

PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES

REFLECTIONS FROM RETIRED EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS

RUSS COWLEY

What is one thing that you really wished you knew when you first became an EDD executive director that you knew by the time you retired?

The difference between common sense and politics. As a new executive director I came on board with the attitude that I was going to change the world (at least God's country Ha! Ha!). I soon found out that the common sense ideas and views I had did not necessarily coincide with those I worked with. I remember sitting down with the Chair of my Board and having a heart to heart discussion about this quandary. He explained that it wasn't that my views and concepts were wrong, but that they were not political. I quickly learned and understood that to be successful, common sense ideas needed to be turned into politically motivated initiatives driven by elected officials and not by me! By the end of my career, as an executive director, I realized that the understanding and respect for political correctness, which I had gleaned, was my greatest asset and reason for success.

Do you have 1 piece of advice you could share with someone newly minted as an executive director, in training to become one, or even contemplating it as a career goal?

The one piece of advice I would give to someone minted as an executive director would be to always remember their place in the political spectrum. Their job is to help the members of their Board to look good and stay out of trouble. This means a career of "organizing neglect", giving up ownership of personal successful initiatives to those who they serve, taking accountability for a failed motivation that is not their fault, always dealing in facts - not hearsay, and being at the beck and call of elected officials.

Director of the [Six County Economic Development District \(SCEDD\)](#) under the umbrella of the [Six County Association of Governments \(SCAOG\)](#), Central Utah from 1989-1997. Executive Director of the SCAOG/SCEDD from 1997-2019.

JOE BRANNAN

What is one thing that you really wished you knew when you first became an EDD executive director that you knew by the time you retired?

I did not enter the Executive Director position from an EDD staff position, though I had worked for a small single purpose (only economic development) EDD early in my career for a couple of years. I felt early on that so much of what I faced as a new ED were challenges that were pertinent ONLY to the organization that I was directing. Next to no one locally spoke "CogSpeak", understood our funding opportunities and challenges, or understood program challenges presented by being in the middle" between funding agencies and our member entities.

Among the first things I learned was that there was very little of what I was doing that hadn't been done (either correctly or incorrectly) by another regional development organization before me. I found a huge base of knowledge among my peers in response to "did you ever?" questions. I just had to gut up and admit that I might be well served to listen to those who had gone before me. That said, some approaches that I heard was absolutely perfect for my local needs, some of the

approaches were completely wrong for local needs and much was a mix of correct and incorrect. My job was to recognize the “right way”, avoid the “wrong way”, and learn to mix and match from shared experiences to meet our local needs AND to recognize that one should continuously evaluate, and modify as necessary, the approach you are taking.

Do you have 1 piece of advice you could share with someone newly minted as an executive director, in training to become one, or even contemplating it as a career goal?

“Never stop cultivating your peers”. I don’t remember any instance where I asked a question of a peer where I got no response or “I’m not gonna tell you” or the like. However, you **HAVE TO ASK** the question and you have to develop a relationship with those who you are asking. I am naturally shy but I took a chance and reached out to Directors in my home state, adjacent states, and, through NADO, across the country. There is a ton of knowledge out there just waiting for a new director to seek out.

Executive Director at [SouthEastern Arizona Governments Association](#) in Bisbee, AZ from 1993 - 2004 and Executive Director at [Golden Crescent Regional Planning Commission](#) in Victoria, TX from 2004 - 2019.

CHRIS BICKLEY

What is one thing that you really wished you knew when you first became an EDD executive director that you knew by the time you retired?

I think it would be understanding that when you work for a large board you really work for yourself. Most EDD boards have 25 or more members; some more than 50. That’s totally different from reporting to an individual and even significantly different from working for a smaller board. I became an EDD ED after working for boards of 7 and 9 persons. In those situations I knew exactly who I worked for and what they expected of me; and they knew that too. Those were very personal and hands-on relationships. It’s different with a large board; you can’t be hands-on with 25 or more people at the same time; and you’ll drive yourself crazy if you try. I suggest you shouldn’t try, but work for yourself. And understand that’s a high standard, because even if you can fool some of the people some of the time, you can’t really fool yourself.

Do you have 1 piece of advice you could share with someone newly minted as an executive director, in training to become one, or even contemplating it as a career goal?

My suggestion is to be sure you want that EDD ED job. Be honest with yourself. Why do you want to be the top dog? It can be lonesome there. If you’re already working at the EDD, your buddies will become subordinates, and you will be their boss; it’s different. I think it’s easier to go into an ED position from outside the organization than to be promoted into it from within. Don’t get me wrong, many, probably most, successful EDD EDs were promoted into their positions, but be aware. Does the ED position fit your style, temperament and talents? Again, be honest with yourself. I served with 2 EDD EDs who got physically ill from the stress they felt trying to do their jobs. It wasn’t good for them, and I don’t think it was good for their organizations. Is there someone else who wants you to be the ED more than you do--the retiring ED, a board member, your spouse? I don’t think those are good situations. If you’re already an EDD ED, are you happy there? Do you enjoy going to work every day? If not, find another job. There’s a job out there you will love; don’t stop until you find it.

Executive Director at [Lowcountry Council of Governments](#) in Yemassee, South Carolina from 1993 until retirement in January 2015.

NANCY ROBINSON

What is one thing that you really wished you knew when you first became an EDD executive director that you knew by the time you retired

I guess something that I wish I had known better when I became Executive Director is that sometimes, no matter how hard you work or how good the idea or grant application is, politics can just get in the way and you’re not able to get that particular funding or the policy change you’re seeking. You have to spend time learning the dynamics. It isn’t personal, and persistence of message, quality, and integrity can bring you up a winner the next time. Or the next.

Do you have 1 piece of advice you could share with someone newly minted as an executive director, in training to become one, or even contemplating it as a career goal?

Advice I would give to an incoming Exec Director is to make every effort to communicate - with your presence - to local government leaders (mayors, county commissioners, state legislators) that you feel that their area - huge or tiny - is important to you, and important to the agency. In Alabama, participation in the COG is voluntary. You always have to

communicate the VALUE of your agency in order for that town, especially small towns with very small budgets, to want to pay dues to be a member. I was proud to have 100% membership every year I was Executive Director, and earned that by showing up, attending Mayors' Association meetings, asking about their towns/cities, what did they need the most, what were they most proud of, and how we could help them. That 100% membership strengthened our position every time we went to speak with state legislators or Congressional staff.

Began working at [Top of Alabama COG](#) in 1977. Became Director of the Area Agency on Aging in 1984 and Executive Director in 2013 until retirement in 2019.

TIM WARE

What is one thing that you really wished you knew when you first became an EDD executive director that you knew by the time you retired?

Many times we might think that the elected officials on our boards do not really care about regionalism. Looking back, I truly believe that as local elected officials, their focus is on their community first and the region second. The executive director has to routinely reinforce the value of working together for the good of all local governments.

Do you have 1 piece of advice you could share with someone newly minted as an executive director, in training to become one, or even contemplating it as a career goal?

Get close with your County and Municipal Managers through individual meetings and group gatherings. These Managers are a Regional Council Executive Director's best friends as they are on the front line of championing the regional councils priorities with their individual Councils.

Executive Director at [Mid-East Commission](#), Washington, NC from 1994-2011 and Executive Director at [George Washington Regional Council](#), Fredericksburg, VA from 2012 - 2018.

WENDELL LAWRENCE

What is one thing that you really wished you knew when you first became an EDD executive director that you knew by the time you retired?

How detrimental the actions of one regional council in a state association can be to the entire network - for many years. Unlike other local units of government (cities/counties), when one regional council or Executive Director makes a terrible policy decision or operates a major program in poor manner, it seems to reflect more negatively on all other councils in that state. Before I retired in 2018, there were still legislators and state officials who would bring up a situation that had negative publicity for Kentucky ADDs....that occurred in 1987. Build a strong, honest dialogue within your statewide Executive Director association to hopefully mitigate some actions that could cause long-term issues with your agency, even if they occur in another region many miles away.

Do you have 1 piece of advice you could share with someone newly minted as an executive director, in training to become one, or even contemplating it as a career goal?

The same advice I received 25 years ago: Don't forget who you work for. Your Board members are not your friends, they are your bosses. I don't care if you are a former Board member, elected official or have been in the agency for years working closely with local units of government and their leadership - if you become the Executive Director of a regional council, you are not their peer or colleague - you are an employee. Granted, a very significant employee and one they obviously place a high degree of trust and responsibility in, but an employee nonetheless. As Executive Directors, we have a significant amount of independence and flexibility with our Boards and agencies, and it has been tempting for a few in the profession to overstep their bounds. Those few are no longer employed at regional councils.

Began working at [Lincoln Trail Area Development District](#) in Elizabeth, KY in 1983. Became Executive Director in 1977 and retired in 2018.