

Building the Future in Howard County with Jennifer Jones

Linda Ostovitz: Hello everyone. I'm Linda Ostovitz and welcome to Real Talk, Real Growth, where we have real conversations with people who are on the cutting edge of what they do, and we always take away a nugget or many nuggets from these conversations that we can put into action and apply to our own situations so that we experience real growth.

Today I am thrilled to have Jennifer Jones with me. Jennifer is the CEO of the Howard County Economic Development Authority. And I've known Jennifer for quite a while, but I've gotten to know her better more recently. And Jennifer, is of interest to me for this conversation because of where she came from, where she went, what she came back to that brought her to the position that she's in right now, that benefits dramatically, Howard County and its business growth. But also Jennifer has had the occasion to deal with the situation where she has taken the lead from somebody who preceded her, who had been in the position for a long time. And as we know taking over in a role like that has its own challenges.

And she's worked through how to make the Economic Development Authority her own and put her own mark on it with her own goals and so forth. So, Jennifer, thrilled to have you join us today. Thank you so much for saying yes.

Jennifer Jones: Thank you for having me. It's great to be here, Linda.

Linda Ostovitz: My pleasure. Jennifer, let's start from the beginning. You originally are from Howard County. Is that right?

Jennifer Jones: That's right. I grew up in Howard County. My parents moved down here when I was about three and K through 12 went to all my school in Howard County. And lived in Columbia all the way growing up.

Linda Ostovitz: I think in that regard, you and I are some of the few originals around. I think I was a little older than three when my family moved to Howard County but I was young as well, so I consider myself a home growing one here. Jennifer, there came a time though when you in furtherance of your career goals and education left Maryland.

Jennifer Jones: Yeah, I did. I graduated from Wild Lake High School, go Wildcats. Really proud of Wild Lake. So I majored in engineering and undergrad and I did apply to the University of Maryland, which has a great engineering school, but sometimes when you come outta high school, you wanna get away from home.

You want to just kind of make your own mark. And so I decided to go to Purdue, which is in Indiana, that's right outside of Chicago. And go there for my engineering degree. When I came outta high school, I just really wanted to get away and see more things. And I think it was a great move for me.

I have family in other parts of the state, so that was good if I wanted to see my aunts and uncles or whatever. But it was important for me to get away and meet new people and learn new things.

Linda Ostovitz: I'm gonna jump ahead and be a spoiler. It's interesting, wanted to get away and what brought you back was the desire to be back home and in a position to be near and to help your parents. So giving that piece of your story away, but once you graduated and you have a degree, an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering, is that right?

Jennifer Jones: That's right.

Linda Ostovitz: Wow. So what did you do with that after you got that degree?

Jennifer Jones: So while I was at Purdue, I did summer internships and engineering summer internships which was great. And then I decided to go to law school after that, I did the JD MBA program. But, I didn't, I never worked professionally as an engineer, but I use the kind of thought process and critical thinking every single day. 'Cause what it trains you is to train you to problem solve and break down big problems into little pieces. And that is a lot of the job I have now. And like a lot of the executive jobs I've had. It's like they give you, the boss or somebody gives you a problem, it's usually very expansive.

It could be overwhelming, but that engineering training, it's just natural for me to break things down into its little pieces and solve and implement and execute. Which is what engineers do. I think I use it every day in a different kind of way, but I did wanna go to law school to kinda round out my education because engineering is focused on, problem solving, math and science.

There isn't a lot of communication, writing communication in a, verbal communication and written communication. Not a lot of that unless it's a technical paper. So I felt like I needed more experience than that. So I went to law school. I did the J-D-M-B-A program and all you do is read and write there and write legal research and writing and you know what I'm talking about.

You're a lawyer. I felt like that filled gaps for me in my education. So I, I think now though, like with all of it it's very helpful for me in this position to have that law kind of experience also because of that.

Linda Ostovitz: Using both sides of your brain. Right.

Jennifer Jones: Yep.

Linda Ostovitz: It's interesting though that you talk about thinking as an engineer, and I will say I've had many clients who are engineers over the years. It really is interesting how an engineer thinks you are different from the rest of us in terms of how you approach an issue, how you break it down into its, tiniest smallest pieces to deal with it, as you say, and I can understand why you view it as such a benefit to have had that education for the rest of what I know you've done and are doing in your career.

So after, we've now got Jennifer Jones who's an electrical engineer, who has a law degree, who has a master's in law. Did you then go to work and use those skills?

Jennifer Jones: I did so when I was at law school, I did the joint program. So it's the, you get a law degree in MBA and you go for an extra year and you just go back and forth, like nonstop. So I did that in four years, and when I came out I definitely used more of the MBA side of things. So like I went into corporate not corporate law, but I worked for Ernst and Young and did mergers and acquisitions consulting.

So that was more of the MBA side. But like I said, having the law degree definitely helped me in verbal, written communication, and it helped me get jobs. So when I first came out, I don't know, it was like, it's very competitive when you first come out, that first, first couple jobs. And I don't think there were too many people that had that combination of degrees.

And so at least, at the very least employers were intrigued. They would ask me, why did I decide to do this? You know what I mean? They, 'cause like they looked at my education and was like, okay, there's not a lot of people with that combination. So it did get me, it did open doors for me, which is what I wanted.

But yeah, I worked more in the business side, the corporate side. And then after consulting I did a lot of international business development and business and economic development. So I would say I used more of the MBA in my career as an adult more than anything.

Linda Ostovitz: All of that education and skillset caused you to move to London, is that right?

Jennifer Jones: Yeah. So I worked for, I was in LA I went to law school in LA. So I was working out there right after law school and took the California bar. So I was out there and then I worked for Live Nation and I was in entertainment. 'Cause that's a big sector out there, as you know.

So I worked for Live Nation in Los Angeles and the UK Office of Live Nation needed somebody in London for a project, a short-term project. So I went out there for a couple of months and finished the project and then they offered me a job and they said, Hey, we would like to offer you a full-time position out here.

So I think they told me that on Thursday, and I wanna say Tuesday I was out there.

Linda Ostovitz: Too bad you can't make a decision, right? And you can't act on things. Then you quickly dazzled them on your short term project to have them say, okay, we want all of you now. Right? Full time. Good for you. Good for you. Well, that's interesting because ultimately where you have ended up is in a place where economic development is all about business.

That will a little bit more, but you had an interesting path to get to where you are right now which started with you coming back to Howard County and getting introduced to the, let's call it the political community, the governmental community in Howard County. Right.

Jennifer Jones: Mm-hmm.

Linda Ostovitz: Why did you come back? Let's start with that.

Jennifer Jones: I came back because as you alluded to earlier my parents were getting older. I wanted to be near them. My dad was starting to have health challenges, so I really wanted to be, I was ocean away, so it was, it was very hard for me to be there. So I was there, was in London for about seven years and then I came back.

And once I got back I contacted my old boss and said, Hey, i'm back in the States. Do you have any consulting? 'cause I wanted, I needed to fill that gap until I figured out what I wanted to do closer to home. There wasn't anything that I was looking at in Howard County right away.

So I did consulting work one of my old bosses, which is great. And then while I was doing that, I was thinking, what do I want to do? I wanna get a job close to Howard County where the commute isn't a long time to my parents' house. As I was doing that, I was just running into a bunch of different people about Calvin Ball was running for county executive at the time. I was looked at his platform for economic development, other things for Howard County. It became important for me 'cause I grew up here and a lot of the things that, the candidates were talking about was like how to make Howard County better and how to grow Howard County in different ways.

And it resonated with me 'cause even though I was away for a long time, it's still home. So, I paid attention to the local level politics and then after that, he offered me a position as his deputy chief of staff. So I was like, this is great 'cause I can work problems that affect Howard County residents every single day. And this is part of me giving back to the community that helped me. So I did everything, not just business development and economic development. I did other things. So I was like doing things with

the Office of Veteran Affairs and Office of Disabilities and things that I didn't normally work on in my lifetime.

So I had to come up to speed on a lot of county issues that had nothing to do with business, which was also great. So I worked with the library system and I did things on some of the immigration issues we were having at the time. So a lot of issues that I, that was not my background, that I had to quickly come up to speed.

And it was good because it helped me it rounded me out in terms of what was going on at the local level in the county that I love. And so I did that for four years. And just getting, get exposed to everything from public safety, like I said, all the way to, veteran issues.

And then after that I was like, okay, so. I'm always like looking at myself in ways how else can I help the county, but also help me in terms of professional growth and learning. I felt like I had been exposed to a lot. Dr. Ball was very supportive of my career, but I was like, okay, so now I want to really hone in on what I, my background and what I'm naturally good at.

I was doing a lot of things in the government that naturally, I didn't know anything about, like I was point on agriculture and farming, which was great 'cause I met a lot of farmers and ag issues that I would never know. But that's not my background. Although they're businesses, so that's my background.

But I was like, okay, now I can hone in on what 20 years of experience can be. And I think I could be more of a benefit to the county in economic development. 'cause that's naturally my, what I've learned over the years. And so at the time, the previous CEO, he was retiring and I was like, Hey, I think I, it would be great for this position.

And Dr. Ball nominated me and the board voted and approved and here I am. And I think that being in this position, I'm using all the things that I learned throughout my life. And I think this is the first position where that's happened. 'cause, other positions. You use a part of what you've learned 'cause it's just a very niche kind of position.

But in this position, I have to not only know economic development and business, which I learned, in California and London. But I have to know the county, which I learned and its issues, even the, non-economic development ones, which I learned working for Dr. Ball the first four years.

So I learned all those issues. And then you also kind of gotta know, the different parts of government that can help you in this position. So I've already knew all the directors of the head of licensing and permitting, the head of planning and zoning so that when you have a business issue that touches those things, I can just call them, they already know me.

I don't have to come up to speed on all that stuff. So you have somebody that's already tied to government operations. And so I feel like those three things has really helped me in this position and I've tried to use that as an anchor to to get our strategic plan implemented.

Linda Ostovitz: So all that experience set you up and had you totally prepared to step into the role of CEO of the Economic Development Authority.

Jennifer Jones: I don't wanna say totally prepared, but it gave good foundation.

Linda Ostovitz: You know what? That's a good point too, because I know you describe yourself as a lifelong learner. You're always thirsty for learning something new. We all do that and we all should be like that.

But you stepped in with such a strong background. You also spent, before we dig into economic development a little bit more, you also spent some time in the political arena though in connection with Dr. Ball's campaigns,

Jennifer Jones: That's right. Yeah, so when I was doing the consulting, like I said, he was running for county executive. I didn't know who he was. I just heard about his platform and I was like, I really like his platform. And he had like good points on, education, the economy, the environment and I just started seeing him in events different places and would talk to his campaign manager about different things.

And then, and I know got to know that team. And then the campaign manager asked me to be his field director, which is basically the person that's like responsible for, the strategy about where you should knock, where you should phone call, which precincts you should focus on.

Which neighborhoods you need to like work on which neighborhoods like you just, and then basically all that leading up to the election where you have to get a ton people out to vote, right? So you know where your base is and you know where your people are. So I had never done that before, I feel like once again, that is also another position where I felt like I just pulled on all my experiences. That's the other position where it's okay, everything that I've learned before, this is the same thing. It's just in politics. So numbers analysis, that's the engineering part. Analyzing numbers communicating with people at the door, communicating with people in general, but in a bit, community events, all of that just is the, it's the same skills.

It's just in a different position. So I think it came, like it was like a natural position for me. There were hard parts to it that I had to learn and everything, but it was a natural position for me because it's the same kind of thing that like engineering and law taught me.

So I just pulled on the same skillset and then since he, won the election and then he offered me a position. So I felt like that was great and I didn't expect that either. 'Cause it was my first time and I know when I took that position too, several people were like who's Jennifer Jones?

Like, why? Because most people grab folks from the state or people that have been in that political arena for a while, known names. And the campaign manager didn't do that. She just was like, Hey, I think you know, you would be good for that. And Dr. Ball signed off. But I think she saw that it might've been like a she also said, I think this is a natural fit for you.

We had been at other events together and things like that, I had asked questions and done a bunch of things and she's like, okay, so this is somebody that we need is very analytical and breaks down numbers and can deploy people where we need to go to get people out to vote.

Yeah but I had never done that, and then like I said, that led me into the deputy chief of staff position and then. Once I was there, deputy chief of staff, I think you two years in or a year and a half in or something like that. Two years in. I then became the Chief Strategy Officer.

Linda Ostovitz: I was going to ask you about that. But before we jump into the Chief Strategy officer and what that involved I'm just picturing almost this progression of Jennifer Jones who have found this terrific educational background. And in the political arena, my perception is you are knocking on doors and getting to know the people,

Jennifer Jones: That's correct.

Linda Ostovitz: the people and building this network of who you know, because of what you were doing.

And then you rise to the level of deputy chief of staff. And my understanding is that in that role, you had various departments reporting to you.

Jennifer Jones: That's correct.

Linda Ostovitz: And so you're not only getting to know the people who run those, but the system, if you will, the county move. And now in economic development, you used all of that to know who to reach out to to make something happen. To move all the blocks out of the way so that something can go forward or to make navigating the system easier so it's something can go forward.

And that's something is you bringing a new business to the county or helping one that's already here with something that they need to help 'em grow.

Jennifer Jones: Right. And I love doing this. I love working with businesses, helping them grow. And like I said, this position is a little different 'cause the other one was a political pointed position with, this one's non-political. So I don't, get into any of that stuff.

It's just like you're a business in Howard County, I wanna help you grow or you wanna come to Howard County for a certain reason, I help you get there. But you're right. When you make phone calls or go to community meetings or knock on doors and you're talking to somebody one-on-one and they're firing questions at you about different things and you kind of come up with the answer or figure out an answer.

If you don't know the answer, figure it out and come back to them. That like really gives you a good foundation for talking to business owners because they're just like, they wanna succeed here. They're raising their families on their businesses. They wanna know different things.

And I get the same type of thing. I'm very comfortable now talking with people talking about different resources. If they're upset with something in the county, triaging that to right or solving the problem. So it does set you up for a lot of conversation.

And honestly it's strange 'cause I am an introvert. Anybody that knows me, I am a introvert. I usually, it's just weird. But I don't feel like I'm odd at all talking to business owners or knocking on doors. I don't know what that means, but I.

Yeah. Yeah, people were surprised. So yeah, I loved it. I love it now. I love this job.

Linda Ostovitz: Well, there's probably somebody who is smart enough to analyze you and put all that in a box. What it means is you're a delight to talk to and you're doing a great job, and you've been building your blocks to be such a huge success at this for all of your career. So you had mentioned that you were the chief strategy officer. Sounds like it added another layer to your capabilities and ability to use your background. So what did you do as the chief strategy Officer?

Jennifer Jones: So a lot of when you work for the county or work in government or in pretty much a lot of jobs, a lot of what you do is execution and implementation, right? So you get a project, you get some milestones and then you execute on it. And that's a good skill to have.

You have to be able to take something that somebody hands to you and execute quickly, which I feel like I know how to do that. I've done that before. But sometimes, I think as you move up the ladder and as you grow in your career, you really need to zoom out and come up with strategy and come up with different ideas.

And that takes a lot of it's a different skillset, it's a different way your brain works than just taking something and executing on it. And I feel like a lot of the chief strategy officer position is just basically looking at what we're currently doing, what we're currently doing across the agencies and looking at, okay, so where are the gaps?

What else could we be doing? How could we be optimizing this? Is there anything else that we're missing? , You're doing all these things all the time. You're completing these projects, you're doing things for the residents, but there's always something that you could be doing better or something that's not being addressed.

So stepping back and saying, okay, looking at the whole portfolio, what else could we be doing? What is a project that we be working on? What can we be doing to make Howard County an even better place? And so that sometimes takes, you gotta switch your brain. It is a different switch in your brain.

And so I felt like that particular thing called on more of my law and MBA more than the engineering. 'Cause engineering is more of you start from a big like an inverted triangle. You start, from the, like the base, the big, and you hone down into something like really, a tiny point where you're solving the problem, right?

And the other thing is like the regular standing triangle where you're trying to start with something like at a pinpoint, and then you're trying to expand up into something broad that's harder for some people, and it's a different skillset.

But the strategic strategy officer helped me do that. So I just basically worked with Dr. Ball to look at okay, we're doing these things in for instance for veterans. We had these programs going, we're doing these things for better known businesses. What are we hearing out there for the community?

What other initiatives should we be doing? And that's what I focused on. Basically just across the agencies. Does that make sense? So it's just, it was good for me to do that because like I said, it's a different switch in your brain and it basically was what I do all the time now. So it just, I have a great team here where I delegate things to, and they execute and implement and come up with great ideas too.

But I pretty much in this position, I would say 70% of the time, am focused on okay, we got this things going. Think the train is running down the track. What else am I missing? What else am I seeing? You have to constantly be looking on the horizon on this position. So that's the chief strategy officer position helped me with respect to this part of my job now. And that thing about that is your brain doesn't shut off. You're always thinking about what's next. You know what I mean? Like when you run your own business, you always gotta be thinking what's next? What's, not working.

It's like it doesn't ever shut off. Yeah. And I really love coming with new ideas. I have really great leadership team that helps with some of this stuff and they're very good. So , I feel like I can say, Hey, I think that we have some great loan programs, but what are we missing? What do we need to do? What have you heard from businesses? What loan programs have, we've been doing, what incentives aren't we, does the next county over do but we don't do and let's analyze some things and figure out who can come out with a new product.

Let's try to do that. So we do stuff like that. And I feel like you have to always be iterating and growing in this position. And so that's what we're doing. So like last year we rolled out a new flex line of credit program to compliment our other loan funding programs for businesses, which is great.

This year we also for our business development team, we really honed in on our international initiatives. And we went on two international trips. So we looked at like at the top of last year, what do we need to be doing and implement and going on and we did successful trip to the uk, Ireland, and Germany.

And then just past June we did one to Canada. Things like that where you always need to just be thinking about what's next and what will benefit businesses here that we currently aren't doing.

Linda Ostovitz: You just addressed some of it, but you know, from a mission, broad picture point of view, what does the Economic Development Authority do? What is your primary mission? I guess start with that.

Jennifer Jones: So by the primary mission is to, make sure that businesses have what they need. If they're here, make sure that they have, they need to grow and expand here in the county. So over business retention and expansion for the current businesses. And I would say that's a large majority because after COVID, businesses can generally be anywhere now and hire people.

So the fact that they're in Howard County is the, it's very important. They can move anywhere and still hire because a lot of people are hybrid and remote, right? So businesses don't have like jurisdictional lines like they used to. So that is important. Making sure businesses grow and thrive and then making sure that we attract new businesses to the county is important.

And also generally promoting Howard County is a great place to live, work, and grow. Howard County is like right in the middle of state, we're right in the middle of the Baltimore Washington corridor. We have a lot of strategic advantages. We have a great school system.

We have great parks. People come here 'cause they want their families to, have like green spaces and a great education. And I think that helping promote Howard County as business friendly and saying, Hey, not only do you come here for your kids, you can come here and start your business and support your family here, so on your business.

And that's our job to do that. And then fill in any other gaps, like if there's gaps with workforce development or any other thing. But I think that strengthening that business ecosystem and promoting Howard County are the two broad things that we do.

Linda Ostovitz: Well, that's a big job. How big the team that you run to help you accomplish that mission.

Jennifer Jones: I have 24 people on the team. And I think there are places that are a little bigger than us and a little smaller, but that's like around 24, 25 people. Yeah. And the teams are broken out into, like I said, we have our business development team that they're the engine that goes out and talks to established businesses.

They boots on the ground, are visiting businesses all day, getting feedback about, different things. And then we have our innovation center, which is, we help startups. It's you come here, you can incubate with us, go through our programs, and then we make you stronger business and accelerate your growth.

And so we have that. And then we have our business finance team, which helps with loan programs and incentives. So funding programs, a line of credit that we talked about, a couple of our microloan program,

our catalyst loan fund that helps businesses grow. And we have that. And then we have our marketing team that market, Howard County and markets our services.

And does a lot of work with the county exec's office in terms of collaboration and marketing the county. Then we have a strategy team, and they basically focus on revitalization, redevelopment projects. I have a data person that focuses a lot of on research and data analytics.

A lot of the other agencies come up to us and say, Hey, we need data on this. Can you supply it? So we supply data to a lot of the government agencies on economics and businesses and also the community also. So that's basically how we're structured. And then each of those groups have a head of that business unit and that's my leadership team.

We meet weekly, the leadership team and we roll out strategies and things like that from there. And then I report to a board. Just so you know, so like I'm quasi-governmental, so like I said, I work a lot at the county exec's office and he funds us.

However we're quai governmental 'cause I have a board, a director, so I report to the chair and they work with me on the strategic planning and things like that.

Linda Ostovitz: It's interesting 'cause I had wondered, I guess when I first became aware of economic development. Is it a governmental agency or is it something else? And it really is something else.

More like a business than it does like the government. Right? But you interact so much with governmental, like agencies, departments, et cetera, to get anything done.

So when you came into your role, you succeeded a CEO would been in the role for a long time, 10 years, 12 years, something like

Jennifer Jones: Yeah, I think it was I wanna say 12 or 13 years. Yes.

Linda Ostovitz: Okay. And I, it is my perception anyway, that a lot of the people who worked in the economic development arena for the county, not for the county, for its board, had also been there for a long time.

What was it like stepping into a role that had been shaped by the individual who held that position. When you're Jennifer, you're not Larry Tweel. How do you go in there and make it your own and establish your own goals and make it all work?

Jennifer Jones: Oh yeah, I mean that, it's a good question. So you have to, take it, and this is the engineering piece of my brain. You gotta take it in bite-size pieces. 'cause if you come in and you're just like, I want everybody to know who I am, and you do it all at once, it's just, it's overwhelming and it's too much.

So what I did was , right before I came in, there had been a strategic plan that I was working on from the county exec side, with all the stakeholders for the EDA. So that plan had officially got approved, and it already had buy-in from everybody, from the stakeholders.

So what I did when I came in is I broke that strategic plan down, and then it's a very high level plan. And I put my own tactics and initiatives under those like six things that we said we were gonna do. Like the 30,000 foot goals that we set, we were gonna do in the plan.

Basically just worked the plan that everybody agreed on. So that first year you work the plan that everybody agrees on and then you align the organization to that plan. So I did some reworking of the organization. The alignment, like with the groups that I told you about, formed those official groups that, 'cause they weren't there, all of them were not there when I first got here.

Just be, it was business development in the innovation center, but those other groups were not there. So I formed those groups based on the strategic plan. And then just I literally at the top of the year, the fiscal year, I sat with each of the groups and we just broke down okay, for each of the goals under each of the priorities that we had, what are the milestones? When are we gonna have it done? What's going on? And we just used that throughout the year and everybody had agreed to the plan. So I just worked it and just implemented that, executed that. You know exactly the way we said we were going to. So that first year is like a baseline of okay, Jennifer can come in, take an organization and execute the way we agreed to with the plan.

Get everybody comfortable with that. So that's what I did on that first year I would say. And so it was a lot of internal work working with the staff. I hired some new staff and I think that after that first year, obviously we're doing a lot of the same things that Larry was doing.

Obviously the business retention expansion and things like that. But we did add some things and I think that first year everybody said, okay. She's gonna continue what worked well and then add some things that we added to the plan and we're comfortable that she can do that.

It's every job you gotta prove yourself, which I don't have a problem with. And so I did that and I think after that people were like, okay, she, we can see this is the direction this organization is going on and we're on board because the direction was like laid out in the plan and what we thought, what everybody said we needed to do post COVID.

And I think my team did a really great job of doing that. And I also during that first year, reintroduce myself to as in this new position to people that already knew me from the other position, right? Working with Dr. Ball. I met with the council members.

I talked to some of the members of the general Assembly that are here, that the political people I talked to, the businesses that already knew me, which was good because they were already familiar with me, but what that meant to be in this new role, what I'm gonna do. I already knew all the people, all the players, but I was just like reintroducing myself in this role and executing this plan that everybody agreed to.

That's basically how I just conquered that. I didn't think about it as oh, it's, this is horrible. I'm gonna have to come in here and let, make everybody like me because they, they like Larry. He was here for 13 years. Okay, that's fine. I'm, they like Larry, but they, I'm different and they can like me too.

I just I felt like that plan gave me a really good way to, to do that. Now I'm just adding onto it, like doing more regional stuff, working with greater Baltimore Committee and other regional organizations to promote the region. Helping, not just being isolated with Howard County, strengthening partnerships with people across in other counties. Like I work closely with some organizations, some economic organizations in Baltimore City, because it's a regional play. You can't really do everything on your own. I work closely with the other CEOs of the other economic development organizations on in the state.

We have a weekly call and so I do that. And I think like I said, through partnerships and having a great team. Being very clear and transparent about what the goals are for economic development. I think, people have pretty much, happy with what we're doing.

Linda Ostovitz: Using that plan was really brilliant. It was noncontroversial, and it wasn't about Larry either. It was the plan. So you start with something that's non-controversial and obviously build on top of that. How would you describe your management style, Jennifer?

Jennifer Jones: That's a good question. So I think my management style is pretty much to, like I said, I meet with my leadership team each week to set my expectations and goals and to get their feedback on things that are going on and any things that they wanna add to it. And my management style is, once we have the goals and it's transparent across the organization what everybody's supposed to do, I don't like to micromanage.

I like to be able to delegate and then check in and then iterate if need be. And I'm not the kind of leader that's okay, I wanna do this new thing. Then give me something in six weeks when it's all done. And then let me see it. I like to build the plane in the air. You have different types of personalities and some personalities are very perfectionist, right? Other types of folks, i'm like, I do not need it perfect, but I need constant iteration and building in the air. So I'm the person that will roll get something to like about 85%, roll it out, and then iterate while we're doing it. You can't wait all the time for 12 weeks for everybody to be perfect for something, you know what I mean?

Sometimes you need to get something moving. So I would say I am an agile leader, like I have high level goals and then I'm like, let's get moving now and then just continue building it in the air and get it rolled out.

I think you have to be like that because the things that are going on now, like at the federal level, at the state level, things are moving fast. You don't have the, luxury to wait around for five months to put something together to help businesses or to help the residents here when they're going through a lot that they're going through. Like if you're a federal worker or whatever, you better sometimes say, okay. Federal workers are getting laid off. We gotta put together a workshop.

Okay do we know what's going on right now? Call a couple people and let's get a date on the calendar and let's get a speaker. And let's do the first one and might not answer everybody's question, but at least we're put it out there and we get some mechanism for feedback from federal workers.

So we did that. So we usually have a business expo two times out of the year. This past spring we had one and that was like right around, the federal people were getting laid off and it was like three weeks out. And we had some, maybe three or four weeks out, and we had our business expo.

We were originally gonna be doing it as a general expo, and then we were like, we need to pivot this to make sure it targets federal workers. And if you are a federal worker and you wanna start a business. This is how you do it and get some speakers in here. So I was like, let's just do it. And people were saying, well, it's like we only have three weeks.

Well we can do it. We have to do something. So I'm that kinda leader and they know that about me now. So I'd rather have something that's like 85%, but we get it out quicker and help people than have it perfect and wait, forever.

Linda Ostovitz: I love that. Build it in the air. You gotta do something and you learn so much building it in the air, right? You get the benefit of other people's thoughts. One of your brand new things that's been unrolled this year is the Cyber Howard Accelerator program. What is the Cyber Howard Accelerator program that you have created?

Jennifer Jones: Yeah the Cyber Howard Accelerator program is a program geared towards cyber companies that have products and their product ready to get customers with. But a lot of times with you

have a product, you think it's ready and it might not be ready to the point where a customer can get it and get what they need out of it.

So the Cyber Howard Accelerator is there to market test it, get feedback from industry experts, talk to people in the field about your product and hone it and accelerate its optimization and its growth so that at the end of the 12 weeks you're really ready to pitch your product, go to investors, things like that.

We had a cohort that just graduated a couple weeks ago. It was eight companies, and then we have another cohort coming up in September. And this past cohort was really great. One company went through the accelerator and they honed their product and they got acquired. So it was a great win.

Yeah, so it was great. One other one actually they worked with us on the European delegation trip that I talked about, and they got a JV partner out there. It's just basically you know, when you're an entrepreneur it's a lonely thing.

You could think your product is the greatest thing in the world and it could be, but it could always be tested and making sure it's really market ready. And so just challenging these companies and saying, Hey, tweak this, do this. And then it gets you ready for investment also.

'cause you might be looking for equity investor or things like that. So that's basically what it is, just to accelerate growth and make sure your products is where it needs to be when it hits the market.

Linda Ostovitz: Well, congratulations on that. And the first class just graduated that last week. We were talking on the phone and you, your next thing to do was to go to a graduation, right? Yeah.

Jennifer Jones: That was it.

Linda Ostovitz: That's great. So the last thing I wanna ask you about, Jennifer, is what's next for economic development in Howard County? What should we look for?

Jennifer Jones: Yeah, I think that this is really a good place for economic development and where we are now because, there are a lot of things going on at the state level and the federal level that I lead to where I feel like the only way to grow the state of Maryland and to grow the counties in Maryland is through economic development and economic growth.

We know we're facing a budget challenge, at the state level. You know, people are getting laid off at the federal level and I think a lot of people, obviously you need to tighten your belt within that situation and cut back on economic development programs because you're saving, like short term budget wise, budget things.

But I think the only way to fight your way out of something like this is through economic development. So you might need to spend money on certain programs, but long term it gets you out of stagnation. It gets you out of negative growth. And I think that, that's where we are now. I think that, me and all the other economic development heads of the state really need to, meet look at our budgets and talk with our county executives and our mayors and the state and really put together, a message that, Maryland is here for growth, Maryland is business friendly and this is how you do it. And it's a grassroots type thing. You gotta do it from the local level up. And I don't think you can really do it from the state down. And I think this is a great time in terms of that for economic development.

In terms of really honing in and expanding our programs, keeping the programs that we have. We need to do all of that. We need to have all the tools in the toolbox to get us out of a negative growth trend that we

have in the state. And I think, the governor's talked about that too, how he, it should be a business friendly state.

He wants to encourage certain lighthouse sectors. And I think that we might need to spend a little money now to reap the benefits later. So I know that might be controversial because a lot of times people say we're in a deficit. Where are we gonna get the money from and what's going on?

And we need to cut back on these programs, but. I honestly think that if you cut back on economic development programs, yes you'll balance the budget now, but in 10 years, 20 years from now, I don't think it's good for the state of Maryland.

Linda Ostovitz: Well in the future, right? Like for many. Well, Jennifer, thank you so much for joining me today. It's interesting to me how in your mind even you compartmentalize your skills. And here's where I use this and here's where I use that, but my goodness, when you put 'em all together, you are a power house.

We are so lucky in Howard County to have you driving the economic development engine. So thank you for that. I appreciate it. I'm a Howard County resident and have been all my life basically like we discussed, so thank you for doing the good work that you do. Please keep it up. And again, thank you so much for joining us today.

Jennifer Jones: Thank you for having me. It's great to see you.

Linda Ostovitz: My pleasure.