

EDRP LEADER SERIES



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Economic development organizations are working harder than ever since the economy turned upside down in March. How are leading EDOs meeting the challenges covid-19 brings to their businesses, communities, and organizations? This brief is one in a series featuring responses from members of IEDC's Economic Development Research Partners (EDRP) program.

Managing EDOs During a Crisis – Part 2 of 2

Leadership. Inspiring and motivating a team is integral to an EDO leader's job. Those interviewed for this series recognized that this role has been even more critical while staff are working remotely; many staff members also are feeling the strain of a heavier workload, childcare challenges, and job losses among loved ones.

John Sampson, president and CEO of the **Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership**, has taken a proactive approach to helping his staff stay engaged, manage expectations for productivity and deal with the emotional impacts of telecommuting. For example, on "Thankful Thursday," staff spend an hour together talking about what's going well, helping them stay connected.

"The focus during this [pandemic] time is on results and not on counting hours," Sampson said. He tells his staff to get done what they need to and then focus on caring for their families, and take days off when needed; "it's an important part of getting through this together," he said.

Southwest Michigan First is an EDO with a strong organizational culture that it has been determined to maintain. Pre-pandemic, the staff had a brief, standing meeting every morning – held while standing, literally – for quick knowledge-sharing to maximize the day for the team. Those meetings have continued (virtually), each day with a different theme intended to engage and inspire. For example, Tuesdays feature a "vision cast," in which CEO Ron Kitchens reports on the bigger picture as a way of keeping staff positively focused in their work. Other days feature a review of a core value and what it means to the organization's work; team-building questions that give insight into personal lives; and celebrations of achievements.

Transparency and communication – "to the point of over-communicating" – has been critical in managing staff during this time, said Kenny McDonald, president and CEO of **One Columbus** (McDonald also is 2020 chair of IEDC's board of directors). In addition, "talking about the future helps to build confidence," McDonald said. "I try to focus on what we can do and not on the things we can't control."

Economic developers often play a role as cheerleaders not just for staff but for partners and the larger community. Mike Neal, president and CEO of the **Tulsa Regional Chamber of Commerce**, published a weekly video on LinkedIn to provide a voice of positivity and optimism, encouraging people to work toward a strong recovery.

Several EDO leaders talked about the pandemic response as a critical opportunity to demonstrate the value of the organization and its work. “I told my team at the onset: ‘If our members and stakeholders and investors don’t see our value during this time, they never will,’” said Dan Culhane, president and CEO of the **Ames Chamber of Commerce** in Iowa. “We have to keep our foot on the gas. I really feel like if we aren’t front and center as helpful in this process, it will be easy not to write a check to us on the back side of this.”

At the start, “the only thing I instructed my staff to do directly was to add value and build trust,” said **One Columbus’s** McDonald. “There would be no short-term return on anything we were going to do. If a company needed something we wanted to be sure they could get it.” The outcome of that, he said, is that people they hadn’t interacted with before now see them as a trusted partner.

Culhane, of the **Ames Chamber of Commerce**, also has encouraged his staff to remain mindful and empathetic of others’ experiences during this time. It’s often said that “we’re all in this storm together,” noted Culhane, but it’s important to acknowledge that people aren’t in the same boat. “We are dealing with people in different situations. I will continue to encourage

[my staff] to be aware at all times of who they are dealing with.”

Engaging with partners. With travel at an ebb, economic developers have been using the time at home to reconnect with other EDOs and organizations in their communities. Over the last few months, EDOs have been in closer contact with their partners than ever, listening and sharing information and resources.

In the initial weeks of the pandemic, **Team NEO**, the regional EDO for northeast Ohio, began convening its local partners regularly. “We thought it would be wise to huddle up regularly to share with them what we are seeing, hearing, and doing as a regional EDO and state economic development partner, and also to listen and hear from local practitioners,” said Steve Fritsch, vice president of communications. Very quickly, more than 100 people were dialing into the calls to share and listen. “It has really strengthened our network of practitioners,” Fritsch said.

Team NEO has been promoting the availability of its research team to assist local partners and sharing insights into how the pandemic is affecting northeast Ohio. It also has been using resources from EDRP’s “[Championing Economic Development](#)” project to help the region’s local economic developers communicate about the importance of economic development, to defend against potential funding cuts.

At the **Buffalo Niagara Partnership**, the slowdown in travel and visits has created time for reconnecting with local partners and better understanding how their efforts fit together with of the partnership, said Tom Kucharski, the organization’s president and CEO.

The **Greater Richmond Partnership** also is staying in close contact with local EDO offices, helping with economic impact analysis and additional research assistance as needed. The partnership subscribed to an online business development tool and provided a training to show local partners how it can be used. During Economic Development Week, the partnership also released a series of video chats with local partners on social media.

The sense of urgency felt by businesses is also felt by EDOs' partner organizations, said Jessica Herrera, director of economic development for the **City of El Paso**. "We have become a lot closer to our counterparts in southern New Mexico and Ciudad Juarez, sharing information a lot faster than we've ever done."

The pandemic also has highlighted the value of regional partnerships. For Kenny McDonald, CEO of **One Columbus** and 2020 chair of IEDC's board of directors, "all the reasons we operate regionally have been reinforced during the crisis" – to offer a platform to collaborate, to leverage resources, and to scale good local ideas in multiple locations.

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