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# Economic Development Now

Leadership and Professional Development



# Tom Kucharski, CEcD, HLM

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By Joy Wilkins, CEcD, HLM

Tom Kucharski's journey in economic development has included key leadership roles with the U.S. Census Bureau, Lee County (Fla.), Southwest Florida, and Lehigh Valley (Penn.) before returning to his hometown to serve as the President and CEO of Invest Buffalo Niagara (N.Y.), a role he has held since 2000. In his community-based roles, the veteran economic development executive has served as the architect behind major regional transformations.

Kucharski served on IEDC's board of directors and in committee roles for more than a dozen years before becoming board chair in 2021. He is an IEDC Honorary Life Member and continues to serve as a regular advisor for IEDC leadership in various capacities. Kucharski is a quoted economic development expert in national publications such as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Forbes, and Newsweek.

In this article, Kucharski offers insights and advice for economic developers serving today and into the future.

## 1. Develop a culture for thinking and acting together as a region.

"It was clear that the economic development system was broken," says Kucharski, reflecting on his early days serving with Invest Buffalo Niagara, an eight-county regional economic development organization. "In a region that was experiencing significant losses in both population and employment, it was human nature for local leaders to become more insular

### About this article

This article is the 26th in the Leadership Insights series, which features wisdom from economic development leaders who have experienced the real-life peaks and valleys of our profession.

Featured individuals have been recognized by IEDC for outstanding service to the profession and their communities. Leadership Insights is a companion series to ED Now's ongoing Leadership in Economic Development series.



lack of community cooperation and coordination was a major turnoff for site selectors. Kucharski shares how he convened a meeting with local leaders to talk about marketing and invited everyone to bring their own promotional materials to the office.

“The amount of material almost caved in our conference room,” he quips.

Prospects would visit communities within the region and receive several different and confusing sets of information on what programs could help them.

“As a result, our region was crossed off the list of further consideration,” Kucharski explains.

The turnaround story began when regional leaders from public and private sectors raised an impressive amount of funds to address the issue. More than 50 leaders came together to create an initiative that would lead to nothing short of a regional transformation in thought and action.

To move away from the territorial culture that had long pervaded the region, Kucharski knew he had to start from scratch in getting people to meet and start talking with each other. Beginning with quarterly meetings, he created an open agenda where participants could come and talk about anything they wanted, including their challenges and frustrations. From these meetings, local leaders began meeting with each other on their own, going to ball games and other social outings together, and coming to an understanding that one community is not the enemy of another.

However, before expecting local leaders to engage in strategic work together, Kucharski saw the importance of engaging them in a regional project that could mutually benefit all. He worked with leaders to develop a unified “economic development toolkit” of information that could be used regionally to communicate with prospects.

“The goal was to move from eight different sets of information to one agreed-upon set for all of us to use,” he explains.



where everyone works from the same foundation of information and actively engages in a strategic process to review issues and solve problems together.

Kucharski credits this regional culture of living and working together with helping the Buffalo-Niagara region succeed in landing more than 400 projects over the past 25 years from Great Lakes Cheese to Yahoo! to Tesla.

“A recent project involved setting up an intermunicipal agreement to bring water in from Niagara Falls across five municipalities,” he notes. “Our regional culture made the project work, which it would not have in the past.”

In Kucharski’s tenure, the region has seen \$7.27 billion in new investment resulting in more than 47,000 jobs created and/or retained.

Says Kucharski, “The biggest thing we have accomplished in the past 25 years is building trust among each other so everyone is working together.”

Today, more than 150 organizations are partnering in the region’s future.

## **2. Leverage trusted relationships to tackle large issues together.**

With regional leaders working well together and realizing the economic development fruits of their collaborative efforts, Kucharski sees the first part of his team’s mission as completed.

“Now we need to work on blocking and tackling to get at the larger issues,” he says.

What are the larger issues? The number one issue affecting regions across the country is housing, says Kucharski, citing surveys done by expert sources.

“We are seeing this issue very clearly in our region with companies we serve, even international companies,” he says. “They all want to know where their people will live.”



The former certified planning professional turned certified economic development professional appreciates the growing opportunities to collaborate with community planners in addressing critical issues impacting the region's future.

"This has involved engaging smart, analytical members of the public and private sectors who don't often get invited and involved in our regional initiatives," he says.

Another issue confronting the region is its sprawling population, Kucharski explains. While the overall population has remained roughly the same over the years—with some good growth shown in the last Census—the regional footprint has doubled in size. Leaders are tackling the challenges associated with maintaining the sprawl while recreating urban density in cities. This includes leveraging available infrastructure in one county to support development in another.

### **3. Focus on economic gardening.**

"While retention and expansion were always an underappreciated part of economic development, these activities are now a front-and-center part of our success story," says Kucharski. "Our message to our local businesses is that while you could go somewhere else, stay here and allow us to work with you to help you be successful here."

Kucharski and his team help business decisionmakers see the value proposition of staying where they are compared to moving to a new location, building a new facility, and finding a new workforce. In his experience, these decision makers find it in their portfolio's best interest to grow in place when the community is working to address their growing needs.

As Kucharski's experiences have confirmed, this "grow-from-within" strategy works especially well in places where people feel deeply rooted to the community, region, and each other.



and entrepreneurial, and making the right decisions together. This includes using data to inform when pivots in strategy are needed, making it possible for the once-aging industrial region to adopt a tech-led economic development approach.

The region has seen significant job growth over the years while the labor force has not shifted much, Kucharski explains. While the region was once characterized by empty buildings and unemployed workers, today buildings are occupied and the unemployment rate is low. With more business development in the works, Kucharski and his team are focusing on creative ways to recruit talent, including reaching out to those who left but maintain strong roots to cultural assets in the region.

### In closing

Throughout the course of his more than 40-year economic development journey, Kucharski has helped regions—ranging from the burgeoning Southwest Florida region to well-established industrial regions in Lehigh Valley and Buffalo-Niagara—achieve significant economic development wins. The challenge, he points out, is to help stakeholders understand that just because you go to the Super Bowl for a few years in a row, this does not mean you go every year.

“Not every year is going to be a Super Bowl year; that’s not how it works,” he says. “Rather, we must always take care to manage expectations with stakeholders while working together to keep the momentum going.”

Going forward, Kucharski provides the following words of wisdom regarding how we can best serve together in the days ahead:

- Try to learn one new thing each day and then take time at the end of the day to reflect on what you learned from the day. No matter how long one has been serving in the profession, there is always an opportunity to learn something new.



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- Be kind. Be considerate. Always put yourself in another's position and work to appreciate another's position.

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