

Just call Lawrence Denney 'Boss'

Chuck Malloy/Lewiston Tribune

Say this about Secretary of State Lawrence Denney - the man that some editorial writers have nicknamed "Boss" Denney. He has a sense of humor.

"People would ask, 'Should we call you Secretary? Or Lawrence?' I would say, 'You can call me Boss.' "

He was kidding, as his friendly smile and laugh would suggest. But what Denney has shown early on is that he's a pretty good boss - a far cry from the House speaker's version of "Boss" Denney, who had the reputation of strong-arming any moderate or liberal who got in his way.

The secretary of state's version of "Boss" Denney took the time before taking office to meet individually with staff people. "I made it clear, 'this is not a job interview - you have a job. I just want to get to know you and for you to know me,' " Denney said.

The gentle approach worked. Aside from one retirement, Denney retained the same staff that worked for longtime Secretary of State Ben Ysursa, including Chief of Staff Tim Hurst. Denney's glad they did stay on.

"They know what they're doing," Denney said. "I can't imagine what it would be like to come in having to replace the staff. I can't imagine how difficult the transition would be."

From Hurst's end, it has worked out well.

"He's a good boss and a good guy. Lawrence is learning the job and doesn't have a lot of preconceived notions of what the job is," Hurst said. "We have similar personalities. He's easy to work with and get along with."

Denney has been spending most of his time figuring out what the job is about, leaving the day-to-day dealings to Hurst and his staff. He's been doing a lot of reading. The business code, itself, runs about 300 pages "and I can't believe how many times 'secretary of state' is mentioned. Every day I'm finding new responsibilities, and it's not just elections and Land Board."

The dull reading has kept Denney under the radar, for sure. But don't look for a lot of news releases or political drama coming from his office. As House speaker, it was a different game. He earned the "Boss" nickname after suggesting to a company that they might want to fire a lobbyist who opposed him. At the end of one session, Denney replaced a couple of moderate committee chairmen with more conservative members. He was a champion for closed primaries and was criticized widely for engineering campaign funding for conservative candidates.

Denney's "greatest hits" as speaker are not flattering. But hardball politics is nothing new to the position. Every speaker - from Tom Stivers to Scott Bedke - would drop the hammer from time

to time. The difference is that most speakers managed to do most of their dirty work away from the public's eye.

Hardball politics is not part of the job description for secretary of state. Denney may respond to questions about elections or election laws, as Ysursa did, during his years in office. But otherwise, he's fine with letting others grab the headlines and criticisms.

"If a secretary of state makes news, especially after an election, it's not a good thing," Denney said.

One of Denney's policy goals is to implement online voting registration in the state, which he says will ensure greater integrity in the election process. His chief ally in that effort is Rep. Mat Erpelding, D-Boise, who came to the Legislature after Denney was ousted as speaker.

"There's more security with online registration than registering at county fairs and on the street," Denney said. "With online registration, you have to complete a form before it can be submitted; with the county fairs, the forms often are not completed. If we had online registration, you still can register at the county fairs."

Erpelding, the House assistant minority leader, says Denney's interest in the issue perked up after he became secretary of state.

"Our conversations on this issue have come full circle," Erpelding said. "His door is always open and we've had some great conversations. There are a few differences, but at least it's on the table."

The missing link, according to Denney and Erpelding, is gaining Republican support for online registration. On that score, it's up to Erpelding to find GOP co-sponsors on his own.

The old "Boss" Denney apparently has left the building.

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