

Iowa Senate President Jack Whitver

Patience, along with ability to listen and build relationships, helped elevate attorney/entrepreneur to key role in upper chamber

by Ilene Grossman (igrossman@csg.org)

When Jack Whitver was elected to the Iowa Senate in 2011, he was close to finishing law school and had a successful career as a business owner. He soon rose into leadership positions in the Senate, first as minority whip and ranking member of the Appropriations Committee and, following the 2016 election, as Senate president.

A lifelong Iowan, Whitver attended Iowa State University, where he received his B.A. and MBA, and was a three-year starter as a wide receiver on the football team. He finished his college football career ranked in his school's all-time Top 10 in receptions and receiving yards, and was named an Academic All-American.

He says his career as a lawyer and business owner has helped shape his perspective, "but that is just one piece of our whole caucus. We all come from different backgrounds, and I think you need that to have a successful caucus." He adds, "None of us are experts in everything, so having a wide variety of backgrounds is really important and helps us build a stronger team."

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Whitver talked about his priorities as Senate president as well as his approach to legislative leadership. Here are excerpts.

Q: How important was mentoring to you as a new legislator, and how do you mentor others?

A: I was very fortunate because one of the first people I met in the Senate was Bill Dix (now the Senate majority leader), and he took me under his wing and helped me learn the process. It is so important to find someone to mentor you, because unless you have been around politics, which I never had, it takes a while to understand how the process works. I try to go out and door-knock with every one of our candidates and spend some time in their districts and talk them through any issues or concerns they are having. I like to build a relationship with them even before they are elected, and once they are elected, I try to spend time with them both inside and outside the Capitol. Relationships are everything in politics.

Q: Why did you pursue legislative leadership, and how did you go about pursuing that leadership path?

A: When I was first elected, I was more into policy, especially our state budget. But we were in the minority, and we weren't accomplishing as much as I hoped we would. I decided to run for leadership so I could help win the majority, and when we did, we were able to get some of our priorities accomplished.

Q: What are some of the qualities and characteristics that you see as important to being an effective legislative leader? How would you describe your legislative leadership style?

A: I like to listen a lot more than I talk. I think it's really important to spend as much time as you can listening to your caucus members and your constituents to understand what drives them and what

Bio-sketch of Sen. Whitver

- ✓ Elected in a 2011 special election; elected as Senate president after the 2016 election
- ✓ Attorney and entrepreneur
- ✓ Has a bachelor's degree and MBA from Iowa State University, and a law degree from Drake University
- ✓ Lives in Ankeny, a suburb of Des Moines, with his wife, Rachel, and their three children



"My children are 6, 4 and 2, and they are a large part of why I do what I do in the Legislature."

issues are important to them. Along with that, patience is really important. As the session goes along, let things play out and have patience with the people involved in the issues. As a leader, you have to build trust within your caucus and with constituents, so they know they can trust you, and that you will be up-front with them, even if they don't agree with you all the time.

Q: What are one or two of the bills you have been involved with that you are most proud of?

A: As Senate president, I don't floor-manage bills, but these are two I was deeply involved with. One of the issues I worked on last year was returning power to the local school districts. The school boards now will be able to run their schools as they see fit and not have to ask permission to do things differently. In a diverse state like Iowa, no matter what a district's challenges, we treated all schools the same. With this legislation, we gave local schools more flexibility to spend funds how they need to so they can be successful.

Another bill involved a constituent whose son was killed on his bicycle by a drunk driver. The parents wanted to get a bill passed that would get drunk drivers off the road, so we worked on a bill last session that would provide drunk drivers with actual help, rather than just jailing them. The legislation gets drunk drivers into a treatment program. We called it a 24/7 program. In lieu of other punishments, the judge can have the person convicted of drunk driving [in the case of multiple offenses or certain first offenses] check into the local sheriff's office twice a day, so they are monitored to ensure that they are alcohol-free. Over time, this type of program has been shown to help people break their addiction.

Q: What are your top legislative priorities for 2018?

A: For me, the most important thing is to reduce the individual income tax. It affects not only

individuals, but every small-business owner as well. If you look across the country at those states that are growing, those states with low or no income tax are doing the best.

Longer term, it is important to look at how to modernize and reorganize state government so that it fits a 21st-century model. So many things we do were designed decades ago and aren't the most efficient.

Q: What are likely to be some of the big issues the Legislature will take on in 2018?

A: We will be talking a lot about tax reform. For several years, we have been trying to pass some water quality initiatives and we will continue to work on that. Mental health is important, and we will be looking to improve both services and insurance coverage.

Q: What are some of your biggest frustrations, or things you'd like to change, about the Legislature?

A: It doesn't move very fast. As an entrepreneur, you are used to making decisions and moving with them.

Also, a lot of the issues we have to deal with in the state of Iowa, and in the country, are not hard to find solutions for. What is sometimes difficult is to find the political will or courage to get the solutions done, so that can be frustrating at times as well.

Q: What do you hope Iowa will be like 15 to 20 years from now when your children are grown?

A: My children are 6, 4 and 2, and they are a large part of why I do what I do in the Legislature.

When they are ready for college, I want there to be good universities here, and when they are done with college, I want there to be good jobs and a good quality of life that make them want to stay in Iowa. ★