



PROFILE: KANSAS SENATE PRESIDENT TY MASTERSON

‘Assume good intentions’: Leader shares how he tries to build legislative relationships, and trust, during a divisive period in American politics

by Laura Kliewer (lkiewer@csg.org)

“If you’re not willing to do something about it, don’t complain.”

That family adage and ethic was instilled into Ty Masterson from an early age, eventually helping catapult him to becoming one of Kansas’ top political leaders.

But it took a while.

Up until his early 30s, when it came to politics, “something” for Masterson mostly meant just voting for others running for office.

A spark to do more came from dissatisfaction with his local government in the town of Andover, a suburb of Wichita.

You can’t just complain, he thought, and voting is not enough.

So Masterson sought and won a seat on the City Commission in 2005, and that same year, he already was being asked by local Republican Party officials to finish the term of a departing state representative.

His initial idea: Help out the party, but don’t spend more than one session in the Legislature, a place Masterson wasn’t sure he belonged.

“I had a bit of an [uninformed] view that those in the state legislative branch needed to have a Ph.D. or expertise in a subject matter,” he recalls.

“But I learned that it’s just a lot of good people who are interested in making their communities better. It’s more about people than subject matter. You can learn [the subject matter]; there’s no one who goes there who knows enough about everything that we deal with.

“And if there is an area that God seemed to have given me an ability, it’s dealing with people.”

That skill has proven to be invaluable during his 17 years in the Legislature, especially as Masterson began to take on various leadership roles. He currently is president of the Kansas Senate.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Senate President Masterson shared his perspective on legislative leadership, civility and relationship building.

Q How do you go about bridging personal or partisan differences with fellow lawmakers?

A In the Legislature, there are 165 different points of view and 165 different personalities. Working with people who feel differently on issues and/or have different personalities is essential. So it’s always a constant search for common ground.

It’s not always possible, but even hints of common ground will give you some place



BIO-SKETCH: KANSAS SEN. TY MASTERSON

- ✓ serves as president of the Kansas Senate
- ✓ previously served as chair of the Senate Ways and Means Committee
- ✓ has been a member of the Kansas Legislature since 2005: House from 2005-2008 and Senate since 2009
- ✓ works for Wichita State University and owns a small business
- ✓ lives in Andover (a suburb of Wichita) with his wife, Marlo; they have six children and five grandchildren

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to start. Different people have different motivations, different priorities. I am a very logical [and mathematical] thinker, and I used to think I could just walk people into a “logic box” and they would come to the same conclusion as I did.

But then you get down to the end, and they have a whole different set of math. So I’m trying to find out what motivates them; that’s the challenge. OK, this person thinks very differently than me. What do I need to understand in order to get some level of agreement on a particular issue?

Q You have mentioned having to overcome some learning challenges in your life, namely attention deficit disorder and dyslexia. On a state level, have you brought a certain spotlight or sensitivity because of that?

A I do sit on a dyslexia task force. But what I have brought more than anything is that I understand that your weaknesses don’t necessarily make you weak, just different. You may have strengths in other areas, and I can recognize that in other people.

Q You help lead a Republican caucus of legislators, and have served several years with a Democratic governor, including now with Laura Kelly. Are there areas of political leadership that you’ve learned from this?

A Absolutely, and it’s also been about learning how to build

relationships with someone who is on the “edges” of my own party. One thing we have in common is that we sincerely want to make Kansas better, although we may have very different views of what that is.

With Governor Kelly, it was easier because she served in the Kansas Senate for eight years, and she was actually the ranking Democrat for four years on a committee that I chaired (Ways and Means). We had daily committees, conference. I had a good working relationship with her before she became governor, so that really didn’t change.

Q What advice would you give for working with the governor of another party?

A I’d say, assume good intentions. When you are on different teams, it’s just human nature that you may impugn motivation. So it’s good to have the best in mind when you start.

Q In general, how have you tried to build relationships of trust and civility?

A Reaching out and taking the effort to actually get to know somebody. In the legislature, it’s a job, right? But if you get beyond, and develop a personal relationship, it really can make a difference.

For example, with our Senate minority leader, Senator Dinah Sykes, we did a fantasy football league together, had dinners together occasionally. There’s been times where we don’t talk shop, we just talk. It’s hard to have a lot of vitriol against someone you actually like as a person.

So I put a lot of effort into getting to know people, on a personal level, and caring about them as individuals. In politics, it’s so easy to sit back with the one-liners, take potshots. It’s becoming, sadly, more common. It’s been here forever, but seems even more prevalent today, particularly nationally.

Q What do you consider the most important qualities of a leader?

A Honesty. Integrity. Courage. Listening. Hearing others out. Follow through. And I live by the adage that you don’t ask someone else to do something you’re not willing to do yourself.

Q Do any of those qualities stand out as being particularly important to your approach to leadership?

A Honesty is top for me. ... You can’t deal with anything appropriately if you don’t have candid, accurate information.

It’s human nature. We typically want to hide certain things that might make us look bad or make someone else feel bad, but it’s important to have that communication.

And that’s why relationships are so important. You have to be able to trust someone enough to have that difficult conversation — particularly if you are a different party or organization — and trust that someone isn’t going to use something personally against you in any way.