



Photos courtesy of FEMA

The Power to Convene

State legislators can take the lead in decision making by convening public and private sector parties to tackle problems

By Christine Carlson and Greg Wolf

When hurricanes Frances and Jeanne made landfall in Florida in 2004, there was a group ready to handle the aftermath. They had not been convened for that purpose; however, they have a hand in setting the agenda for how the region can move forward.

State Sen. Ken Pruitt, with Gov. Jeb Bush, had convened the Committee for a Sustainable Treasure Coast to take a collaborative look at how best to improve the quality of life in the three-county area. Twin hurricanes placed a new item—rebuilding—squarely on their agenda. What this means is that rebuilding will take place in a way that draws together people and interests from different counties and jurisdictions.

Sen. Pruitt's foresight was also the state's good fortune. "This committee will set the template for what will happen along the Treasure Coast," he said. "I cannot understate the importance of the committee's collaborative work."

And Sen. Pruitt is not alone in imagining a better way to get people working together. State legislators can help engage people in problem solving in their districts, as Senator Pruitt has done, as well as in their policymaking role.

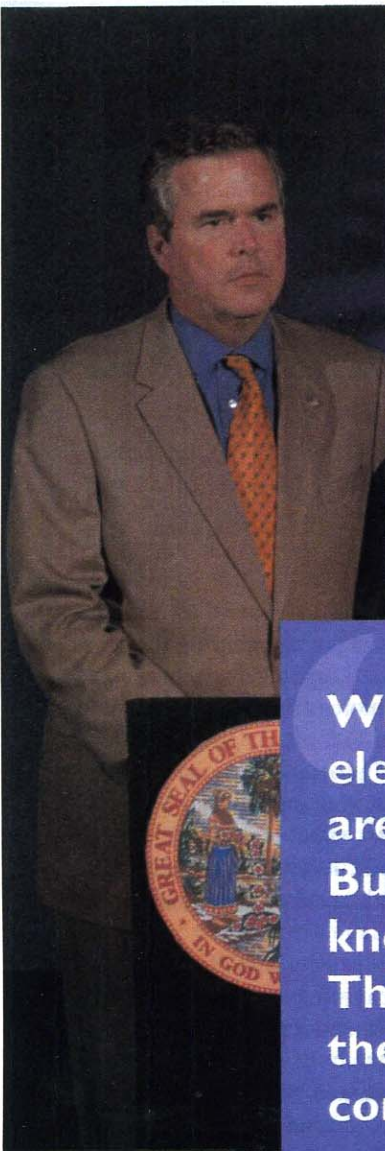
A term for this new approach is finding "Public Solutions."

In practice, this means people from inside and outside of government, taking responsibility for coming up with an answer to a thorny public problem. It all starts with legislators convening people, calling them to the table to work on issues that government alone cannot resolve.

"When we are elected," says Roger Moe, former Minnesota Senate President, "legislators are given a gift. But many don't know about it. This gift is the power to convene."

Lana Oleen, former Kansas Senate Majority Leader, points out, though, that the idea can be vague. What does "convening," mean? "It's simple," she answers. "Call the right people, and encourage them to work together to come up with a solution. Generally, when leaders invite people to the table to work on an issue, they are willing to come."

Over the past decade, the Policy Consensus Institute has worked with leaders to foster the kind of collaboration needed



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to achieve better solutions. From these experiences, we have developed Public Solutions, a system for employing a collaborative approach to governance in a variety of settings.

Being a convener is different from chairing a committee or leading a meeting. Here are seven suggestions that we have found useful for legislators to keep in mind when they serve as conveners:

- **Be inclusive.** "Don't be afraid to engage a wide variety of people," says Sen. Oleen. "Welcome representatives from all interests—not just those with an obvious interest." Welcome each participant so they know they are important to the decision-making process.
- **Establish a neutral place.** The place needs to ensure an impartial process. When the issue is complex and divisive, it will be especially helpful to get assistance from an experienced facilitator in planning and conducting the process.

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- **Direct, rather than dominate, the discussions.** “Your role at such a meeting is to bring people together to find agreement,” says Sen. Moe, “not to make decisions for them.” There has to be an environment for working through issues.
- **Keep people moving.** Keep participants working together to consider options and integrate them into solutions. Where there may be institutional impediments, or red tape involved, consider using your own capabilities to overcome them.
- **Be impartial.** In order to keep people participating, they must believe that the leader or convener is not predisposed to one side or another and is trying to find a solution that all sides can embrace. This may require that there be conveners from both sides of the aisle. Help ensure that the issues being considered are framed in an unbiased way. Defining and naming the issue jointly can ensure that everyone is willing to contribute to finding a solution.
- **“Demonstrate on-going visible commitment to the process.”** In order to keep participants at the table, they need to know that the convener is paying attention and cares about the progress the group is making. Even when you cannot be directly involved throughout the process, it is important to send signals of your on-going interest. Provide feedback to the group on their progress.
- **Make sure there is an outcome.** Getting to closure can involve establishing timetables for the process and reminding people of them. The best agreements are written, and include an action and implementation plan that spell out different people’s responsibilities.

Sen. Moe points out, “One benefit of collaborative governance is that it can keep issues out of the legal and legislative arena. When people can develop a solution that does not involve more red tape and regulation, everybody benefits.” Things move more smoothly, and policymakers can focus on things where legislation is truly needed.

Convening is a useful tool to do that. It is not always the right option, but often it can work. “Pick the issue,” says Sen. Moe. “The environment, health care, education, transportation—chances are there is some element of it where collaborative governance would jump-start a solution. . . . [I]t will more often than not achieve results.”

Indeed, collaborative governance can unlock bitter disputes and create solutions that last. It has happened in legislatures in Montana, where there had been a simmering dispute over hazardous waste cleanup. It has happened in Minnesota on long-term care issues. In addition, in North Carolina, roadblocks to progress on groundwater contamination fell away in a day once

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the right people worked together. Legislators convened those who came together to craft answers to all these questions.

The bottom line on convening, from the standpoint of a legislator, is that not only is it a more effective way to arrive at better, more lasting solutions for people, “but it also makes good political sense,” says Sen. Oleen. “Involving people in the decisions that affect their lives makes them feel included.” And, even if the ultimate policies are not the ones they would have liked to see adopted, they can live with and accept the outcomes.

“Those who have been elected have a powerful, but little-used tool at their disposal: the power to convene,” says Sen. Moe. “This is not a currency to be spent frivolously. You have to be judicious.”

“But,” he adds, “the results can be remarkably satisfying.” And, he says, there are tools and resources available to assist legislators who choose to follow this course. “No one has to start from scratch.”

—Christine Carlson is Executive Director of the Policy Consensus Initiative, which builds and supports networks that provide states with leadership and capacity to achieve more collaborative governance. Greg Wolf is Executive Director of the National Policy Consensus Center. The Center conducts applied research to develop systems for collaborative governance that leaders can use to achieve better solutions to complex public issues.

For more information, please see www.policyconsensus.org.