern from some members of the public who want to testify, but who are disabled or who are immunocompromised.

The concern is about being exposed in a large room with a large group of people. So I think we’re going to continue to have accommodations so that members of the public can submit testimony and have their voices heard without having to come to the Capitol.

Q What do you see as the most important issues for the Legislature in the year ahead?

A We’ve got a lot of federal stimulus money that has come to the state. Fortunately, too, the Nebraska economy continues to do well, so we also have additional funds that give us more flexibility to address issues beyond the federal stimulus.

Anytime you have money to spend, you have a lot of people with different ideas on how to do it. That will be a challenge for us. We need to make sure we invest wisely.