

PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES

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

