



# PROFILE: WILL MORTENSON, MAJORITY LEADER OF THE SOUTH DAKOTA HOUSE

‘The person who has to be the most restrained is me’: Mortenson shares views on leadership, and lessons from predecessors, as he embarks on history-making term

by Jon Davis ([jdavis@csg.org](mailto:jdavis@csg.org))

A decade ago, as a young policy analyst in the South Dakota governor’s office, Will Mortenson got his first up-close look at the work being done by lawmakers in his home state’s “citizen legislature.”

He immediately liked what he saw. “It was so intellectually stimulating and such a fun job of fresh challenges every day,” he recalls now. “Working with very capable people who were service-minded had a tremendous impact on me.”

Little did he know at the time, but Mortenson also was getting some early lessons on legislative leadership that he would be able to use himself one day — from caucus leaders such as David Lust and Russell Olson.

“I really thought those guys were working for their members and not asking the members to work for leaders,” Mortenson says, “and I think that’s the only way this job works.”

In late 2022, Mortenson’s legislative colleagues chose him to be House majority leader, a position that he takes on at age 34 and only in his third year in office. Mortenson, in fact, is the youngest leader of a Republican caucus in South Dakota history, as well as the first-ever tribal member to serve as majority leader in either the House or Senate.

But he also brings with him some unique experiences that have prepared him for the position, perhaps none more grave than last year’s impeachment of the state’s attorney general, who fatally struck a pedestrian while driving in September 2020. (The attorney general pleaded no contest to two misdemeanor charges in the case.)

Mortenson filed the resolution on impeachment and took the lead role in arguing the case before the full House. The attorney general ultimately was impeached by the House and removed from office by the Senate.

For his work on such a high-profile, highly emotional issue, Mortenson earned the respect of colleagues. And it gave him some perspective on leading the 63-member caucus.

“As I look at it, we’re going to be dealing with some tough topics in the coming years, but it’s hard to imagine one that had as much gravity and difficulty as that impeachment topic,” he says.

In a conversation with CSG Midwest, Mortenson shared his perspectives on leadership and his outlook for the 2023 session. Here are excerpts.

**Q** Who are some of the people who have shaped your views on leadership?



## BIO-SKETCH: SOUTH DAKOTA REP. WILL MORTENSON

- ✓ elected House majority leader in 2022, first elected to the Legislature in 2020
- ✓ is a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and is the first tribal member in state history to serve as majority leader
- ✓ is an attorney whose practice focuses on agriculture business and estate planning
- ✓ lives in the state capital, Pierre, with his wife, Shuree, and their two children: son, Augie, and daughter, Jules

“The number one thing the caucus leader can do is provide an example. ... I can’t go to one of my members and say, ‘Hey, that’s not how we treat each other’ if I’m treating people badly.”

**A** I’ve had the real privilege of watching some very capable and earnest majority leaders.

Probably my favorite was David Lust, who passed away way too early, last summer [at age 53]. He was the majority leader when I was working in the governor’s office and was somebody who was very smart, capable and very tough, and very funny.

I think that equal measures of those traits add up to a good leader. In the Senate, the leader at that time was a guy named Russell Olson. Those are the people who I look to as having done the job in a very forthright way. They were able to be of service to their caucuses. Those are two I would point to.

**Q** What lessons did you learn from your first term in office?

**A** Problems are just much better resolved in direct communication — rather than communication on social media or through traditional media.

I think that a primary driving force for anyone in the public sphere, but I would say particularly for lawmakers and political actors, is that they don’t want to be embarrassed. People will never forgive you if you embarrass them, and they will take steps they never would otherwise, whether that be out of anger or retribution or something.

So one key is that we always show restraint, whether things are going well for us or poorly, and that we really take care of one another in a collaborative body even if we are diametrically opposed.

We don’t want to do anything to try to embarrass each other or intentionally inspire overt malice against each other.

What does that look like? It means don’t succumb to your emotions and fire off a Tweet or a Facebook post, or don’t go find somebody from the press and try to bury the other guy. That just doesn’t work. That might make you feel better for 10 minutes, but it’s going to ruin a relationship for 10 years.

**Q** Has your perspective changed now that you are the majority leader?

**A** To some degree. I think the number one thing the caucus leader can do is to provide an example. I can’t go to one of my caucus members and say, “Hey, that’s not how we treat each other” if I’m treating people badly.

So the person who has to be the most restrained is me. The person who has to be the most consistent is me. The person who has to be the most fundamentally fair is me. Maybe that’s not how others view it, but that’s certainly the standard that I’m going to set for myself in the position of leadership.

They elected me majority leader not so that I could issue orders, but so that I could take orders and be a servant of the caucus, and be somebody who is working to make each of these members more effective in whatever direction they want to take us.

When the caucus holds a position, now that’s my position.

**Q** What are your personal goals for your first session as majority leader?

**A** My approach in year one, especially given that I am one

of the five youngest members of my body and I’m only in my second term, is to practice some restraint. I am not personally going to carry a large bill load. I am not going to try to be the primary influencer of our caucus agenda.

I am really going to lean on the leadership team more broadly and lead this in a collaborative fashion. One key is going to be just trying to keep people in the boat. That doesn’t mean they’re all rowing in the same direction, but I can provide a forum where people feel they’ve been treated fairly and that their voices have been given equal weight as a legislator, so that when we talk about caucus-wide priorities, we’re not talking about the priorities just of leadership, but indeed of the whole caucus.

**Q** As the first tribal member to be a majority leader, do you feel you’ll be setting an example for younger members in the state?

**A** I hope so. About 9 percent of our state’s population is tribally affiliated, and it’s spread across the state.

It’s been something in the DNA of South Dakota since before statehood. Whether you’re on or off the reservation, whether you’re a tribal member or not, I think that we do our best work when we realize that we’re all South Dakotans and that we can pull together.

In a lot of cases, because of the way tribal policy is set, the state has a tendency to say, “That’s in the feds’ portfolio, and there’s just nothing we can do.” Personally, we have three other tribal members in my caucus, and we’ve been pretty eager to say, “Where can we partner?”