

## PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES

# LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF: CHRIS BROWN

Letter to my younger self.

As I reflect on my time here, I wanted to drop you a note just to give you the benefit of some of the lessons learned from this new path on which you are about to embark. If you have been here more than a week, you know it's not all sunshine and roses, but it will be ok. The sun can get hot, and the roses have thorns, so just sit back and enjoy the different seasons. Roll with what comes and don't let the little things get to you. Hopefully, this will help to encourage you, and maybe avoid a few of the problems along the way.

This job you have just taken will be many things. You will have some late nights, some long weeks, and more time that you want to know right now with training and research. You will have a lot of learning to do, my friend. But I can tell you, you will make some great friends along the way, and learn a great deal from some very smart and dedicated colleagues. And even a few things from those who are not so smart and dedicated. Listen to what everyone is trying to say. If they have experience, then there is something you can learn from each person.

As you walked into an established organization it will take a little time to know everyone, to understand their roles, and to know how they all fit in. Initial impressions will be more accurate than you will be able to imagine. It is ok to take your time to find the best people to fit your team. Not just the best you have available.

Government works at a pace equivalent to molasses rolling uphill in wintertime; until something is needed from you. Then you are expected to move like a jackrabbit running from a hungry coyote. Don't start running just because someone else thinks you should. If it is possible, then go ahead and deliver. But if it is not, then simply communicate when you can carry out the task; unless it is an application deadline. Those are set in stone and only get moved when you have it completed and turned in early. The more effort you give to working with our agencies and board, the more you will see in return.

Change is tough for most people. While you are excited with new things and can find ways to be more efficient, those changes will rarely be accepted with the same excitement you feel. Take the time to get buy-in, and even some input so others have a level of ownership along with you. It takes more patience in the beginning but yields less frustration dealing with the complaining that will definitely happen. It also allows those affected the ability to correct the problems you cause with the "new way" and gives you a much better product in the end.

Communication is the key to almost everything. When your people are doing well, let them know. When they are not meeting expectations, let them know that as well. Also, make sure they know what those expectations are. Those conversations can be uncomfortable, but do not avoid them! Be respectful and show empathy, but have the conversation. Go ahead and read *Leadership and Self-Deception* (The Arbinger Institute, 2000) as soon as possible. This can help you to take some of the rough edges out of the conversations and break through the common defensive posture.

Communicate your ideas and goals to your leadership team. It is much easier to get to the same place when everyone knows which direction to go. Our organization will have opportunities to take many different paths. Work to develop your leadership team and then work with them to step out and lead. The best thing you can ever do is to find and equip good people, and then get out of their way. Be there to help and to guide, but don't get in front of capable people. Run alongside and just try to keep up.

Remember to drink a beer. Not that I really have to remind YOU of that, but this will bring about some of the best lessons you can learn. Many stories from the “old timers” are shared at the end of the day. Whether you grab a water, tea, Dr. Pepper, or the good stuff, this will create opportunities to laugh about what someone else has done, cry about what you have done while everyone else laughs, and just learn that you are not alone. This business can be tough, but the friends you make here will always be there to help.

There will be many times you feel overloaded. While I haven’t learned how to avoid that yet, I have picked up a few tips to keep what is important at the top of that pile. You already know about the rocks in the jar. Fill it with sand (little things) and nothing else will fit, but put the rocks in first (important things) then pour the sand in around it. Here is one that I think you can run with a little better. In reading Rich Dad Poor Dad (Kiyosaki, 2012), Rich Dad was giving a lesson about money. Most people pay themselves after all bills have been paid and essentially only keep what is left over. Rich Dad teaches to pay yourself first, then pay the bills. The idea is that the threat of bill collectors, the IRS, or other influences will keep the motivation in place to make the money needed to cover both. Whereas, if you only “pay yourself” with what is left, then the motivation is lacking to improve your situation. This holds true with family and relationships as well. Instead of giving family what is left after we try to get this mountain of work done, “pay” them first. Schedule the time they need first, just like a monthly budget using your calendar. This puts your top priority at the top of the time checkbook. Our Board Chair, State and Federal Agencies, and Program Heads will give us the motivation to stay focused in the time budgeted for work. You don’t short that work time, just like you don’t short your payment responsibilities, but the time committed will be more productive. Now you can’t say, “Well I’ll just work late tonight, or catch up this weekend.” You are committed and it’s now or never, buddy! I’m really hoping I get installment 2 of this Letter to my Younger Self in the next few days telling me this paying my time first works out. But I would appreciate if you could get started on this path a little sooner. I’m excited to see how this can work out!

The work you are doing here is great. You are able to support our communities to help people, create jobs, and seek opportunities that would otherwise remain just ideas. There will be some that don’t understand the what or the why. There will be some upset because they don’t see the benefit for them. Just remember to stay calm, do your research, and have the information and reasons at hand. The more prepared you are, the smaller any problem will become. And don’t forget, take the time to celebrate the successes. In this business we are normally three or four projects down the road before one is officially completed. Don’t lose sight of those accomplishments and the impact they have for those you serve. That is what brings it all together and makes what we are doing so very worth it. Good luck and hang in there. In the end we can both look back and see it was a great ride. And one more extremely important bit of information. Sometime in early 2019 go ahead and buy an OWL camera and stock in Zoom. Just trust me on this one.

Chris Brown, Executive Director, Arc-Tex Council of Governments, Texarkana, Texas



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# LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF: MISTY CROSBY

Dear Younger (New Executive Director) Me,

Take time, every week, to meet with at least one of your board members. Building interpersonal relationships is key to building trust, and you'll need your members to trust you so that they will share maximum information and seek you and your team out for assistance. It may seem like a time-consuming thing in the beginning, but it will save you time in the long run—as you'll learn from them their priorities, and they'll come to you proactively in the future—you won't have to ask. Also, know they'll hold some things close to the vest – and don't take offense.

Speaking of time, you're not going to have enough of it. Hopefully, recognizing that going in will keep you from getting too far into the weeds. In the beginning, you may have some time on your hands, but you'll have to drop everything when a legislator or a funder or a member calls, and your day will tilt sideways. The longer you're in your position—and the more of a trusted voice and leader you become—the more your day will not turn out as planned. That, too, is ok. Just keep swimming.

Bring in partners—as many as you can. Learn about other organizations, and understand their work and programs that are also improving the quality of life in the communities your organization serves. Intentionally look for opportunities to publicly support their efforts and align those with your members' needs and the services your organization provides. Don't view others' success as a threat to your success. There is so much to do—it will take many hands to do it.

Join and be an ACTIVE Participant in your state association, regional association(s), national association(s), and professional development organization(s). These membership organizations are great vehicles for building your network and for seeking advice and counsel from a group of leaders who are going through much of the same struggles—and sometimes triumphs—as you. Learn from them. Offer new ideas and listen to theirs. Always be on the lookout for a potential partnership that could help solve a problem for one or more of your members – or yourself – in the future.

Know that your board has very high expectations and assumes you're the expert on the latest issue/strategy/hot topic being discussed (i.e., brownfields, renewable energy, housing, broadband, etc., etc.). Do your best to get up to speed, but don't hesitate to use your network to connect you to individuals that you can bring on board as staff or consultants who might know those things better than you—and enable them to do their work in support of your membership. Surround yourself with bright folks that exhibit strong servant leadership traits, who don't crave the spotlight and will lead in bringing resources to the table with your member governments, non-profits, and communities to solve their problems, and who will also step back to allow your members and communities to take the credit for the 'success.' But don't forget to push to have your organization and its work or role mentioned in the press release, so community leaders know what your organization does. Don't assume they know—even if they come to the board meetings. If community leaders don't understand or know what you do, they won't know when to plug you in to help them problem solve, and your organization will become irrelevant. You must remain relevant.

Don't assume anyone knows what your organization does—legislators, funders, members, staff, media. Take time to educate key leaders throughout your region, federal and state partners, staff at all levels, and the media on your organization's strengths, the value you add, your mission in service to your region, and your successes. Also, don't be afraid to ask for what you need from your board and your funders. They cannot eat you. And do not hesitate to “honk your own horn” a bit, but also honk the horn for someone else who is doing good work and adding value. Everyone needs a supportive hand and a shout-out now and again.

Even though you may be kind to your staff, you may feel like you're bending over backward to make them happy to walk in the door every day, and you consider yourself the best boss in the entire world, don't take offense when they don't see it the same. Be kind to your staff and support them in whatever way you can, but also remember they're human—and that you're human, too—and you will never please them all.

Don't be too hard on yourself—elected officials are fickle. And this work is HARD. Rest up! It will feel like you're running in place and getting nowhere. But time truly flies, and your efforts do not go unnoticed. Someday you'll look back and wonder how 32 years passed you by.

Misty Crosby, Former Executive Director, Buckeye Hills Regional Council, Marietta, Ohio



## PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES

# LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF: RICK HUNSAKER

Dear 1995 Rick,

Once you have recovered from the euphoria of being named director and realize the breadth and depth of your responsibilities, take a deep breath. Rising up through the organization, even though it has only been 5 years, has given you a solid foundation in working with communities. True, you know little about workforce programs and only have worked with transit in a planning role, but the knowledge will come. Remember all you have learned since first coming to the organization and how you and your co-workers have ably handled entirely new programs in the span of only a few years. Housing, transportation, RLF, and the flood all landed in the inbox with no prior training and you have thrived. Trust yourself and the team. You will all rise to the challenges ahead.

Above all, be true to your word. Don't make promises you can't keep and strive for honesty to be your hallmark in all you do. Keep the board fully informed at all times of your actions and reasoning. Don't spare details if you feel they are important. Your reports may be long and you will gain a reputation for being long-winded but this full disclosure will help build trust. Do this and when you need the board to have your back or support future projects they will be there.

For policies you need or want to implement, always give the board a recommendation. Throwing them options will muddle direction. You know what is best and they hired you to make these decisions. Don't present problems to the board for them to solve. Present the solution and seek their support. Better, tell them how you solved it.

Be prudent in budgeting. Build a cushion even if it needs to be small some years. A reserve will serve your entrepreneurial endeavors well. Be fair in charging communities for service but don't give away the farm. Your work has value.

As you seek trust extend it to others. Be a trusted and reliable partner to other agencies and the constituents you serve. Remain vigilant but don't assume the worst in people until they give you a reason to do so. Admit when you were wrong because you will be. Apologize and do what you can to mitigate any issues your error may have caused. People make mistakes. Forgive yourself and forgive others. Feel shafted because you trusted someone you shouldn't have or because you came up short in a partnership? Remember the experience but don't replicate or mirror it. Always take the high road and it will be noticed.

Trust your staff. Challenge them, and give them the freedom to work as it best fits them. Listen to their needs and their concerns and do what you can to make the workplace one they will hate to leave. You will accomplish great things as a team but nothing on your own. Make sure all the employees know they are valued and needed because they are. Invest in their growth and allow them to grow professionally within the agency. Seek their advice in how you serve the region or grow services and implement your staff members' best ideas.

Be entrepreneurial. Take risks. Remember things always change so continue to lay the groundwork which will diversify the agency's resources. Building a reserve is critical. Finances may be tight now but they will improve if you keep this goal front of mind. Accept failure and spread the accolades for any successes. You will have failures and this is fine. Bring the board along in your new ventures. They are business people who like innovation and understand risk but they need to be well informed to be comfortable with the directions you will take them.



Network. Take the time to attend conferences and build relationships with peers across the state and nationwide. You will need your colleagues in the state for emotional and professional support as you all face common challenges. The agency will be better for what you will learn in sessions and in the hallways at national functions. Join NADO and engage sooner than later. Invest your time and stay involved. Membership will be rewarding for the agency and you personally.

The communities are your clients and your strength. Serve them well and don't turn away projects within the mission. Being valuable to them will pay dividends among elected officials at all levels in future years. Play the long game here. Steady interaction and results will show up years later when you need it.

Live up to your government contracts. State and federal employees have long careers either with the agency where you first came to know them or in another role. They remember competent, dependable partners. Build as many bridges as you can because you will be surprised where people will land. Successful contract completion means additional contracting opportunities in the future and will aid in furthering your reputation and the reputation of the agency.

Understand your identity will be tied to the COG, so how you conduct yourself outside of the office will reflect on the agency. Your reputation is the most valuable commodity you have. Cultivate it in all you do. Be responsible, be responsive, be dependable, and be honest. Listen. Oh – and read emails twice before you send them. (Yes! Email isn't just a fad! Employees will also all have email and internet access at their desks and through the phones you will buy them.)

Enjoy the time in your position. You will meet many interesting people and be constantly learning. You will drive through communities, see their progress, and know you helped make people's lives better. The leadership you provide will mean every corner of your region (and beyond!) will in some way be impacted by your work. You will relish friendships developed through your service for years to come.

There is a fulfilling career ahead of you. Get to work!

Sincerely,

2022 Rick

Rick Hunsaker, Executive Director, Region XII Council of Governments, Carroll, Iowa

