



RICK COLE: A PROFILE

by Don Weeks

Governor Blanchard's chief of staff, Rick Cole, never passes up an opportunity to tout the achievements of his boss or to boast of the abilities of others in the administration. Perhaps, out of habit, Cole touts and brags more than most. For the greater part of Blanchard's first term, Cole was the governor's press secretary--the designated spokesman and crafter of messages. Habits are hard to break, and it takes constant prodding to get Cole to talk about himself. With enough encouragement, however, he is willing to expand on the man who has been called the deputy governor.

Shortly after Blanchard was elected to a second term, Cole became chief of staff. The transition was gradual, he said, because, while press secretary, he displayed a knack for dealing with policy issues. Now he focuses more on policy and less on getting the message out. He also has more responsibility now for relationships among staff and department heads.

Relating to the public is important in both jobs; Cole believes this is the principal function of government in a democracy. He said, "If you're not relating to the people who are paying the taxes, creating the jobs, voting in the elections--if you're not relating to them in government, then there's something wrong in a democracy In government, democracy, I think, means making sure that the actions of your organization reflect the aspirations and values of your constituency, and then doing what needs to be done to let them see that that's happening."

Part of Cole's job is making sure that the actions of others within the "organization" are consistent with the policies and goals of the man in the front office. It's a part of the job for which he feels particularly well suited. "I think I was able to catch on to what [Blanchard] was trying to do pretty early," he said. "I felt almost from the day I started working for him that I was able to really track what he was trying to do."

While Cole considers Blanchard a personal friend and occasionally, in strictly social settings, will call the governor by his first name, he treats his boss with respect and perhaps a little awe. "I never forget that what he is--besides Jim Blanchard, a hell of a bright guy with a wonderful way around people--is the elected leader of nine million people. He is given a very special place in history by virtue of that honor."

Cole has known other governors. In fact, it was former Michigan governor G. Mennen (Soapy) Williams who encouraged Cole to get into politics and government. Cole, 38, first became part of the Blanchard team in 1983, as deputy director for marketing and public relations in the Department of Commerce. Before that, he was a partner in a Lansing public relations consulting firm. He has also worked on political campaigns, including William

Fitzgerald's effort to unseat Governor Milliken in 1978, as a legislative aide, and as a lobbyist.

Cole, who has both a master's degree and doctorate in administration and higher education from Michigan State University, is interested in public policy administration and education administration. In addition to his heavy work schedule, he teaches night courses in communications and public relations at Michigan State University. In his classes and on the job, Cole approaches public relations from a social science rather than a journalistic viewpoint. Cole believes public relations evolved from social science; now, however, most of those in public relations are former journalists, and Cole feels that the term's original meaning has been distorted. "People use [public relations] to connote somebody who is dishonest and that will resort to trickery in order to get you to do what they want," he said. "If I thought people meant that about me I'd be hurt, I'd be offended by it. And if there are people who feel that way, and they use it in that sense, I think they're wrong."

Cole knows that when he first became press secretary, some reporters resented him for not being one of them. His background and style earned him the nickname "Slick Rick" among the capitol press corps. It bothered him at first, but now, he says, "I look at it as a term of endearment It's basically complimentary, when you get right down to it."

This ability to see things in the best light is part of Cole's personality and formula for living. He muses, "If every time you get burned in a situation you say, 'well, I'm never going to do that again,' as you go through life, the list of things you're going to allow yourself to do gets shorter and shorter, and pretty soon you become pretty rigid and pretty useless."

Cole likes to recognize the best in others and says he remembers the people who helped him along the way better than those who hurt him. "In the first place, life is too short to go around worrying about all the people that tried to gain at your disadvantage. It's also a lot more fun to play offense than it is to play defense," he said. "There are ample opportunities to reinforce people, in a variety of ways, who are trying to be helpful. And after all, that's really what most people are simply trying to do anyway: to make a difference."

The title chief of staff and management styles received a lot of national attention recently when Donald Regan was replaced by Howard Baker as the president's chief of staff. Cole says there are few similarities between him and Baker. For one thing, Cole insists he has no personal political aspirations. (Many feel Baker hopes to parlay his new leadership position into a springboard to the presidency.) He also feels that his and Baker's tasks are quite different. "It's one thing [for Baker] to come into a situation and provide direction when there isn't any. It's totally different [for me] to come into an organization that is functioning very well and avoid creating problems." On the subject of executive management styles, Cole says Governor Blanchard is "a hands-on, value-driven kind of leader."

At the office, Cole is involved in many matters and with many people. He is often on the phone, either seeking or giving advice. He's not sure which he does most often, but he'd like to do more of both. It is hardest, he says, to figure out what not to do. "I really tend to want to know what's going on," Cole says, "and that sometimes gives people the impression that you don't

have confidence that they're doing it right. And that's not the message at all Knowing more gives you the ability to make an intelligent decision not to get involved, which you have to do a lot of the time or else you end up becoming officious."

Cole tries to keep office and home as separate as possible, although most of his friends are people he works with and work often seeps into his home by way of the phone. He unwinds by golfing, running, and spending as much time as possible with his family. "They're here, and that's a blessing; they're young, and it's fun to be around as they are growing up." He and his wife, Deborah, have three daughters, ages 2, 4, and 10. They just bought an earth-bermed home on 12 acres in rural Ingham County where they intend to grow organic food and raise farm animals.

Cole also finds relaxation through teaching. "That's a great way to unwind. I enjoy the hell out of that." Teaching or administration at the college level is the career he seems to want to pursue. Although he has taught a course or two each term for the last several years, this objective keeps getting postponed. He has now been working in government longer than he thought he would. It has been satisfying, he says, but "as far as making a living is concerned, [teaching is] the thing that I'm sure I will enjoy doing most I like to teach. It's fun, it's a blast!"

What is it about working for Governor Blanchard that is so rewarding that Rick Cole has allowed himself to be diverted for so long? "I like the impact of the job, the ability to make an imprint, the ability to be part of something bigger than you, bigger than me; the ability to work with people who are at the top of their game . . . to be around people who are as good at what they do as anybody in the country."

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