

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

