Yes, No, Maybe So

Several years ago I accompanied a locally elected official on a business trip. I was young and relatively inexperienced as a public employee. I considered this official a friend, having known him for several years and interacted with him on many occasions, both personally and professionally.

When we arrived at our destination, we worked out, had dinner and then proceeded to a reception attended by several other higher ranking statewide elected officials. As my friend worked the crowd, engaging in conversations with the other officials, he became a different person. Never once did he acknowledge my presence, let alone introduce me to anyone. It was as if he didn’t even know me. I was quite taken aback and was very surprised and embarrassed by his behavior.

I thought about that evening for a long time; in fact, I still do. When I consider what being ethical means, I know it is more than just following the rules; it’s behaving authentically, treating others with respect and being true to who you really are. I vowed then and there to never let the circumstances dictate my behavior as a friend and a colleague. Lawmakers can do the same.

Life, circumstances, status and other factors may change in your life, but you don’t. You remain the same person and should strive to be true to yourself and those around you in every circumstance. Constituents deserve to know the real you, and colleagues need to be able to trust the real you. A change in your status, or wealth or authority, should never dictate a change in the real you.

It has been said that people will often forget what you told them, but they will never forget how you made them feel. I will never forget the embarrassment, disappointment and hurt I felt that night. But I learned a hard lesson, and I will never forget it.

The news is replete with stories of political leaders who forgot who they were. They let their status, power and authority go to their heads and along the way compromised their personal values or ethical standards. And when they fall, those who knew them before they became powerful say, “That’s not the person I knew.”

Life holds many temptations, and one of the most seductive is to let your status, wealth or authority change the way you treat others. A good test is whether your mother would approve of the way you behave in any given circumstance. Somehow moms know the real you and want the very best for you.

Perhaps this is all best summarized by a saying I saw once on a grave marker in the Boot Hill Cemetery in Tombstone, Ariz.: “Be who you is—if you is who you ain’t, you ain’t who you is.”

—Mark Quiner

Mark Quiner is the director of the Center for Ethics in Government at NCSL. We’d love to hear your comments or questions on ethics. Email Ethan Wilson at ethan.wilson@ncsl.org.