The 1994 Republican electoral victory in the House of Representatives would make Newt Gingrich the leader and public face of House Republicans in his new role as Speaker in the 104th Congress. However, within four years a 25 vote majority would decrease to 6 and Gingrich resigned as Speaker. In January of 1999 J. Dennis Hastert was elected Speaker to replace Gingrich. Despite political infighting and fierce Democratic opposition in his early days as Speaker, Hastert would successfully lead House Republicans to pass legislation in four high priority areas. These early successes coincided with a distinct shift in leadership style from the Gingrich era. Hastert would institute five strategic steps as leader of House Republicans to successfully pass legislation with a small majority.

The first strategy Hastert adopted was “incrementalism,” the process of passing legislation in small steps, both substantively and structurally. This was a direct departure from Gingrich’s leadership style, which would force large substantive changes in policy in one sudden piece of legislation or package number of controversial issues into one omnibus bill. Gingrich’s tactics were possible with a large majority, but with a smaller majority, legislating through small changes becomes much more important.

Second, Hastert reinvigorated his committee chairs by refraining from intruding upon their authority. Gingrich would frequently overturn committee decisions he disagreed with by using tactics such as introducing manager’s amendments on the floor or self-executing rules. Gingrich would often completely bypass committees altogether by assembling “leadership task-forces” to deal with pressing issues. As a result of these tactics, committee chairs became political enemies of the Speaker, increasing the difficulty of successfully passing legislation. Early in his term, Hastert has avoided these tactics and worked closely with committee chairs.

Third, Hastert placed an increased emphasis on listening to and consulting with his rank and file members. This strategy more actively involved the entire party membership in the legislative process, and increased support for the leadership. An example is the FY2000 Budget Resolution, where rank and file members had an unprecedented level of input into the resolution. As a result, only two Republicans would vote against the measure. To go along with his increased emphasis on listening to and consulting with “normal” Republican Members, Hastert placed a greater emphasis upon teamwork within the party. Instead of Members exercising traditional “monopoly rights” to halt legislative efforts, a sense that all party members have a responsibility to ensure successful passage of Republican initiatives has become the norm in the Republican Party, allowing the party to survive a number of close partisan votes.

Finally, Hastert rediscovered the Senate. While Gingrich would pass legislation without consulting the Senate, which the Senate would frequently ignore or substantially change, Hastert took the unprecedented step of creating a senior staff level position in charge of bicameral affairs. By coordinating legislative efforts with the Senate, Hastert avoided angering Republican Congressmen by passing large numbers of bills that had no
chance of becoming law and focusing legislative efforts on policy that both bodies could agree on.

By adopting these five strategies, Speaker Hastert managed to successfully “coach” the Republican majority in the House of Representatives to legislative victories with only a six vote majority. By utilizing leadership strategies perceived as more favorable to party membership, Hastert kept together a small majority and managed to increase the public’s regard for Congressional Republicans. Despite these successes, it was likely that the changes from Gingrich’s leadership style were more due to the political reality of a small majority than a fundamental paradigm shift in leadership theory.