

Developing the Practitioner

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Key Questions

- What do economic developers do?
- Can they do it better?
- What do economic developers need to know (learn) to do their job better?
- What should a professional development program look like?
- The argument – PD is essential but it is not clear what form it should take

Two Views of Economic Developers

- Tom Peters:
- “...a thousand inventors of urban, rural and suburban tomorrows”

A Less Flattering View

- One of life's lowliest creations who walks the earth in miserable solitariness prayerfully petitioning the gods of Gross National Product to "bring me please, one small industry so that I may take it to my bosses and say unto them, 'Lo! Masters thy humble servant is deserving a pat on my pointed little head for I have laboured long and hard in the vineyards and have produced a goodly harvest'" (author unknown).

Rationale for Local Economic Development Action

- Local action can make a difference to outcomes (Schumacher 1973)
- Localities best prepared will reap the rewards
- Consensus that local and regional competitive advantage can be created
- Government policy supports local economic development
- Professionalism is therefore critical

Two Approaches to Local Economic Development

- “Shoot anything that flies, claim anything that falls”

OR

- Apply the lessons of experience and “the science” of LED
- Is there a science to LED, and if so where does it lie and how is it learned?
- We have to believe that there is more to ED than shooting anything that flies

The Practitioner's Art

- Tasks almost limitless, many tools available
- Influence only indirect
- Constraints of politics, few resources, high expectations, lack of democratic mandate, feisty stakeholders
- Tyranny of short term wins
- Growing complexity of governance and development drivers (Sorensen 2000)
- Difficult strategic choices
- Keeping up with the latest thinking (fads?)

What drives LED success? And why is knowing this important?

- Strategy is driven by theories of what drives development (the why question)
- Competitive advantage can be created
- The actors involved want to make a difference
- Resources are finite, ie poor analysis matters
- The capacity to intervene is limited
- A bulwark against action driven by the lowest common denominator

Hence...

- Learning on the job or borrowing what they do next door is not good enough
- Doing “what works” is only part of the solution
- The practitioner needs knowledge, context, rigour and science
- There is an evidence base for action, strategy and policy – this can be learned and should be learned

The “How” and “Why” Questions

- How much is ED art and how much science?
- How much theory, how much practice?
- Skills versus knowledge – getting the balance right
- Is there a right way of doing ED?
- Can this be taught?
- Generic skills versus ED-specific skills

Learning Practitioners

- Practitioners come from many disciplinary and professional backgrounds
- Skills and knowledge vary enormously
- Fear of paralysis by analysis
- An inherently practical orientation
- Scepticism about academics
- Learning from other practitioners is highly valued – war stories, how to's, case studies
- But ... ED is not just the sum of the tasks

RMIT - EDA Partnership

- There is a need for a specific set of awards in economic development
- Multidisciplinary approach – economics, business, planning, geography, political science, demography
- Blend of “why” and “how to” learning
- Three award programs proposed – Grad Cert, Grad Diploma and Masters; MBA option
- Blend of online and short F2F offerings
- Commencing S2 2009

Ongoing Issues and PD Options

- International experience – IEDC, EDANZ, EDAC
- Intensive short courses versus full academic programs?
- Online versus F2F
- What status should be given to PD programs in accreditation of practitioners?
- RPL issues
- Still a small market
- Will be a long haul till the programs are bedded down and accepted