

Lawmakers Need to Walk the Talk for Bipartisanship

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The legislature is considering a middle class tax cut for Wisconsin. Sen. Jeff Smith writes about how a new legislative session can turn the page for bipartisanship and his goals for cultivating good ideas and building trust across the aisle.

MADISON - I've said it. Governor Evers said it. Republican leaders said it - "We need to work together."

A number of clichés come to mind as we talk about working together. "It's easier said than done" or "Talk is cheap." I prefer "walk the talk."

When I flipped on the TV to watch the local news two weeks ago, I was surprised to see local Republicans lined up supporting Governor Evers' idea to offer a middle class tax cut. Oddly, there were no Democrats involved in the press conference.

It's common for the Majority Party not to include the Minority Party for press activities. It doesn't have to be like this, but deep political divides still exist for many Wisconsin lawmakers.

During the last 8 years, the Majority Party ignored the wants and needs of the Minority Party. Harsh political fights over collective bargaining rights, redistricting, voting rights and many other issues left legislators very little appetite for bipartisanship. In fact, only 22% of all legislators currently serving in the Assembly or Senate know what it was like before 2011.

There are still some legislators (myself included) that do remember what it was like. Don't get me wrong, there were still intense political disagreements, but we also discussed the merits of bills during public hearings and while meeting in the halls of the Capitol. The power of a good idea pulled Republicans and Democrats together.

We saw a glimmer of that power during Governor Tony Evers' State of the State Speech last week. There was one moment when the Senate and Assembly Republicans joined Democrats for a standing ovation -- it was the Governor's idea to offer a middle class tax cut.

We all agree a middle class tax cut is a good idea, but there will be disagreements about how to pay for it. Democrats want to pay for the tax cut by recovering funds from ill-conceived tax credits. Republicans want to do it only one time. Despite the differences on how to get there, we've found some common ground.

Imagine if Democrats and Republicans stood shoulder to shoulder advocating for a middle class tax cut at a press conference. Imagine if the Majority Party invited the Minority Party to the table to discuss how to accomplish our shared goal. The final product would be more representative of the needs of ALL Wisconsinites.

Unfortunately, there's still some reluctance in really working together or perhaps there's uncertainty as to where we start. I have a few ideas on what we can do first.



As Senators and Representatives we bring our unique experiences and differing opinions to the job. Every new session offers us an opportunity to start a productive dialogue to learn from each other. We can't let our own bias and partisanship get in the way of doing what's right.

Beginning this term as a new Senator, I made a commitment with my team to meet with Democrat and Republican legislators in the Assembly and the Senate. I'll take this time to introduce myself, listen to their ideas and learn more about the communities they represent.

Having these conversations to acknowledge our differences and similarities is the first step for establishing mutual respect. These relationships can build trust so we can, again, make the right decisions for the future of our state.

Team success begins and ends with trust in each other. As a lifelong sports fan and former high school sports participant, (can't honestly say I was a star athlete, but I tried) I know how much further we get when we work as a team.

I've observed Republicans finding Democrats who might add their name next to theirs as co-authors of their bills. That's a good step, but adding names is not enough; it's about adding good ideas too. As legislators, we need to prioritize cooperative input and let the power of a good idea take root in our Legislature.

We have an opportunity to turn the page and heal the political divisions. Progress will happen once we put away the political scorecards and "walk the talk" for bipartisanship.

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