Idaho Senate Majority Leader Bart Davis (left) and Connecticut Deputy Speaker Bob Godfrey (right) have collected a few tips for legislatively effectively over their combined 46 years of state legislative service. CSG's Capitol Ideas magazine sat down with them during the 2016 CSG National Conference in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, to get their thoughts on what freshman legislators need to know as they start their terms. Godfrey, who served as CSG national chair in 2011 and as CSG East co-chair in 2005, and Davis, the 2009 CSG national chair and chair of CSG West from 2003–04, remember the advice shared with them in their early days as legislators and offer their insights on how today's newly elected officials can develop as leaders to better serve their constituents and the states.

1. What should newly elected legislators arriving in state capitols for the 2017 session expect in their first year of legislative service?

Godfrey: “I just happened to do freshman orientation for the last 20 years. ... We spend an entire day playing legislature, so they have an idea what the environment is going to be like, but also where the information is going to be coming from, the kind of things they’re going to have to digest and learn quickly. They usually come away feeling overwhelmed, but also quite happy with that kind of exposure.”

Davis: “What I would hope every one of them would understand is that no single party fully defines
anyone on any legislative floor. We’re all compelled in most states to crowd under one of two political umbrellas, but not all Democrats think alike, and not all Republicans think alike. But it’s the collective wisdom that you’re looking for, not a single legislator’s opinion. … Thomas Jefferson reminded us that not every difference of opinion is a difference of principle.”

2. Was there a piece of advice you received early on in your legislative career that was particularly helpful to you?

Davis: “The best advice I can quickly recall ... is that your first year is really a learning year, and you don’t really learn if your mouth is open a lot. Now, don’t be mute. Speak up. But you will learn a lot about process, about how to create public policy. ... If you’ll sit and listen a lot that first year, you’ll learn a lot and you’ll come out a stronger legislator.”

Godfrey: “The most important piece of information that I got and that I continue to share is don’t make any promises you can’t keep. ... The role of legislatures is to slow thinking down. We’re supposed to be deliberative bodies. ... Take your time, think about it. Listen—and usually there’s more than two sides to an issue—before you make a commitment.”

3. We are meeting in historic Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. Have the principles and values that make a good legislator changed over the years since our founding?

Godfrey: “We spend much more time legislating than those earliest legislators did, and we have the pressures that technology bring of instant information and the pressure to make a decision right away. ... I think that’s a big difference in the 200 some odd years.”

Davis: “We encourage people to pick apart issues; don’t pick apart people. And, yet, still whether it be on the front page of the newspaper or other venues, we forget that principle and start going after individuals instead of issues. But I do think we are more similar than dissimilar. ... Sometimes, in our desire to be loyal to our political caucuses, we’re not as loyal as we should be to the needs of our citizenry. ... I get the sense that it wasn’t quite that way back then.”

4. How can state legislators overcome partisan divides to get the work of the states accomplished?

Davis: “I don’t think it’s unhealthy to have conflict. It’s contention that I’m not a fan of. ... It appears to me as an outsider watching what happens inside the Beltway is that they are legislating by press conferences. Well, I’m seeing more and more of that seeping into states. ... The states have been mostly doing this right and they just need to believe in their system.”

Godfrey: “Staying close to your constituents as opposed to the people who fund your election is another huge issue that I don’t think the founding fathers had to think about.”

5. So much of the work of state legislatures occurs within the committee context. What are the characteristics of a good committee member?
Godfrey: “Whether you’re a freshman or a veteran, you need to attend those (committee) public hearings and hear what the story is on any given issue and then be able to make a decision on it. ... Then, having a real discussion—talk to your colleagues on the committee—get it worked out well in advance. ... That winnowing process is important, so participate!”

Davis: “If you vote for the bill in committee then you should vote for the bill on the floor. ... If you send the bill to the floor, and in the interim you gather new information or your point of view changes, you need to tell that chairman that your opinion has changed. ... We rely on you; we have to trust the committee system.”

6. Can you tell me about a time when cooperation and compromise within a committee helped you achieve a goal you might not have otherwise accomplished?

Godfrey: “It happens often on the committee level. You’re really banging out the substance of bills and it’s good when someone raises an issue (with a bill). ... We can fix it much more easily at the committee level than in the more formal floor debates. It’s essential to the committee’s mission.”

Davis: “A good committee meeting is one where the committee members are feeding off of each other—not to tear down a witness, but to understand an issue. If everybody would just listen to each other, regardless of the labels we have after our names on Election Day, you’ll learn a lot from each other. ... I’ve learned by listening. Even now, I learn by listening.”

7. Do you have any tips for new legislators in mastering parliamentary procedure?

Davis: “The best advice I would give any new legislator is don’t worry about it. To be an effective legislator, if you’ll just sit and watch the process for a period of time, you’ll pick up all of the skills you’ll really need to do your job. ... Don’t get too wrapped around the axle.”

Godfrey: “I am the parliamentarian (in the Connecticut House). ... Bart’s absolutely right. Make a motion for the passage of the bill and don’t worry about the other stuff; I’ll take care of it from the chair, if I have to. ... Understand the principles ... but don’t get hung up on the other 472 pages of the Mason’s (Manual of Legislative Procedure).”

8. What drives you to continue serving as a legislator? What motivates you in the morning?

Godfrey: “I love to get up every morning and go to work still. Yes, it’s interesting topics, it’s cutting edge—culturally, legally and in every other way. But I look forward to getting into the building and working with the people who are there as we share the common interests, we have senses of humor, we know how to get things done, we know how to build coalitions around issues, and that just makes it fun.”

Davis: “My wife and I, we have six children. All of our married children and grandchildren live in Idaho. I genuinely care about their future. ... What drives me today probably isn’t what drove me when I first showed up, but today for me it’s the concern for the folks who are my family. ... These are my friends and neighbors I represent.”
9. How do you balance it all—legislating, working and personal/family relationships?

Davis: “Long days, long weekends, and you have a lot of help. People are more than willing to help where they can. As a lawyer, I have judges who are as accommodating as they can be without adversely impacting the rights of the other side. But we are a citizen legislature—most are—and I think that’s a healthy thing for at least smaller states to be that way.”

10. What are some resources that newly elected state legislators should consider to help them in their new roles?

Godfrey: “In Connecticut, it’s the nonpartisan staff if they are looking for information. You need to ask for that preliminary information so you know which questions to ask. We’ve guided them to places like CSG’s Knowledge Center, which gives a nice background view of a lot of the very big issues that are being talked about in all of the states.”

Davis: “States talking to each other is healthy. The Council of State Governments is a classic example where legislators from all over the country can get together and learn about an issue, learn how states are handling it, saying to themselves … ‘I want to bring it home to my state.’ … States, being the laboratories of democracy, need to talk to each other and learn what’s going on inside each of their labs.”