

**Jon Wainwright:** Hello, and welcome to In Practice. I'm your host, Jon Wainwright, and on today's California Lawmaking edition of In Practice we will be talking about staffing a committee. And to tell us more about that, we've brought in Erinn Ryberg. She is the Legislative Director for Assembly Woman Cristina Garcia.

**Erinn Ryberg:** Hello. Nice to see you.

**JW:** Thank you for joining us. So let's just go ahead and dive right in. First off, to give folks a little background, what do you do as a Leg Director?

**ER:** As a Leg Director, I manage the Assembly Member's legislative package. That starts from coming up with bill ideas, vetting them, researching them, deciding if we have the staff capabilities to actually implement them. Once we have our leg package down then I steer it through the entire process - helping the legislative aides that work with me, speak to stakeholders and committee staff and the Governor's office and all the different interested parties, and make sure that we can come up with a bill that will ultimately be signed by the Governor. I also give her recommendations on how to vote on legislation for anything that comes through the Assembly Floor.

**JW:** Ok. Cool. So, that's good background for folks. Now, we're just going to dive into one part of that whole process, which is staffing your member through committee. So, we'll start with a broad overview. What's the overall process of that?

**ER:** So, Assembly members and Senators sit on a certain number of committees. It's different numbers based on the member. Their role on the committee is to read and analyze legislation, and then ultimately vote on it and decide whether it makes it out the committee or not. Committees have a much more narrow focus area, and so, they're supposed to consider and analyze the bill with that focus area in mind, whether it's health or education or judiciary.

So, my job as a staffer, I staff my member on judiciary committee. I read the bills, analyze the bills, and then ultimately give a recommendation to my boss on how to vote and then she takes that recommendation and either listens to me or not, and then we go from there.

**JW:** And then that would be a separate process from staffing a member as they take one of their bills to a different committee? What's that process like?

**ER:** So, if you're staffing a bill, then you know the ins and outs of that bill, you're working with different stakeholders, and you're guiding it through the committee process, through multiple committees - fiscal and policy - and you're dealing with a lot of different people. Committees have different requirements.

If you're staffing just one committee, then I work with the same people, the same committee staff, the same subject matter. So judiciary, we deal with all legal issues: evidence, civil procedure, penalties, punishments. It's a much more narrow focus, again,

compared to a bill that I was staffing for my boss, it could be on any topic that we decide and our goal is to get that ultimately passed. For judiciary committee, I don't want to say I don't care what happens to the bills, but I just am thinking about them in regards to that committee alone and whether we should let them out that committee. I don't often know what happens to them afterwards. \*chuckles\*

**JW:** \*chuckling\* Sounds good. What are some of the biggest challenges with staffing the committee?

**ER:** First of all, committee staff, for better or for worse, a lot of the staff has been in the committees for years - some ten plus years. And with that come a lot of likes, dislikes - again, certain agencies, ideas, members, topics, issues. If you have an idea that you think is just the best idea and you get to a committee and staff doesn't like your idea, or they don't like that agency, and they have a lot of pull over your committee chair, then your bill is dead. Or, if they like it then it can pass. So you would need to know going into the committee where the staff is on your bill and on that topic and decide if there's even a chance you're going to get it out of committee.

The second is, I would say, committee politics. Ultimately, we're in California, so Democrats have the majority. Most of the chairs on committees are Democrats, except for one. If the Chair has a yes recommendation, then the chair expects all democrats to vote yes. They can, of course, vote no, but keeping in mind that one, you have to let the chair know, and two, if you are going to be that deciding vote that leads a bill to die that the chair wanted to pass then you need to know that there may be some repercussions with that and ultimately you may be asked to vote with the chair.

**JW:** Okay. Sounds like we've probably danced around a couple of these things here, but what are some of the basic do's and don'ts?

**ER:** I would say do read the bills. We have committee staff give all the Democratic members' staff briefing on all the bills. They tell them what all the bills do, why they like it or why they don't like it, and I think sometimes it's easy for us as staff to not actually read the bill and just take what they say to be the truth. Definitely listen to what they're saying, but also read the bill and make sure that they're reading it the way that you're reading it. Especially if you have a legal background, you can read the bill and understand what it does. Make sure to read the bill.

Make sure to take meetings with everybody - support and opposition. You don't want to have a reputation for only meeting with certain groups or certain organizations or just not having any of the tough conversations on bills. I try to meet with as many people as possible.

I think the biggest [don't] is don't commit your boss to a vote unless you're authorized to do so. As much as you may like a bill, as much as you think your boss may like a bill, they could have some issue with it that you don't know about, or something could come up last minute - a last minute amendment or compromise - and so, even if I know how

my boss is going to vote on something, I don't know what's going to happen in the next four days before committee so I never say what her stance and position will be. I always say, "Well just show up in committee and you'll find out."

**JW:** And I feel like one of the other don'ts would be, don't not loop in the Chair of the committee on...

**ER:** Yep. Yep. Definitely. And I think it's all just constant communication with the committee staff and with the Chair's office because ultimately it's going to have a big role in deciding if this legislation moves forward or not and you don't want to be seen as a staffer that's kind of a hindrance to that.

**JW:** Okay. And then, last piece of advice here for any new, young lawyers getting into the world of lawmaking. What's the big takeaway advice? What's that one thing you wish you would've known on day one that you know now that would make life a whole lot easier?

**ER:** I think, when I first started taking meetings on legislation, people would always offer their advice and their help. They give you their cards and say, "Call me. I can help you on this. I have expert knowledge on it."

But, given my legal background, I always want to research myself and find everything out myself, But what I realized is that they know these issue areas a lot better than me and I could Google something for four hours that they could give me an answer in 20 minutes. So reach out to people. It's good not only to get actual accurate information that's fast, but also then you're starting to build that relationship with that person and then you can turn to them if you have a question that your boss needs answered in five minutes and you can look up to them. I'd say if somebody tells you to reach out to them, and offers to help you, then keep that card and actually reach out to them and ask them for help because they wouldn't have asked you if they didn't mean it.

**JW:** Good deal. Well that all sounds like really good advice, and hopefully our listeners take it to heart. That's all the time we have for this In Practice. Thank you again, Erinn, for taking the time to walk us through how you staff a committee.

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