

[Mayor John W. Hickenlooper opened the Profiles in Leadership: America's Great Mayors series on April 18, 2007, at the invitation of the Economy League and Fels Institute of Government of the University of Pennsylvania.]

LESSONS FROM A BREWPUB: The John Hickenlooper Guide To Civic Success

We started our Profiles in Leadership: America's Great Mayors series to answer a simple question: what does a great mayor look like? We weren't expecting to find out that, sometimes, a great mayor looks like a brewpub manager. But John Hickenlooper is used to surprising people.

He surprised his friends and family in Narberth by morphing from an awkward, unambitious kid into a dynamic, successful businessman. He surprised his bankers by turning a risky brewpub venture into a catalyst for a neighborhood's development. He surprised everyone in Denver by beating the pants off of a field of well-established politicians and becoming mayor.

And he surprised our audience by explaining that restaurants and city halls aren't that different. "I think that any candidate is greatly improved by having spent a few years running a big, popular restaurant," he said. "Whether it's the restaurant or a big city, you never have enough money. You have a diverse group of people you've got to weld into a team. And the public is always ticked off about something."

In 2003, Hickenlooper rode a wave of ticked-off voters to victory. Public frustration with Denver's political establishment had opened the door to an outsider candidate like him. Hickenlooper seized the opportunity not by railing against his opponents but by presenting a positive vision for the city. He emphasized the need for teamwork. He vowed to improve city services and balance the budget. He promised to end the old-school game of political insider-ism and put the best possible person in every city job.

So far, he has delivered enough that his re-election is virtually assured. He balanced the budget despite declining revenues. He passed key civil service reforms. He reached far beyond his circle of friends and supporters to find qualified, diverse appointees. He helped end years of city-suburb political warfare, paving the way for a groundbreaking regional transportation initiative. *TIME Magazine* has called him one of America's top big city mayors, and he faces no significant competition for his second term.

How did he do it? He turned to the lessons he learned on the brewpub floor.

Lesson One: Listen

As a candidate, Hickenlooper listened to local businesspeople and found out that tax revenues were more likely to shrink than to grow. That allowed him to craft a smart budget that helped him win early endorsements from the local papers. He listened to leaders in the towns and suburbs surrounding Denver. That helped him end years of animosity and start money-saving, region-growing regional projects. He listened to average Janes and Joes all around Denver, and that helped him grasp the importance of improving city services and restoring faith in government.

And from the minute he launched his campaign, he listened to his own gut instincts. "At that first meeting, we're sitting there with a bunch of political consultants," he recalled. "There's six other candidates- it's almost like a made-for-TV movie - there's the Greek former police chief, the Latino former city auditor, the African American state senator - all the way down the list. And one of the people said, 'You're at 3 percent in the polls. If you're going to distinguish yourself, you've got to pull down one of these frontrunners.' And my wife and I looked at each other and said, 'Well that's exactly the direction we're *not* running.'

"We never did opposition research. We never did a negative ad. We never attacked. We tried to run a campaign where we said, 'We're going to hire the best person for the job for every single job in the

city.’ We were going to focus on being transparent, inclusive, and collaborative in a way that no one in the city has seen.” The message worked: Hickenlooper won 65 percent of the final vote.

Lesson Two: Know Your Real Budget.

One of the first things that candidate Hickenlooper did was make the rounds of local businesses. Based on what he heard, along with other research, he decided that instead of tax growth, Denver was about to see a significant decrease in tax revenue; so he made up a budget, took it to the newspapers, and won early endorsements.

The next thing he knew, he had jumped to 33 percent in the polls, with his nearest competition at 15. “I still remember my wife reading the details,” he said, “and she was not terribly happy about this. She lowered the newspaper so just her eyes were above it and said, ‘You never told me you were going to *win*.’”

But he did win, and his projections proved correct. But he arrived armed with the mandate he needed to make tough budget cuts.

Lesson Three: Know your Real Competition

When Hickenlooper opened his brewpub in a half-forgotten downtown neighborhood, his employees thought he was crazy when he put ads for other local restaurants in his restrooms. “The other restaurants couldn’t believe it. Our staff came up to me and said, what are you doing?” he recalled. “I said, they’re not our competitors. You’ve got to look at our self-interest in broader way. They’re really our allies. Our competitor is the TV set. We’ve got to work together to get people off the couch and out to enjoy life.”

That attitude helped revitalize what’s now known as LoDo – for Lower Downtown – and Hickenlooper brought it to the mayor’s office. One of the first things he did was throw a party in his loft for every regional county commissioner and their spouses. “I gave a two-minute speech: ‘The history of divisiveness, and us trying to get benefit at your expense, is over. And from now on, the City of Denver will do everything we can to help the suburbs,’” he recalled. “I got a huge round of applause. There was this tremendous hunger there.”

Similarly, he reached out to the Republican governor, who’d had epic battles with Hickenlooper’s Democratic predecessor, Wellington Webb. “On my first day in office I walked across the green. I spent about an hour and a half with him, and I said, ‘I guarantee you I will never embarrass you for political gain. We agree on about 90 percent of the stuff. It’s crazy for us to get in fights over these other things.’”

Why reach out? Because just as a successful brewpub needed a successful LoDo, a successful Denver needs a successful Colorado. “Denver doesn’t compete anymore with Seattle or San Diego,” he said. “We’re competing with metropolitan Shanghai. And metropolitan Bombay. If we don’t begin working together at a much higher level, we’ll find that not just our grandchildren’s jobs but our children’s jobs will have gone away.”

Lesson Four: Never Stop Building Your Team.

Don’t ever expect to see Hickenlooper pat himself on the back. As he talks about Denver’s successes, he credits his partners, his predecessors, his employees, his advisors, his wife, his parents – everyone but himself. This is no accident. It’s part of his strategy of keeping his team together.

Restaurants depend on a team of diverse people with many backgrounds and skill sets, all of whom have particular needs if they are to get their jobs done. Cities depend on the same thing. When he came into office, Hickenlooper made sure that he brought in a staff of appointees who were not only highly qualified, but diverse and representative, with connections to all parts of the city's social and political culture. He appointed one of his competitors for mayor as a leader in his transition. He established transition teams that could reach far beyond his personal circle to find qualified candidates for appointment. He made a highly visible effort to put a team in place that Denver's citizens could trust.

And he never stops building up his teammates, listening to their needs in private, and praising them in public whenever he can. He praises the city employees who helped him trim Denver's budget. He praises the suburban officials who helped make transit reform a reality. He happily declined to put his picture up in the Denver airport, substituting pictures that celebrate regional landmarks.

"Symbolic stuff really matters," he said. "You end up coming out better in the end. By taking your own picture down, it's as if you had a bigger picture up there. Don't think that I'm totally self-sacrificing."

Following his presentation, Mayor Hickenlooper took questions from our audience and from Wendy Warren, Assistant Managing Editor, *Philadelphia Daily News*.

Q: What's your opinion of Philadelphia beer?

"I think the Philadelphia *region* has great beer. Victory, Yards, Dock Street are all great new beers. Fermentation is always a great model for any kind of creativity."

Q: How did you bring a diverse set of people into government? How did you start that process?

"When I first got elected, this was a key challenge. I knew a lot of different people, but in a big city, with a strong-mayor form of government, you need to appoint literally hundreds of people. Your own social reservoir is not sufficient. So elected officials, all the time, are appointing people who helped them get elected – which is nonsense. I campaigned on this: running a big-city bureaucracy requires almost none of the skills as running a campaign successfully."

Hickenlooper reached out to the Chamber of Commerce, the tourism bureau, downtown partnerships, and put together 29 "transition committees." They compared each city agency's practice to best practices nationwide, and made recommendations for hires. Hickenlooper interviewed the finalists.

"Of the people I hired, my 60 senior appointees, 51 or 52 I'd never even met. It allowed us to really expand our pool, and set in place our practice that we were going to hire the best people for the job."

Q: How important was diversity?

"I was the first white mayor in twenty years. And diversity was an important issue that was discussed all through the campaign. And Mayor Webb – I was very careful. This is part of the restaurant background, not having enemies – anytime I criticized anything about the city, I prefaced it with praise for Mayor Webb. Which was easy, because he'd done so many great things. But I praised him every single time. So when I took office, we had a great relationship. He had no chip on his shoulder; I had never embarrassed him. So we got a lot of support from his people, helping us with the transition. And I tease him to this day

– we have a more diverse administration than he did. Roughly 60 percent Latinos and African Americans. And I can say, in every single case, we hired the best person we could find.

“Sometimes it took us longer. Our Rec system predominantly serves Latino kids and African American kids, and the first three finalists were all white males. Well wouldn’t someone who grew up in lower income neighborhood do a better job of relating? So we went back and looked again. Still no luck. Looked again, and we ended up hiring an African American woman who was the number three person in the Chicago parks. Getting her Ph.D. in child development. Much better than anybody else – but we had to look for her.”

Q: How did you sell something like a regional tax for transit reform to those mayors who weren’t going to get a stop on the new rail lines?

“It’s the same self-interest. The people that argue, ‘Why should I pay for transit when I’m not going to be able to take the transit?’ Everyone pays to take people off the roads. The benefit is, if anything, more for those people that get to stay on the roads and have that mobility, but knock 12 or 14 minutes every day off their commute time. Even if the transit line doesn’t go to you, those residents still cross the city during rush hour, right? You just have to, again and again, make the argument that you didn’t have to take transit to get the benefit from this. You’ve got find a fresh way to keep saying the same thing.”

Q: You’re obviously good at praising people. How do you tell people things they don’t want to hear, about budget or staff cuts, or poor performance? Do you sometimes have to bare the knuckles?

“No, I take the restaurant paradigm again. You may not be able to make them completely happy, but if you work hard enough, and listen, and really try to hear them, you can often get at least half of what they want. And the very act of trying so hard to see their side of it goes a long way.”

Hickenlooper came in facing a \$70 million deficit on a general fund of \$750 million. And there were unions with guaranteed raises. “Really there was about a 25 percent budget cut that we had to find.” Luckily boomers were retiring, but still he had to go to every agency to talk to them about possible cuts in staff, pension benefits, health benefits, and so on. But he didn’t go out and tell them what was going to happen – he went out and told them what he needed to achieve, and asked them how they wanted to contribute.

“We offered them the choice. In the private sector, you have two choices – you can lay people off, or everybody can tighten their belts. And in the private sector, it’s good to lay people off, some would argue – you get rid of the dead wood, people that aren’t laid off are happy they still have their jobs, so morale is good – there are reasons why that cycle works. But in the restaurant business, it never works that way, because it’s a family. You’d no more lay off your cousin than your mother ... so what we did was, we appealed to the city workers. I said, ‘I don’t get a dividend. I don’t get a bonus. I recognize that government is not a business. If you guys want to do layoffs, that’s fine – we’ll do a secret ballot. How many of you want to do layoffs?’ Even those people who had seniority, who were the least likely to get laid off, said, ‘Let’s not do layoffs. We’ll take a pay cut, we’ll give more to our pensions.’”

Q: How do you run a successful office of arts and culture?

“Lean. Arts can be a divisive issue, so you’ve got to be frugal. You can’t be controversial – it’s got to be art and culture and music that’s broad enough to appeal to a lot of people. We did an event called Doors Open Denver. We took eighty buildings, architectural gems, that most people never get into. It’s everything from the baseball field – you see the locker rooms, the dugouts – to the old pump station, this beautiful old 1910 building, we opened all these buildings for the whole weekend, with all these volunteers. The budget was \$28,000. And that appeals to everybody, right?”

Q: How do you improve city services? Is it enough to add new layers of staff who help people navigate the bureaucracy? Shouldn’t you just “fix the system?”

“You’d better fix the system, because adding that extra layer [of staff] is expensive, and redundant. It’s stupid. But if you don’t have that level right now, when you still haven’t changed the bureaucracy, then the frustration sets in. This becomes a snowball. The biggest thing is to get people to believe in their city. And once they do, then the city employees believe in their city. You can’t tell where the cart and the horse is.

“You know, if I’m speaking in Denver, I never give a talk without talking how incredible our city employees are. We had this huge snowstorm, and our employees were out there plowing, 12 hours on, 12 hours off, for eleven days straight. They missed Christmas, they missed New Year’s. Most of the public, they see the TV news during sweeps week and they see that 90-second segment on that parks and rec employee who’s taking a two-hour coffee break every day. That’s what the public sees about that workforce. Every day I go out there trying to change that perception, and it gets back to the city employees, and they work harder. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Q: What’s the landscape of existing political interests you were up against? How did you deal with them moving forward?

“Every labor union in town opposed me. But even with all those entrenched interests, I still won in a landslide, so I didn’t owe anyone. But during the transition, we immediately reached out to labor. We said, you’ve got to help us. You’ve got to make sure that you’re well represented.”

As for other political interests, he tried to get around the patronage problem by making sure that no one group – like his campaign supporters, or clients of his consultants – got special access to the mayor. “There were some standing people who had had a lot of political power, who saw their power diminished. But part of what we did was, we took that power away from everybody. The power of patronage, of you-do-this-for-me-and-your-friend-gets-this-job, we don’t do business that way. We had some problems, certainly in the first few years, finding a place where everybody had a role they were comfortable with.”

Q: If there hadn’t been a budget crisis, would your approach have worked?

“I’m one of the luckiest people on earth. Mayor Webb’s approach was so different from mine, that my natural approach seemed so fresh, so different.” The budget crunch “did allow me to set a tone, and accelerate that willingness within the workforce to look at different ways to get their opportunity.”

Q: What's the role of the planning department there? How important is planning? Does it only benefit the rich, not the poor?

Webb's planner had established a solid long-term plan for the city. Hickenlooper's people stuck with that. "They really created an ethic around planning. We just tried to continue and expand that belief that the built environment matters. Pushing developers to put a little more money and a little more time into creating something that's beautiful. That sets a standard for the next developer, that sense that place matters. Everybody wants to be in places that feel right, that are beautiful, that are intriguing.

"That's part of what Doors Open Denver was – to celebrate that, make it more part of the discussion: what are these buildings? How can we plan better if we want to have less traffic, less congestion on our streets? How can we design our new communities for bicycles and pedestrians?"

Q: How has planning helped poor people?

"There's no point in pumping a lot of HUD money into a neighborhood and fixing up the physical infrastructure if the school is still pathetic. There's no point in doing that if you don't have the police support, if you're not willing to make sure that the residents can get health care that's affordable and preventative. In the broader sense of planning, everything we do in terms of making an impact on underserved neighborhood is tied around that sense." Small investments can make a difference, he said: planting trees to shade the south sides of homes and helping people save on their summer AC bills.

Q: Would folks say that you've done enough?

"No. And they'd be right. It took us a year and a half to figure out what things worked and what things didn't. Or we start doing one thing in one neighborhood, and another neighborhood says, 'why them'?"

Q: Questions about controlling violence dominate our mayoral debates. You've reduced crime by 10 percent -- can you help us get past the conversation of just "getting tougher and tougher and tougher"?

"We reduced crime by 10 percent, and we did that by getting tougher and tougher and tougher. You ask almost any citizen what they care about, and they'll say, it's crime, and it's schools. You hear that day in and day out, and they are intimately connected. If you don't have a safe city, all the other stuff becomes just more window dressing.

"But you don't just throw money at it. We asked, how can we get the whole city to take responsibility for being a safe city?" He chose to follow the Los Angeles model, installing independent monitors in order to build public trust in the department. Take the problem of accusations of police brutality and misbehavior: "Ninety-eight percent of them are groundless. And yet you get into this dynamic where the public begins to lose faith in the police force. And how do police capture the bad guys? It's through tips! It's through relationships with the neighborhoods.

"During the recession, we lost about 100 cops. But the moment we had savings, we put every penny into the police force. But it wasn't all just to hire cops. It was to hire this independent monitor, with a staff, so that every single accusation gets investigated. And we publicize the results, so that people see that our cops are good.

“And they’re not perfect. We had this one case where a cop shot a kid in his own living room. We suspended him for eleven months. The kid had knife, was coming at him, I’m not sure he needed to be shot, but in the end, the cops picketed outside, I had 300 police officers calling me ‘Chickencooper’ and stuff like that, but we had to show that police officers who make a mistake are just as accountable as everyone else.”

He stuck to his guns and went out to the police department and told 800 police officers, “I’m doing this for you. This makes your job safer.”

Q: Most Philadelphia mayoral candidates were legislators, which requires some different skill sets. What skills should a legislator ramp up or down to be an effective mayor?

“I’m lucky that I don’t know any of the candidates, so this is not directed to anyone in particular. Again, I think being a good listener is a huge part of any management success. The ability to take criticism, and not always be on the defensive. The ability to bring different people together, and to get them to work together.”

Q: What does Philadelphia have that deserves celebration?

“I’m so glad you ask that. I can’t tell you what a delight it is to be back. I’ll always love the city – do you still have that heart in the Franklin Institute? Walking through that, when I was four years old, you know, ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum, is one of my earliest memories.

“You have one of the most beautifully designed cities ... but more than that, now that I’ve been outside I’ve found out. People who live in Philadelphia think, we’re the little brother to New York, or corrupt ... but out in the world, people think of Philadelphia as the birthplace of liberty. Betsy Ross. Ben Franklin. Part of any success is people’s belief. Philadelphians need to believe ... you have one of the most beautiful cities to live in. An incredibly high quality of life – you compare living in Philadelphia to living in New York, it’s just not the same. You’ve got to see that the rest of the world’s primary thought is how great Philadelphia is. This is where the Declaration of Independence was signed. This is where people figured out what so far is the most perfect system of governance on earth. Right here. Those principles are central to what Philadelphia’s brand is. It’s up to you guys to figure out how to talk about them freshly.”

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The America’s Great Mayors series is a project of IssuesPhiladelphia.org, a nonpartisan source of timely analysis, polls and indicators, and thought-provoking columns that discuss how to focus government on efficiently and effectively providing the results that matter to city residents. IssuesPhiladelphia.org is an initiative of the [Economy League of Greater Philadelphia](http://EconomyLeague.org) through the generous support of the William Penn Foundation and our members.