

## SERDI New Directors Pre-Training Survey Results

### 1. In what State is your regional council located?

- South Carolina
- West Virginia
- Arkansas
- Maryland
- Virginia
- Florida
- Georgia
- Mississippi
- Virginia
- Virginia
- Tennessee
- Virginia
- Virginia
- North Carolina

### 2. How long have you been an executive director?

- 5 years
- 3 months
- 5 months
- 1 ½ years
- 5 ½ years
- 14 months
- 3 years
- 5 years
- 3 ½ years
- 4 years
- 2 ½ years
- 9 months
- 2 months
- 2 ½ years

### 3. Were you an employee of the regional council prior to being appointed by your regional council as executive director? If not, what was your previous position when you applied to become the executive director?

- Yes. Director of the Development Corporation affiliated with the COG. Prior to that I worked for a financial institution in regional role.
- Yes. I was an employee.
- No. I was in the banking business prior to accepting the position.
- I was not an employee of the Council, I was Senior Vice President for a petroleum distributor in the Region for more than 30 years, (85 employees).
- Regional Planner for 3 years, left for 1 year to work for member local government and was appointed when predecessor retired.

- Yes.
- No, I was Vice President for Business Development & Marketing for Atkins (formerly PBS&J), an international engineering consulting firm.
- Yes, I was deputy director/ community development manager
- Yes.
- No, I was a finance director in a member county.
- No, Vice President of a Redevelopment Authority.
- Yes
- Yes. 20 + years.

**4. How would you describe the situation that you inherited?**

**a. The council was seen as strong and relevant. The local governments in the region saw the council as their regional entity and a place where they go to discuss the challenges that the region faces. The council was seen as a player with public and private partners throughout our region.**

- It was seen as laid out above in “a.”
- Fair to good, the executive director had been doing a good job of expanding the organization, but not well in personnel management. As the organization grows the employee turnover rate went up and programs suffered. Financially, the organization was in good condition.
- It was seen as laid out above in “a.”
- I think that our planning and development district was seen primarily as being strong and relevant. We provide services in many different areas: community and economic development, aging, Medicaid Waiver, workforce investment, and loans. At the time I became the executive director we were seen as an agency that collaborated with many public and private partners. I think that we are still viewed in that light.
- It was seen as laid out above in “a.”

**b. The council was mainly seen as place where local governments came if they needed a federal or state grant.**

- Mainly “B” but the board, while not particularly engaged, did represent leadership in the region. The COG worked hard to ‘get along’ and intentionally took a less visible role to make sure local elected officials received credit for the COGs work. To some extent, this continues, but our profile has increased in certain areas (convener of the region, new annual report to tell our efficiency/financial and operational story).
- The Council did not seem to be getting enough credit for the good work it was doing, its technology was getting dated.
- It was seen as laid out above in “b”.

**c. The local governments in region were disengaged with the council and the Board of Directors did not have a lot of the “significant leaders” as members.**

- Some of the old board members had been getting too comfortable with the current status. I reached out to elected officials not involved with the Council. The last election changed several board members, improving the situation. As a result of the high turnover rate I was able to be personally involved in hiring or promoting 9 new staff members who are now young and energetic and loyal to me!
- It was seen as laid out above in “c”

**d. The council had serious financial and staffing issues...its future was questioned. If the council went away tomorrow, it might not be missed.**

- It was seen as laid out above in “d”
- Not true for us, we would be greatly missed and our accounting staff is top notch, thanks to the former Executive Director.
- It was seen as laid out above in “d”
- It was seen as laid out above in “d”
- It was seen as laid out above in “d”

**e. Other (Describe)**

- Personally frustrated by the slow pace of government to respond to a changing business environment.
- A combination of “a” and “b”. Our local governments support our PDC and the work we do. Our success in grants over the years is part of why our localities support us. The organization itself was strong, but the former leadership had become overly confrontational, uncooperative and at times unprofessional.
- The council was involved in a serious legal issue due to the actions of the previous director. It also faced elimination from the TN Legislature.
- Both “a” and “b” depending on locality.

**5. What has been the biggest good surprise for you as executive director?**

- Not a surprise really, but a blessing. Organization was in pretty good financial shape and has continued to improve.
- The competency of the PDC’s staff the willingness of the community to include the Council in planning.
- The willingness of the state’s executive directors help and provide assistance openly.
- Learning the new vocabulary and acronyms. DOD, OEA, JLUS, MDOT, DOT, DLLR, WIA, WIOA, WIB, SHA, SMADC, SMEDA, MEDA, MACO, NACO, DOL, DHS, DORS, MdBC, MDE, PRC, CBC, MS4, TMDL, WLA, Watershed,

Viewshed, FIOS, .....I thought government employees spoke English, the speak acronyms and the ones that do not speak acronyms well are often afraid to ask, "What are you talking about?" .

- Once the right board members were in place on our executive committee I was shocked how willing they, and the local government leaders, were to engage with the organization. Defining our role and purpose in the region has been easier than I thought, but it certainly took getting the right people in place.
- The Board has fully supported a small increase in our dues structure.
- Staff collegiality and professionalism.
- Discovering how dedicated the staff is at this agency. I never realized how hardworking everyone was until I became the executive director.
- How useful we can be to our jurisdictions if we deliver a quality product.
- Being a former "employee", you really never know how the employees will react to you becoming the "boss". I received tremendous support from the staff and continue to. My board also has been very supportive.
- Coming from a member community I was greatly surprised to see the untapped potential for the district to assist local governments.
- Quality of the staff.
- Networking with new people and seeing the region I have worked in for ten years as a planner from broader perspective.
- The ease of the transition for the staff. While I did/do have some issues due to changing from a fellow employee to the Director, it has not been the large problem I expected.

**6. What has been the biggest frustration for you as executive director?**

- Attitudes of a minority of long-time staffers. These are slowly migrating out of the organization. Didn't want too much 'brain drain' at one time, so they are either self selecting out or retiring...Additionally, our local elected leaders (county councils) have had quite a bit of turnover, which has meant a lot of education and re-education of local elected officials and new COG Board members.
- So many places to and things to do. So little time to do them.
- I would say there are two. (1) No clearly defined duties of what an EDD/PDD executive director is supposed to do; and, (2) financial constraints that make it very difficult to implement substantive change.
- It takes several years to build up personal relationships to a level that people trust that you are helping them, not trying to steal their grant money.
- Managing mediocre performers. It didn't take long to get the under performers to move on, but those who consistently do enough to get by and do not advance the organization are harder to address. Since there is rarely egregious misconduct or under performance, it makes it harder to address from a management perspective. We've since reorganized and implemented a reduction in force, but it was a lot of hassle to go through in order to address mediocre performance. I guess this is what management is all about...figuring out solutions to these types of organizational challenges!
- Financial struggles from making payroll, paying off old debt and discovering more debt.

- State's lack of knowledge about and appreciation for my regional council. We are much larger and considerably more resourced than the rest of our sister councils in the state. However, in general, many state actors hold the regional councils in low regard.
- Dealing with one particular economic developer who does not involve us in economic development projects for the county where he is employed.
- Staffing - motivating existing staff to push beyond status quo and training new staff members.
- Not unexpected, but there were some issues surrounding several ongoing projects that needed to be cleaned up. I spent a lot of time my first year "mending fences".
- I think one surprise for me was how far we were behind in technology and outdated software. We had a very outdated website, we were still writing payroll checks, we had crazy e-mail addresses that didn't make sense (our former Executive Director didn't want us using our e-mail for "personal" use), we were still operating like we did 10 years ago.
- Many of our contracts had not been reviewed in such a long time and I found out we were paying for things we didn't use, didn't need or could get at a much better price.
- Our Personnel Policies handbook had not been updated in over 10-15 years and many items in the handbook were out right illegal.
- We didn't even have a sign on our building because our former Director didn't want people to know where the office was.
- We owned a building that the Community College was using as an offsite facility. The building didn't have an operable heating system and I received a call the first day on the job as Executive Director about what I was going to about it (This was a \$150,000 heating system replacement job).
- Also, we operated a non-profit corporation (Lake Country Development Corporation) and had foreclosed on a rubber boot company and we had thousands of boots and equipment "junk" stored in a training center. They called the first day and wanted to know when we were getting all of this stuff out of the facility. None of these items were relayed to me before the former Executive Director left. I also found out that the people on the other end dealing with these items didn't want to deal with our former director.
- Taking a staff and organization, which was growing irrelevant and moving them in a new direction.
- Financial condition of the agency.
- Bombardment of small tasks that take up the day when I would like to focus on larger tasks with more effect.
- Employees that do not see the big picture and the need to plan.

**7. What are aspects of your job that are challenging to you, good and not so good that you would want to share with other new directors and for them to provide you with feedback?**

- Challenging: constantly feel like I have to play defense while looking for new ways to keep the COG relevant (new programmatic opportunities). In a very conservative political environment, we have to constantly talk in terms of governmental efficiencies, jobs, and economic development. Some of our

biggest successes, however, have been related to community development (particularly in low-mod income areas) and if we broadcast this success, it's met with some skepticism or disinterest.

- The most challenging aspect is my unfamiliarity with many of the projects already in development. Many of our projects have been developed and administered by other personnel within the office. This makes it challenging when questions arise regarding the status or history of those projects.
- Good aspects are the resources available to help directors get acclimated. Not so good would be the lack of defined job description or role of an executive director.
- Learn to listen. What do people really want?
- Be polite, be helpful.
- Try to never get angry.
- Listen: do not text, listen to messages, read papers talk to others while people are talking!
- Every hard project needs some elected official champion. If you cannot find one then go on to the next project on the list.
- Find some friendly elected officials and other Executive Directors to show you the ropes and help them in turn as soon as you can.
- What are ways to get staff to challenge the director with new ideas for the organization and programs?
- Management issues as far as dealing with staff that were not supportive to change.
- Not so good: balancing/maintaining productive relationships with state agencies and Executive branch, who are sometimes wishing you (regional council) would go away.  
Not so good: the limitations on innovation placed on the agency by the bureaucratic nature for federal and state funding.  
Good: a unique opening at this time in my region's history, for the agency take an unprecedented leadership role in crafting solutions for the region's opportunities and challenges.
- Supervising staff with whom you previously worked as a planner.
- Personnel problems in general.
- Finding new sources of revenue in the face of dwindling grant funds.
- Keeping our board of directors engaged in the operation of the agency.
- Staffing has been the greatest challenge - and assuring we are "keeping up" as a quality employer.
- Being the Executive Director of a small organization, you have to stay on top of everything financial, everything personnel and it can be hard to "do the job as the Executive Director" if you are constantly trying to juggle many different tasks.
- Our past record of grantsmanship has been tremendous. However, many of our localities don't understand that the climate is quite different than even 5 years ago. They don't seem to understand that they can't get a grant to do everything they want to fund. I try to keep the localities and Board updated on the "state of the economy" but they still don't seem to get it sometimes. I hear so many comments from localities that "we got a grant to do this 10 years ago...why can't we do it now. Therefore, a challenge for our organization is that has been so "financially" dependent on grants/administration.

- Staff development, breaking down the silos of thought. Also, communicating to local communities new ideas.
- Having to spend so much time on financial improvements giving inadequate time for program and member relations.
- Maintaining staff relationships I had before I became director is difficult if not impossible. This is good in that my decisions are largely not personal so a little distance from them helps. On the other hand I would like to get updates on their progress without giving them the feeling that there is a trust issue.
- The importance of developing relationships with individuals that are necessary for our COG to survive...Getting employees to become the "experts" at what they do...Helping employees understand what it takes to remain relevant to our members...Methods of staying up to date with activities in all our member jurisdictions...New innovative ways to regionalize activities/services of our members...Getting COG Bard to seriously look at what the COG needs to provide and how to position ourselves for the future.
- Funding security...How do we provide local planning assistance that we are famous for when we have no funding and our local governments can not afford the costs? How do we secure seed funding to start new projects before they take enough form to seek grant funding?

#### **8. How could your fellow directors in your state be helpful to you?**

- They are helpful already. We meet monthly and we consistently have time in our meetings to share best practices and 'steal' ideas from each other. This is a long-standing practice with COGS in SC.
- My fellow directors have been exceptional in providing guidance and insight to projects and regulations. I very much appreciate their assistance.
- They knew so much more than I do, listen to them get their advice, but make your own decisions for your own political environment. If you use their ideas then Give Them Credit. Build shared interest coalitions and partnerships.
- My fellow directors have been extremely helpful to me during my first year.
- No idea.
- By sharing knowledge in areas where I am not particularly knowledgeable, such as social services. I find that the other directors in this state are generally very helpful.
- Discussing operations, opportunities to partner/ diversify program offerings to maintain relevance
- Fortunately, other directors have been helpful and are always very willing to share documents, etc. I think training staff is equally as important especially in areas of personnel and financial.
- I could not ask for more help than what I received from the other directors. More than one took me under their wings and checked on me.
- Examples of funding and financial successes.
- By simply getting to know me and talk shop at various times.
- The COG directors in North Carolina have a very good working relationship. Our association provides the opportunity we need to interact and discuss issues, opportunities, and challenges. My fellow directors are very helpful and very responsive to my inquiries.

**9. How could one of your colleagues from another SERDI state be of help to you?**

- Our most challenging program area is Workforce Development. (We are the local WIA administrative entity.) I think this is due to the complexity of the law/regulations and this is becoming even more so with implementation of WIOA (new law). Our state Employment Agency is one of the most difficult we work with and the relationship between COGs and this agency is constantly strained.
- General guidance and when questions arise.
- Probably by providing information of programs and ideas to generate revenue and improve efficiency.
- Not Sure.
- Outside perspective on state association issues and how they handle peer collaboration could be beneficial.
- Discussion of alternative revenue generating programs that may potentially work in my state.
- No idea.
- A colleague from another SERDI state could be helpful to me by providing a different perspective. He or she could help me develop some new ideas regarding the provision of services to our counties and municipalities.
- Discussing operations, opportunities to partner/ diversify program offerings to maintain relevance.
- I think I would like to see how other State Associations operate and how they provide training and assistance to their regional council members.
- If anyone had gone through something similar it would have been good to be able to ask questions and bounce ideas off of them.
- By simply getting to know me and talk shop at various times.
- Not sure that I can answer that since I don't know much about what other state organizations are doing. It would be great to see a menu of services offered by every organization so that you could question those that provide services you may need in your region.

**10. If a mentoring program for new directors was established, would you participate in it? Would you like to be matched up with a veteran director from your own state or from another state? What would be some of the benefits/support that you would want to derive from a mentor?**

- I have had a mentor for five years within my state and this has been helpful. I would not recommend a mentor from another state – too many differences...Mentors keep mentees grounded and focused on the really important issues, rather than the issues that constantly grab attention and eat time.

- At this point I am unsure as to whether such a program would be beneficial or not. Perhaps after I have more tenure I would be able to make a more educated decision as to whether such a partnership would be beneficial. I do feel like all directors have been very supportive, and would continue to offer assistance upon request.
- I think it would very helpful especially if it was from a veteran director from within my state. It would be extremely worthwhile to get a feel from someone who has done this job for a while as to what it entails and what should be the focus.
- Given 5 years in, I've already established a few mentors. I certainly would have participated in this as a newer director because it took me quite a while to establish my mentor network.
- I would potentially be interested in participating. My preference would be an in-state mentor. I would be looking for lessons learned in management and development/growth strategies for a successful organization.
- Likely, but not as a mentee, but as a mentor. Unless the veteran director is running a large metro agency, I think the scale differences might make the learning potential minimal. However, I am willing to serve as a potential mentor.
- Yes, I would participate in a mentoring program for new directors. I would not mind having another director from my state as a mentor, but I think it might be more beneficial to have a mentor from another state just so that I could take advantage of a different perspective. There might be programs and practices common to another state that would open me up to new ideas. I think that a mentor could provide keen insight into such areas as personnel, fiscal management, the relationship between the agency staff and the board of directors, and innovative services that the agency can offer. And, of course, a seasoned director could offer valuable insight into leadership skills.
- YES- either would be fine. It would be nice to have someone to reach out to for sharing ideas and talking about issues as they come up.
- I would like to participate. I would also like assistance in succession planning. I have been with the PDC for 36 years (4 years Executive Director) and I know that many of "us" will be leaving the profession in the next five years. We should be preparing our senior staff for the next generation of Executive Directors.
- Yes. If I could be matched with someone with a strong background in an area that I think we are weak.
- Probably would not participate. Informal mentoring, yes.
- The directors surrounding me have already been supportive and quick to reach out. I can call them at any time and that seems to be more effective than a program.
- I feel that I have 15 mentors with our directors in North Carolina. Other than innovative programs that we don't offer in North Carolina, I am not sure what a mentor from another state could offer me.