

In Idaho, ethics lessons die in the cloakroom

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Few people who are attracted toward or recruited into seeking public office get a heads-up on ethics laws early on.

Only later do they acquire this knowledge - often at the expense of themselves or a colleague when somebody has been accused of crossing the ethical boundaries.

Citizen legislators, for instance, come to office not fully cognizant of their obligation to maintain the public's trust.

To conduct the public's business in public.

To recognize any conflict between the official's private interests and his public responsibility. Or even when there's an appearance of a conflict.

Why would they? Where they come from, they either answer to an employer, a customer base or a corporate board of directors and shareholders. In their world of private employment and for-profit enterprise, the public interest is an ambiguous concept.

So it's progress when newly elected members of Idaho's Legislature submit to a public ethics training session this week. And the entire Legislature will undergo more instruction shortly after lawmakers convene in Boise in January.

The classes follow more than two years of ethical lapses - from tax scofflaw Phil Hart of Hayden using his House seat as a means to evade tax collections to House State Affairs Committee Chairman Tom Loertscher of Iona killing a bill that might have undermined his road abandonment dispute at home; from former Senate majority caucus Chairman John McGee's resignation amid drunken driving and sexual harassment charges to Senate Resources and Environment Committee Chairman Monty Pearce, R-New Plymouth, engineering new oil and gas exploration laws after he lined up his own oil and gas lease.

But once these lawmakers become sensitized to ethical matters, where do they turn?

Not to an independent ethics commission. Idaho is among nine states - including Wyoming - where lawmakers self-police their ethical cases.

It's also among only three states - along with Michigan and Vermont - where the public has to take a public official's word for it about whether he's serving the their interest or his own. Idaho does not require its state officials and lawmakers to disclose where they make their money.

Nor can these ethical lessons shield any official from the temptation to negotiate a lucrative lobbying contract from the perch of his public post. The Gem State joins 10 others in requiring no cooling off period between public service and signing on with a special interest.

So that leaves these ethical questions to the legislative leadership.

Leaders such as House Speaker Lawrence (Boss) Denney, R-Midvale, who played favorites. Denney has shielded allies such as Hart and Loertscher while punishing Eric Anderson of Priest Lake for raising ethical concerns.

Leaders who in both houses have responded to ethics probes by making it more difficult for you to learn when a complaint has been filed and what happened to it.

What good are ethics lessons taught in a classroom when they get punctured in the cloakroom?

No wonder the Center for Public Integrity gives Idaho the 41st worst score in the country in what it calls a corruption risk report card. That compares to Washington (third), Oregon (14th), Montana (31st), Utah (35th), Nevada (42nd) and Wyoming (48th).

In spite of that, legislative leaders - notably Denney - have dragged their feet at holding themselves more accountable to you.

What lesson is being taught here? Is it to behave ethically - or simply to avoid getting caught? - M.T.