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Posted at 03:53 PM ET, 07/21/2011

Richard Riley, former U.S. secretary of education, on his leadership lessons

By [Tom Fox](#)



Richard W. Riley was the U.S. secretary of education under President Bill Clinton and a former two-term governor of South Carolina. He is currently a distinguished professor at Furman University, and serves as advisory board chair of the Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership at Furman. Riley was named one of the top 10 Cabinet members of the 20th century by Time magazine.

How is government service an opportunity for the next generation to make a difference?

In our free democracy, if you really want to impact a lot of a people in a meaningful way, government service is the way to do it. When I got to Washington, it was amazing to sit around with eight to ten people and realize the decision we would send to the president would impact literally 50 million children. That is overwhelming to a person who really is into public service, this idea of having input on children in such a significant way.

What is your leadership style?

I really study things. Some people think that we spend too much time deliberating, but I have never seen that as a problem. Hearing all sides and thinking things out is a way to bring about good decisions. However, when critical events happen and you need to make quick decisions, you have to make it very clear to the public that you are committed to seeing that a resolve is reached. I always went all out and never looked back. I never consider defeat as an option.

The most important thing is to believe in what you're doing; people can tell if you believe in what you're doing or not. I would encourage young people interested in public service to be prepared, surround yourself with competent people, think things out, then decide what's best, get committed to it and don't look back.

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How did you communicate and connect with your employees at the Education Department?

I had a lot of personal contact at the Education Department. For example, I never made a major decision in Washington dealing with education without a teacher in the room. Normally that was Dr. Terry Dozier, who was Teacher of the Year in South Carolina and National Teacher of the Year, and had a phenomenal record as a social studies teacher. I enjoyed having people there who disagreed with me. I welcomed that and people knew that.

It was not uncommon for me to shift my feelings about things in a significant way when advised by very competent people. Many times we would have something worked out that we were going to recommend and Dr. Dozier or whoever was in there would say, "You know, that sounds good, but it simply won't work." Then they proceeded to tell you why it wouldn't work. They are professional educators, and I paid a lot of attention to that. That was part of my modus operandi.

How should federal leaders keep employees engaged and motivated?

It's very important to develop a common vision among your key advisors, staff, and the leaders in government with whom you're dealing. Excite them about where you're trying to move things to make a difference. To keep that alive, it's important to have research-driven policies and careful benchmarks to measure your progress. In education, reform is always underway. You reach certain benchmarks and then you develop another area to reach other benchmarks. You can tell if you're moving in the right direction if your benchmarks are moving upward.

What were your key accomplishments as secretary of education?

We were very much involved in setting up national goals. Goals 2000 was a major piece of legislation passed in 1994. Also, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1994 set in motion the development of educational standards. President Clinton and I were very determined to do that. We had to work with governors and local school officials to develop standards for each state — that is, what a child should know in fifth grade about science or third grade about math.

With incentives from the federal government, technical help and political leadership, the president and I were able to get all 50 states to develop standards in major core subjects — a big job. The states themselves started coming together to develop what they call "common core standards," that was state driven and not federal-government driven which is the proper way to do that. We still have a long way to go, but everybody is tuned in and knowledgeable about the idea of standards and curriculum to reach those standards.

Other major national priorities were to help economically disadvantaged kids afford college through Pell Grants and college incentive programs and the e-rate, a way of developing funds for public schools and libraries to connect to the Internet and get support for those systems. We now have every public school connected.

What leadership lessons did you learn as governor of South Carolina?

Success in any major position depends on the people that you bring in to advise you — the professional paid staff as well as volunteers. I always prided myself on bringing in top people and making sure I had a diverse group. My staff as governor and as secretary of education were diverse, just like the country is, and they were the best staff of any body by comparison. I was very proud of that.

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