Q & A WITH BILLD ALUMS: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL LEGISLATORS IN PROMOTING CIVIL DISCOURSE AND CIVILITY? HOW DO MEMBERS ADVANCE POLICY OVER PARTISAN POLITICS AND DISAGREEMENTS?

“This is a hard conversation, but one that should be had. I’ve watched good legislation become a firestorm of misinformation and name calling because the draftee of the bill irritates people.

“Right or wrong, government and lawmakers have become the example for civility in society as a whole. We need to remember that all the legislators and staff, all the constituents who come through our capitol, are individual people with life experiences different from ours.

“And while we will often not agree with them on particular issues, the fact that as human beings, they deserve respect should not escape us. Furthermore, the fact that we may not personally like an individual should never reduce us to bad governance in an effort to settle a score.”

“Treating each other with respect and starting with the notion that each elected official’s motivations are pure until proven otherwise will enable quality discussions and debates.”

“Legislators are leaders and role models, whether we recognize it or not. How we treat one another contributes to the larger culture within the legislature and back home.

“One way members can advance policy is by sharing ‘why’ you’re working on this problem, being open to other suggestions that may be solutions (instead of being married to a specific idea), and personally visiting with other members.

“Just before I joined the Legislature, the ‘smoking room’ in the North Dakota Capitol was closed. During those years, everyone went into the lounge during breaks — whether they smoked or not — and used that time to get to learn about each other and their families. There wasn’t a Republican or Democrat lounge; there wasn’t a House or a Senate lounge. It was one room where everyone was welcome — and politics was usually left in the chamber.

“That environment to build rapport with colleagues just doesn’t really exist anymore.”

Iowa Sen. Amy Sinclair
Sen. Amy Sinclair is a 2016 graduate of the BILLD program, and serves as vice chair of the BILLD Steering Committee. First elected in 2012, she currently serves as Senate majority whip. Sinclair also is chair of the Education and Government Oversight committees.

Michigan Sen. Arc Neubtt
Sen. Arc Neubtt is a 2012 graduate of the BILLD program. He currently serves as president pro tempore. First elected to the Senate in 2014, he previously served in the Michigan House, where he was majority floor leader.

North Dakota Rep. Corey Mock
North Dakota Rep. Corey Mock is a 2011 graduate of the BILLD program and serves as a member of the BILLD Steering Committee. He was first elected to the House of Representatives in 2008. He served as minority leader from 2015 to 2018. Mock currently is chair of the Interim Committee on Information Technology.

The Council of State Governments’ Midwestern Legislative Conference wishes to express its deepest thanks to the following private sector donors, all of whom generously pledged significant contributions in support of the MLC’s 26th annual Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development. Notwithstanding the unfortunate cancellation of this year’s institute due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the MLC remains grateful for the loyal support of its partners, as well as for their belief in the importance of leadership training and the need to provide legislators with the opportunity to develop their leadership and policymaking skills.

Please contact Laura Tomaka, CSG Midwest program manager, for more information on becoming a BILLD sponsor. She can be reached at ltomaka@csg.org.