



Midlands Business Profiles

Conversations

Dick Riley, Former Governor of South Carolina



The Honorable Richard W. Riley

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MidlandsBiz:

Where were you born and raised?

Dick Riley:

I was born in Greenville, South Carolina, in the early 1930s during the Depression. Obviously, I was too young to recall the difficulties of that time. My memories are of a wonderful childhood in Greenville and a very comfortable life.

I attended Greenville High School and Furman University.

MidlandsBiz:

Describe one key event in your formative years that shaped you as a person?

Dick Riley:

After joining the Navy in WWII, my father was stationed to Miami so the whole family packed up and moved there during the war. Those years forced me to learn how to adapt to new surroundings and to be a good study of people.

MidlandsBiz:

Describe your leadership style.

Dick Riley:

I believe the most important leadership skill is listening – and not just listening, but actually hearing and understanding what others are saying.

Leaders also love learning and will read volumes of information; they understand the critical role that preparation plays in life.

Leaders love moving people to lift up their ambition and their hopes to accomplish great things. Leaders love figuring out what motivates people to move in one direction or another. Leaders love making things happen and promoting change in areas that they consider are for the good.

I have tried to put these skills into practice in order to take full advantage of the wonderful leadership opportunities that I have had in my life.

MidlandsBiz:

What leaders do you admire?

Dick Riley:

Historically, leaders are often developed and defined during a time of crisis. Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Truman and Kennedy all had to face periods of crisis in our nation's history and proved themselves to be great leaders. While no major crisis occurred during Bill Clinton's tenure, he has strong leadership capacity and accomplished great things as President; he continues to do so.

I have always enjoyed my relationship with our State's governors.

Here in Greenville, I have always admired and had great respect for former [Mayor Max Heller](#). His is a unique and inspiring story of leadership.

MidlandsBiz:

What accomplishment are you most proud of as governor of South Carolina?

Dick Riley:

According to the [RAND Corporation](#), the Education Improvement Act (EIA) that we passed back in 1984 when I was Governor was, at the time, the most comprehensive school reform in the country. It was a major reason why Bill Clinton invited me to join his administration as Secretary of Education.

EIA involved some controversial initiatives, not the least of which was a penny sales tax for the improvement or reform of education in South Carolina. I was proud of all the members of the House and Senate for their willingness to make difficult decisions to benefit education. The state had a history of inadequate education for the poor, especially for African Americans, and I was determined to do whatever I could to turn this around.

It was a wonderful collaborative effort, and it was the right thing to do

MidlandsBiz:

What accomplishment are you most proud of as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education?

Dick Riley:

When I went to Washington, the discussion around the country centered on implementing standards and accountability into the education system. I was determined, as was Bill Clinton, to get the country involved in the standards movement at all levels and in all courses as a way to measure the effectiveness of our education program.

When we started into the initiative, the states basically did not have any academic standards in place. After eight years of hard work with the nation's governors and their respective state school chiefs, by the time that I left office every state had adopted academic standards.

Accountability is so important in education.

MidlandsBiz:

What is your candid opinion of the No Child Left Behind program?

Dick Riley:

No Child Left Behind is moving in the right direction, but it has some problems.

For instance, if you are going to look at national comparison statistics, you need to have fair accountability so that the standards will mean something. It's not fair for a state like South Carolina where the standards are relatively high to be compared against another state's rankings where the standards are lower. All of the states agreed to standards; now we need comparable standards in each of the states.

Jim Rex, South Carolina's Superintendent of Education, is doing a great job of trying to move in this direction and get the wording done right so that all states will be on a level playing field.

No Child Left Behind needs to be changed, and I hope that happens.

MidlandsBiz:

What is the most difficult decision that you have had to make in your career?

Dick Riley:

When I was Governor, I remember the first time that I had to make a decision regarding a capital punishment case.

During my campaign for Governor, I had promised quality legal representation and no discrimination in all trials; I also promised not to interrupt the process if a person was found guilty. A horrible crime had been committed in this case, but it was still a very hard decision to make. I stuck to what I had promised during the campaign and signed the papers.

When I was Secretary of Education, Bill Clinton called me up one day and asked me to put my name forward to be a United States Supreme Court judge. He wanted someone who could provide leadership and thought that I would be an excellent candidate. I was taken aback. I had never considered being a judge, let alone a Supreme Court one.

I talked it over with my family and friends and they all thought that I should put my name forward. By this time, though, I felt that I had a key role to play in leading

much-needed reform in the Department of Education. I had already brought in top educators from across the country to serve with me, and we had really turned things around at a Department that the previous Presidential administration had considered eliminating.

I decided not to put my name forward. That was a tough decision.

MidlandsBiz:

What are we doing well in education in 2008?

Dick Riley:

After all these years, we know what works in improving education in our public schools. We need to prioritize those initiatives and not get sidetracked by fringe issues, such as vouchers, that cause political upset. The information indicates that vouchers will not provide better across-the-board education and that they take away needed funds from the public schools. I have always been opposed to vouchers and time spent on debating them is a diversion that we ought to avoid.

Here are projects that work: training and hiring quality teachers, smaller classes, individualized learning programs, early childhood education, and developing programs to improve high school graduation rates and opportunities for college education.

MidlandsBiz:

Talk a little about the Riley Institute.

Dick Riley:

I am very proud of the [Riley Institute](#) and its relationship with Furman University. David Shi, the President of Furman, understands the critical role that experience plays in developing leaders. There is a real premium these days in getting students involved in engaged learning, hands-on learning, and service learning.

We also promote leadership by bringing in top national and international figures to speak at our annual conferences, dinners and other events. Another successful initiative is our Diversity Leadership Institute that promotes diversity in a very positive way.

MidlandsBiz:

What are some of your favorite books?

Dick Riley:

I have always been involved in positions where an immense amount of reading and preparation is required, so I read a lot for business and for pleasure.

I just read [The Nine](#), which is a history of the Supreme Court. I guess I never did get over that decision I mentioned earlier.

John Adams by William McCullough is a great, well-written history of one of the founding fathers of our country.

MidlandsBiz:

What advice do you give to young people today?

Dick Riley:

It's an exciting time to be alive, but 21st century skills are absolutely necessary to survive in the 21st century. Learning about and mastering the use of technology is important in your careers. You have access to all the information in the world through the Internet; but you have to be careful how you use it. Reading and math skills are important but, once you have these basic skills, you also need to develop your own creative and innovative thoughts.

The most important trait that corporations are looking for these days is the ability to work with people. It gets back to the point that I made earlier about the importance of listening to and respecting other people.

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