



## ***Washington State Legislative Service Project: Staff 2012*** **Executive summary – Winter 2012**

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The Washington State Legislative Service Project examines the views of key individuals involved in the legislative process to determine how recent developments in this process have affected legislative civility. Study participants include state-wide elected officials; legislative and agency staff, members of the media, professional lobbyists, and legislators who served between 1990 and 2012. The staff aspect of the Legislative Service Project focuses on Washington State legislative and agency staff who worked in Olympia during the 2012 legislative session. Survey questions included the areas of: public perceptions of the legislature, civility and bipartisanship, work/sleep performance effects, and leadership/management effectiveness.

Of the participants who responded to the survey, 1/3 identified themselves as staff to state-wide elected officials or state agencies, and 2/3 identified themselves as legislative staff. Over 50% of the participants reported having over 10 years of work experience in the legislative process. Respondents' previous experience included: 20% had been student interns, 25% had previous elected experience, 11% had been a lobbyist, and 9% had served as a legislative page in their youth. Survey participants were slightly more likely to be female, and most were from the Puget Sound or the NW part of Washington. About half of the participants aligned with the Democratic Party, with the other half being evenly split between the Republican Party and self-described independents.

Staff found their work to be very meaningful. They indicated that prior work experience, formal education, and experience and knowledge of the political process best prepared them for their current position. The aspects of their work which they least expected to encounter was the long hours during session, interacting with uncivil individuals, and the low salary.

When evaluating various aspects of state government, staff graded the performance of the State Judiciary highest, followed by the Governor and state agencies. The Legislature received the lowest grade. The aspects of the legislative process which employees feel are most favorable to citizens include an open and transparent process, constituent services, and state legislative staff employees having high ethical standards. The aspects which are least favored include bureaucracy and red tape, waste and misuse of public funds, incivility, and dispassionate employees. Staff felt that the legislature could improve its image through

improved communication, greater citizen engagement, pursuit of efficiencies, and a focus on customer service. Ideas for improving legislative efficiency included reduction and streamlining of regulatory paperwork, improved training, more bipartisanship, and greater reliance on strategic planning.

Employees defined civility to include active listening, respectfulness, showing courtesy even during disagreements, willingness to engage in collaboration, and professionalism. In general, staff felt that they were more civil than others involved in the governmental process. When evaluating which aspect of government is the most civil, the Governor rated the highest, followed by State Judiciary, state agencies, and then the Legislature. Citizens and special interest groups were rated less civil than any of the aspects of government. Staff felt that a legislator should be held to a higher civility standard than the average citizen, and that legislative civility is on a decline. The staff agreed that some of the factors effecting legislative incivility are increased campaign costs, special interest groups, and ideologically-driven media outlets and constituents. The majority of employees feel that the polarization taking place in Washington D.C. and other states is also occurring in Washington State.

Staff overwhelmingly agreed that cross-party legislative interactions tend to improve working relationships among legislators. Employees also opined that the best ways for legislators to get to know each other is through legislator-only social events, integrating seating and office assignments, visiting other legislators in their home district, and working across the aisle. Legislative leadership was identified as being critical in the implementation of these changes, as were legislators looking for areas of commonality and keeping focused on what is best for Washington state and its people.

Employees felt that to repair legislative relationships affected by hostile campaigns requires professional attitudes, limiting campaign spending, and joint party new legislator training. Staff observations of legislators during session is that legislators' quality of sleep is worse during session, that more legislators are "morning" people outside of session and "evening" people during session, and that legislators are at their peak performance for making decisions between 11am and 1pm.

Staff's perception is that the most common legislative office leadership style emphasizes setting a vision, but allowing staff freedom in the implementation. The legislators' management style which staff persons feel is most common is one where all decisions are cleared by the legislator. Staff also identified the most common legislative personality to be one which is more likely to focus on people than projects, rely on what is certain as opposed to being open to explore new insights, make decisions based on values and personal beliefs, and that most legislators prefer a planned and stable life.