

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.

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