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### Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper's Entrepreneurial Approach to Leadership

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Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper got his start in public service thanks to a bartender. Hickenlooper had spent 15 years building a brew pub business up from scratch, eventually expanding it to three states. In 2003, after a conversation with customers about the plan to change the name of Mile High Stadium, one of his bartenders told him he should run for mayor of Denver. So he did, won, and pledged to bring his entrepreneurial approach to the public office.

In 2010, he was elected governor and is now bringing that approach to this broader role. We caught up with Governor Hickenlooper at the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting in Davos (<http://www.weforum.org/>) to check in on how that approach has fared and hear what lessons he's learned along the way. An edited transcript of our conversation appears below.

#### **Give our readers a sense of your experience in the private sector and how it shaped your approach to government.**

I actually came to Colorado as a geologist. Loved the job, but I got laid off. I was out of work for two years and had the idea of launching a brew pub — this was before they were a common concept, in 1986. I spent two years honing the idea and raising money and we opened in 1988. We were the first brew pub in the Rocky Mountain region and we opened in an area known as lower downtown that was a bunch of abandoned warehouses. Not a lot of people went down there. So one of the first things we did was collaborate with the other businesses in the area to try and raise awareness. We bought ads together, we had a brewers' fest to bring people down and spend time in the neighborhood.

In 2003, all my customers were complaining about the renaming of Mile High Stadium. And a bartender of mine said: "You should run for mayor." So I talked to a lot of mayors around the country to understand the job — could you make a difference, was it fun, would I be good at it? And so I decided to run. Our whole campaign was about bringing an entrepreneurial style of government to the office.

#### **So what did that mean?**

We tried to hire a lot of people from business. That was the first thing. Most people, when they get elected, they hire the people that helped get them elected because they think they'll help cover their back. But they aren't managers. They've never been trained. They don't have the experience, so you have risk adverse people who grew up where there's no benefit to taking a risk. There's only downside. So we brought in a talented group of people from all walks of life — not just business — but not one was a political appointee. I had only met 10 percent of the team before the transition process happened and we had a transition of 450 people.

#### **So you found success with that approach at the city level. How has it done at the state level? Have you had to change your approach?**

Oh man. In government they love to attack each other. People get so dug in with their positions and they end up with a self-interest that is about protecting that position no matter what. To get business done, you have to get people to expand their sense of self-interest and then get those self-interests to overlap. That's when you get a transaction. Then you get progress.

#### **Have you been able to get people to come together to find commonality?**

Sometimes. Here's an example. In Colorado we have a lot of shale gas and with hydraulic fracturing we can drop the price dramatically. But there's been a lot of concern over safety and what's in the fracking liquid. And the fracking companies weren't disclosing. So I called the CEO of Halliburton and said you're getting killed over here on this. You have to find a way to let people know what's in there while still protecting your intellectual property. I told him even Coca-Cola puts its list of ingredients on the can. So he came over and we brought in the regional head of the Environmental Defense Fund and we got to see where there was some common ground. We ended up having a press conference where the regional head of the EDF and the regional head of Halliburton both claimed victory. That's where transactions happen — defending your old turf isn't going to bring about progress.

#### **You mentioned hiring before. What's your approach there? What do you look for in a candidate?**

I really [want] to see how well can they bring people together. How well they empathize. How they listen to people. That's the best way to persuade someone: listen to them. Geoff Smart, the author of a book called "Who," helped us with our transition to the governor role. He really trained me on this — before you hire anyone for a really senior position, spend a lot of time and write down what skills you need in the role, what the objectives are, what kind of person you really want. Sounds obvious but if you talk to

CEOs and ask them how much time they spend on this, it isn't a lot. Writing a job description is one thing but really looking at the characteristics, the traits, the kind of experiences you want is so key.

**What's one of the most important lessons you've learned as a leader, either in the public or private sector?**

The single biggest thing came from when I was running the brew pub. I learned how contagious your own mood is. That's the single thing. If you're in a bad mood, within a half hour, everyone on the staff is. When you go through that door it's show time. Kurt Vonnegut was a friend of my dad's at Cornell and he said something once: "You have to be very careful who you pretend to be, because that's who you're going to become." We had a couple real tough years in the restaurant business and by just forcing myself to positive and optimistic and cut jokes, things went better. I was still working 60, 70 hours a week, but all the sudden we started getting breaks.