

## Chris Chung – Get Out There!

So, I think having been with three different state economic development groups in my 25 years in this profession, 10 years in Ohio, which was a state agency model, at seven years in Missouri with one of these public-private statewide nonprofits, and now 7 1/2 years here in North Carolina with a similar public-private approach; I think the advice that anyone who's new in a state economic development leadership role and again that could be head of a public agency, that could be head of a public-private nonprofit one, is to get out there.

I think this is a very important role in any state because right or wrong, this is a role that people associate with how the state's economy is performing, whether the state is successful at landing transformative opportunities that can really change the trajectory or their economic growth. It's a high visibility, high profile and—I hope most people would say—a highly important type of role. It's an honor to get to serve in this.

What people, I think, expect or desire is for these individuals who come into these roles to make themselves accessible and available right out of the gate. I think state agencies can get a bad rap within their states for being a bit of an ivory tower where they're just inaccessible to some of their key constituencies and stakeholders. I think in economic development that's true.

There's plenty of situations where local economic developers, you can imagine they would grumble that the state never comes out to their area or never makes time for local communities to hear what those communities are needing support or help with. And I think some of that can be addressed right out of the gate by an effective leader who comes in and takes the time not just to meet with all these different stakeholders but tries to do it on their territory.

I've been in a unique situation both in Missouri and North Carolina, neither of those were the states where I grew up in or am from. So, one I just I had to learn the geography and makeup of those different states. So, it behooved me to get out there very early on and just see the state that I would be responsible for helping promote through my economic development work.

But of course, a very important second benefit to that was just getting out there and connecting especially with those local economic development partners. Every state economic development official, if they don't come in already knowing this, they quickly learned that any success that's ascribed to the state economic development group, it's really very much the result of a broad and deep team effort that involves a lot of different partners and there probably isn't a more important partner to a state agency than those local economic development groups who do so much of that work, that blocking and tackling, to get the result of a business recruitment win or major business expansion.

I think recognizing that out of the gate, going out and engaging with these different partners, preferably doing so by visiting their communities so that they understand that they don't have to go to the state capitol to kiss the ring and get time with the head economic development executive for the state. That goes a long way. Not just, you know, benefits the new economic development head for the state in terms of helping them see the state, but it also just, I think, creates an atmosphere of partnership and accessibility. That's really, really important to establish right away, at least in my experience.

I think another piece of advice, and this probably just goes to any leadership role, is to always exercise as much intellectual curiosity as possible. This is a truly humbling profession in the sense of how quickly you learn, how much you don't know about so many different topics, and that really

shouldn't be that surprising. In any given day, in my role, I may be dealing with a company that makes some technology I've never even heard of, or some industry that is just taking off, and there's constantly so much knowledge to be gained in interacting with these different companies so that we can understand what their needs are and therefore try to position North Carolina as a great solution for what those companies are seeking. And it forces us to learn very quickly about all these different industry trends and factors that are driving why companies are looking to grow where they're choosing to locate.

I think for anyone who's new to economic development in general, let alone heading up an economic development agency, I think just never, never forgetting that there is a lot to continue to learn about all sorts of different subjects and to keep asking those questions. There's no shame in that. Whether you're a leader of any kind of organization, certainly economic development, there is no shame at all in trying to understand more about the landscape that you've inherited.

And what you need to do to be successful and again, those are a couple of those lessons that I have learned over 25 years of this, is be accessible, get out there early on, ask a lot of questions. Don't be ashamed or hesitant to ask a lot of questions. And I guess the last piece of advice like, I talked about with the organizational model that we have here in North Carolina, is be very deliberate and very consistent in how you're messaging what your organization does and how it can add value.

Whether you're inheriting an organization that's been around for decades or whether you're getting ready to take over a brand new state organization that's been created to do economic development, you'll be surprised at how many people you need to explain to what your group does, what its role is, and how it can actually help different stakeholders, be that the local community, be that a company that's looking in the state for potential new location. That would be another piece of advice that I have learned in my career and that I would readily offer to anyone who's new to this type of role.