

**PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES**

# MARK FARLEY

When Mark Farley joined the Upper Cumberland Development District (UCDD) in 2012, the District was undergoing a federal investigation which had sent his predecessor to prison. Mark noted that “his predecessor had done some good work, but had lost sight of the mission of the organization.” \$1.5 million dollars had been misused, but Mark was quick to note, “there were still \$2 million in reserves so the organization was fiscally still very strong.” Mark was working at a neighboring county before becoming Executive Director and had spent time reviewing the organization’s finances before joining. He was grateful that during the investigation of the organization “no rock was left unturned” and thus he was provided all the necessary documentation to fully understand the situation.

When Mark joined UCDD, staff were fractured, and some still supported the previous director. Mark had to “take the time to form my own opinions and not believe ‘either side’”. It took time for him to address the internal culture at the organization and build a team with the staff who remained after the leadership transition. Once Mark had the right “people in place, they set the tone” at the District and Mark was able to bring on additional qualified staff to further the capabilities of the District. Despite the challenges he faced at the beginning, Mark found that “others generally want you to succeed and will help you get the organization back on track”. Two other Executive Directors in Tennessee were Mark’s “guardian angels” and really helped him succeed in the role from day one. He now plays this role today, when helping Executive Directors in nearby Districts.

It took about three years to move from fixing problems to building the strength of the organization. One critical effort was to build back the District’s reputation. Employees were embarrassed to be in vehicles with UCDD identification and Mark knew that addressing the District’s reputation was critical. Mark made the decision to partner UCDD with the respected local university, Tennessee Tech, and helped the university become an EDA University Center. Although some employees are still worried about the reputation of the organization, Mark is confident that they are “doing good work and getting the [District’s] name out in a positive way”.



***Upper Cumberland  
Development District***

*Executive Director, 2012- present*

## **KEY TAKEAWAYS:**

- Take the time to fully understand your District’s finances
- Most people want you to succeed and will help you
- It takes time to rebuild an organization
- Seek out partnerships with other local organizations, including universities
- Understand your organization’s mission and how projects and programs align with it
- Open communication with your Board is key
- All new Executive Directors have to chart their own path; they are not the previous Director, for better or worse

When Mark joined UCDD, a state legislator formed a committee to review the District's bylaws, charter and legislation with Mark and the District's Board. This effort "helped me to see why we were created, and also allowed the Board to see what we could possibly be. Mayors on the Board were given the opportunity to identify areas that they really wanted us to work in," and it was easy to identify projects that aligned with District's mission. Mark found that "your bosses will tell you what they want you to do, you just have to listen." He loves the flexibility of EDDs, and their ability to adapt to new issues- what they are working on now may be different from just a few years from now!

Mark noted that "we're not the only organization in town, and when the Board will bring up things that really need to be done... there have been times when I've said 'well you've already got an organization over here and that's their job and their role'. From time to time we have to say no to things." Transparent communication with the Board, and alignment with the District's mission are essential to its success. "All new Executive Directors have to chart their own path; they are not the previous Director, for better or worse. You get a longer honeymoon period when you inherit a mess" but will still be expected to get up to speed quickly and get the organization back on track. Mark advised that "if the Board picks you, take it and run with it." Be confident in their decision!



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## **KEY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES INCLUDE:**

- Area Agency on Aging
- Housing
- Economic Development
- Small Business Development Center

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