

CONNECTIONS

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A Question of Culture

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Experiments in **ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION**



The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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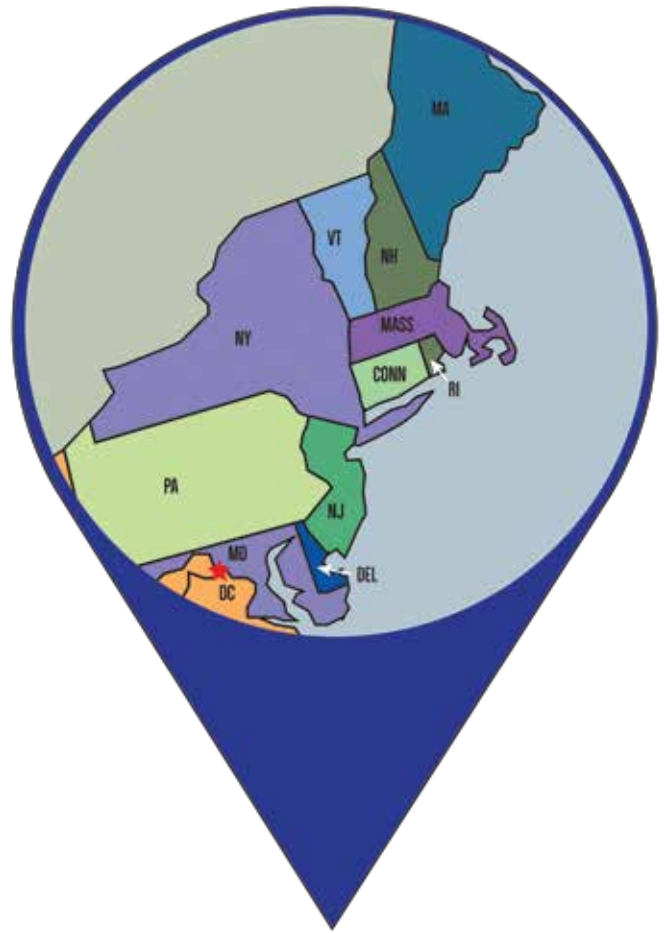


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Vibrant Communities: Reinventing an Economic Development Organization

By Abby Straus



What does it take for communities to become more economically vibrant?

Whose business is it? How might citizens best participate in developing their own economic well-being and that of their communities? How do we close opportunity gaps so more people can participate? What happens when we don't? How might we think—and what might we do—differently to get a handle on these questions for lasting positive change? And what unique part might our organization play?

These are questions we've been asking at the Northeast Economic Development Association (NEDA), a

63-year-old nonprofit that has spent the last several years reinventing itself to be more relevant and useful to people who care about the economic vibrancy of communities throughout the Northeast. Originally founded as the Northeast Industrial Developers Association, NEDA's fortune has waxed and waned over the years. In 2016, with membership numbers stagnating and a board close to burn-out, the questions got tough and close to home: Should NEDA continue to exist? If so, what is our unique purpose? Whom do we serve? How might we best support our members in doing the things they care about? What capacity do we need to do this?

Two years and much soul-searching later, the organization is on its way forward with renewed purpose and vigor. Our questions were answered, in large part, by applying systems thinking to understand the complex world of economic development and the context we find ourselves in today.

WHOM DO WE SERVE? WHOSE BUSINESS IS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?

At its birth in 1955, NEDA's focus was on developing industry. Build a strong manufacturing base, the thinking went, and the economy will flourish. As technology evolved and industry began to undergo disruptive change, the organization's

view widened to include business in general, the development of land and infrastructure, and training people to be ready for the new types of work required to make business run. The new narrative was about the attraction of business, building the tax base, and creating jobs.

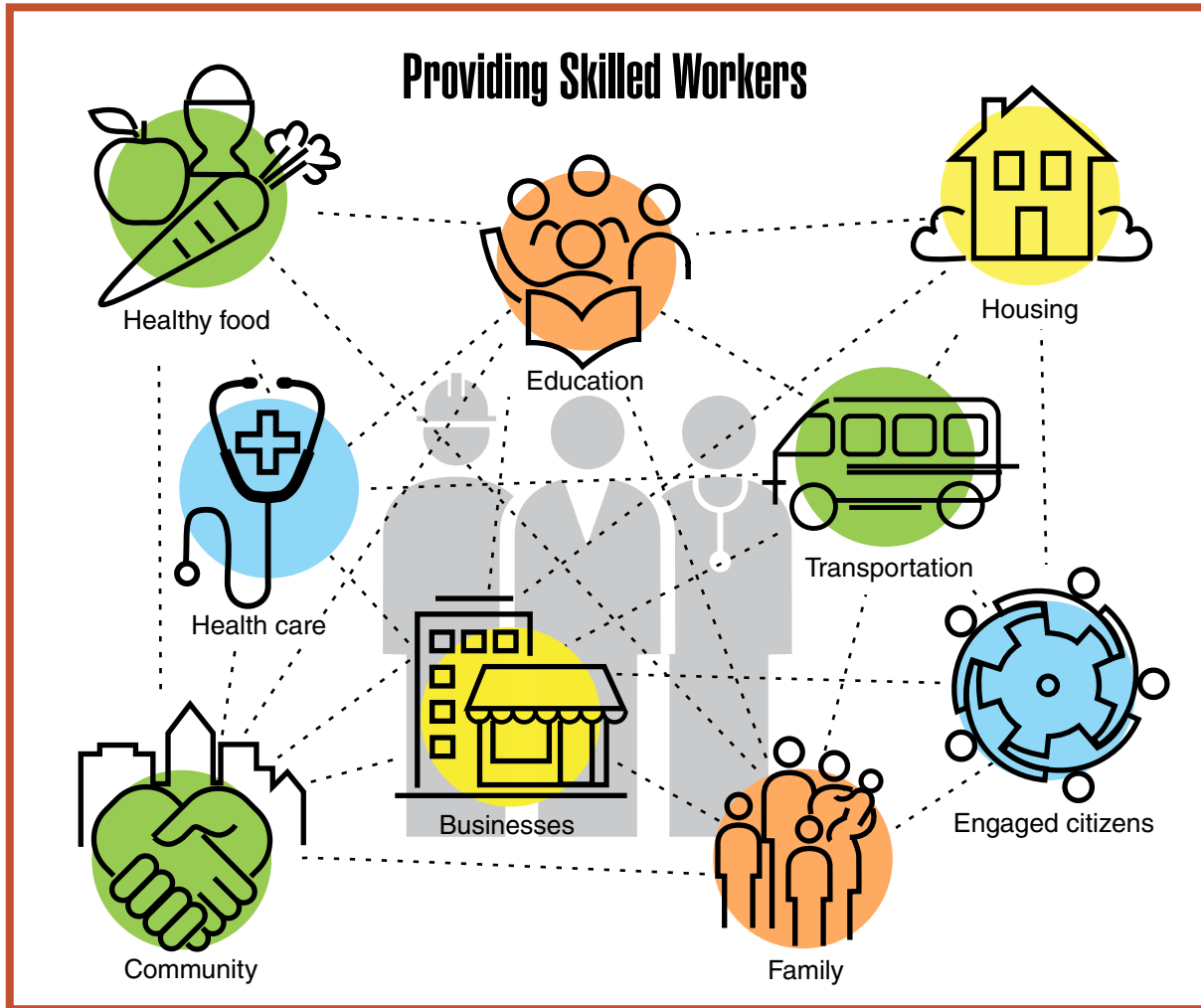
Mark Waterhouse, senior statesman of economic development and former NEDA executive director, feels that "we have made a mistake in thinking of economic development as 'jobs and taxes.' Part of the purpose," he says, "is to create that better environment in which to exist." This includes everything from healthy, affordable, and inspiring places to live and work to the social and political structures that enable us to meet our human needs. These are all aspects of a complex, interconnected system. While there is merit in understanding the parts, it is the ability of the parts to work together that allows the system to perform well as a whole.

To understand how this works, consider any aspect of economic development. The successful provision of skilled workers, for example, is informed by a multiplicity of factors, including family health, interaction with a caring community, education from early childhood on, transportation, access to healthy food, adequate health care, housing that people can afford, businesses that engage with



Everyone in a complex system has a slightly different interpretation. The more interpretations we gather, the easier it becomes to gain a sense of the whole."

—Margaret J. Wheatley



the community, and the enthusiasm of citizens to engage in the work that is available.

People whose work is critical to economic development may not understand themselves to be part of the system, and frequently they are not included in key conversations—to the detriment of all. We realized that it’s NEDA’s purpose to get the “whole system in the room” to support the most robust collaboration and problem solving possible. We therefore serve all representatives of the system that makes economic development happen in the Northeast. In addition

to those who consider themselves economic development professionals, these include educators, health-care providers, community and faith-based groups, as well as planners, placemakers, and organizations working to achieve equity and capability for communities that have been traditionally unable to participate in the creation and sustainment of wealth. There are also institutions, such as libraries, that are reinventing themselves to play an increasing role in the economic well-being of their communities. We must include them, too.

Our inquiry also starkly revealed that, while we represent 11 north-eastern states and the District of Columbia, our board and membership in no way reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of our region. Economic development as a profession has come a long way, but there's still work to do. Our hope is that, by reaching out to a broad range of sectors and disciplines, NEDA will truly be a microcosm of the system we represent.

We began by updating the language we use to match our new vision. We changed our name from the Northeast Economic Developers Association to the Northeast Economic Development Association, to identify with a topic rather than a particular profession. We changed our pitch from the daunting "Join the most respected economic development organization in the region" to "Economic development is everyone's business. Please join us!" Our message is clear: if you care about the economic well-being of communities, you belong.

WHAT IS OUR UNIQUE VALUE? HOW DO WE HELP FACILITATE OUR MEMBERS' SUCCESS?

Whoever our members are, they want solutions to the challenges and opportunities they face. They want to build local economies, create jobs, attract and retain businesses, and

provide happy, healthy citizens with great places to live, work, and play.

In our complex, rapidly changing world, we can't predict where solutions will emerge, and the sheer volume of information available today makes identifying and choosing solutions incredibly daunting. When stakes are high, and money and time are tight, reinventing the wheel is not an attractive option. Yet this is what frequently happens because people aren't connected to one another in ways that facilitate the sharing of what works.

Because it's a regional organization, NEDA is a natural choice as an aggregator and a connector, a hub of information and inspiration that spans the geography and interests of our membership. There are tremendous assets waiting to be leveraged in each state: examples of promising practices, professional development opportunities, and people who offer products and services to help communities thrive. Rather than providing solutions ourselves, as we had attempted to do in the past, our purpose is to facilitate connections across the system between people and solutions that already exist. Our goal is to connect, inform, and inspire.

Response to our idea was enthusiastic, from members and from potential partners who shared our vision and wanted to be part of the mix. A collaborative project with

a software startup is in the works. NEDA members will be able to subscribe to a regional calendar based on the activities they are interested in. We are cocreating an online, wiki-based tool to connect members with solutions to build and sustain local economies, and NEDA is partnering with organizations and individuals throughout the region to highlight education and training opportunities that will be of benefit to all.

By focusing the spotlight on our members and partners, not on ourselves, we're able to draw on the capacity of the whole system to help it succeed. Everyone can contribute and everyone wins. NEDA becomes the coordinator of a trusted network that provides quality connections and information about economic development in the Northeast.

HOW MIGHT WE BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY?

Even this lean role requires considerable capacity to perform well, and we were running on fumes with an overworked director and an exhausted board. How, we asked, might we find the staff functions we need despite our limited funds? The answer came in the form of an association management company that, for the cost of one moderate salary, will provide services including secretarial, financial, communications, and event and

member management—all the things you'd want a good staff to do.

This left us more time to think about our revenue model, which was woefully out of date. Rather than depending solely on membership dues and an annual conference, we inquired, How might we provide value to a wider group of stakeholders, thus diversifying our revenue base? With our new identity as the connector of many, advertising—applied responsibly, of course—and a wide range of sponsorships become viable options. We began revenue sharing with partners on some of the programs we offer jointly. We are also designing a program where commu-



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nities will pay a fee to be supported in and acknowledged for sustainable and socially responsible economic development practices.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM THIS PROCESS ABOUT OURSELVES, AND WHAT MIGHT WE PASS ON THAT WOULD BE USEFUL TO OTHERS?

Author Peter Block says that we don't work on questions, they work on us. As we began asking questions about how NEDA could and should change, we felt doors opening all around us. *Who has a stake in the economic well-being of our communities? How might we engage them, so they feel included and want to participate in the NEDA community? How might we connect members to ideas and to each other to create value that will produce revenue? How might we support local associations in their work in collaboration rather than competition?*

“ Questions are fateful. . . . They are the chamber through which destiny calls.”

—Godwin Hlatshwayo

Used in our process of strategic inquiry, these questions, and others like them, provided solutions we had never imagined, like finding a virtual staff and new partners with tools perfectly suited to help us realize our vision.

We discovered that our purpose doesn't lie in solving problems for our members, but rather in connecting them to each other and to the solutions they—and we—create together. We learned that there is an appetite for connection and cocreation and that NEDA can provide an environment in which people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives might exchange knowledge and experience in service to creating an economically vibrant Northeast.

It's early days yet. We're experimenting and discovering and—as Peter Senge says of organizations that learn—continually expanding our capacity to create our future. We're staying alert, feeding what works, letting go of what doesn't. We're using what we know about systems to nurture our own. We feel hopeful and curious, and we feel the weight of what we've begun as we chart a course into territory unknown. ■

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