



TechTown
DETROIT

MEDA 2026 · Breakout Session

The Next Step Ahead

What we learned building, killing, and licensing small-business programs — and what it actually means for your EDO Monday morning.

SPEAKER

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ROLE

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AFFILIATION

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DATE

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WHO'S TALKING TO YOU

Who's Talking To You



Wayne State-Anchored: Operating from inside the neighborhood, not from a remote policy office or academic tower.



9,000+ Businesses Supported: Over 15 years of continuous, on-the-ground support through economic booms and crises.



\$500M+ Capital Raised: Our clients have raised over \$500 million to start and grow their businesses.



12+ Years Training EDOs: Helping economic development organizations adapt our tools nationwide.

"This session is a field report of what worked and what broke — not a sales pitch."



Here's What You'll Get Today

45 Min Session · 15 Min Q&A



PART 01

The Problem

What is actually showing up in your inbox from small businesses, Main Streets, and board chairs right now. We examine the real math on your desk.



PART 02

What We Tried

An honest look at our experiments. What worked, what failed, what we ruthlessly killed, and what we spun out into sustainable models.



PART 03

What You Can Steal

Our core rules of thumb travel well. The proven playbooks and tools are ready for your EDO to license and deploy Monday morning.

Monday Morning Inboxes

The 3 Inboxes

If you run an EDO, a chamber, or a municipal Econ Dev Department in Michigan, some version of these three pleas land on your desk every single week:

INBOX 1: THE RETAILER (14 MO. IN)

"The lease is eating us alive."

"I didn't understand the percentage-rent clause or CAM fees when I signed. Now sales are slower than projected."

Wants: A way out.
Needed: To know before signing.

INBOX 2: GROWING SERVICE FIRM

"I'm drowning in admin."

"I have 7 employees. I need a bookkeeper, HR, and a lawyer, but can't afford full-time salaries."

Wants: Warm introductions.
Reality: You lack a vetted network.

INBOX 3: YOUR BOARD CHAIR

"Should we launch an incubator?"

"The city council wants innovation. What new headline program are we announcing this fiscal year?"

Wants: A headline.
Doesn't want: A program that dies.

The Math on Your Desk

Michigan Economic Reality

99.6%

of MI employers are small businesses,
employing 47.7% of the private workforce.

SBA Office of Advocacy, 2025

1,344

Net new MI establishments last year
(25,756 opened, 24,412 closed).
High churn hides growth.

SBA / BLS BED, 2024

65.3%

of U.S. businesses close within 10 years.
Nearly two-thirds fail to survive a decade.

BLS TED, January 2024

47%

of MI small employers turn a consistent profit,
as rising costs continue to hurt the majority.

Fed Credit Survey, 2024

56%

of MI local governments call their fiscal health
"good" — down sharply from 63% in 2023.

U-M Public Policy Survey, 2025

1 in 5

EDOs run on under \$500K a year. Most operate
with a lean staff of 5 people or fewer.

IEDC State of the Field, 2025

The 20-Year Framework

The Core Framework

We didn't rely on heroic budgets or fleeting fads. We stayed relevant by executing three intentional, boring, and repeatable rules of thumb:



PILLAR 01

Fill The Gaps Nobody Covers

Talk to the businesses that failed, not just the ones pitching you. Ask what was missing in the ecosystem when the lease was signed.



PILLAR 02

Partner — Don't Duplicate

If someone else is already doing it well, bring them to your table. Don't waste finite budget trying to out-build a national player.



PILLAR 03

Try. Stop. Start Again.

Set a hard kill date before your launch date. Ruthlessly sunset what isn't hitting metrics before the program becomes your identity.

PILLAR ONE

Fill the Gaps Nobody Covers

The winning question isn't "what's hot in economic development?"
It's "what is everyone complaining about that nobody is building for?"

Don't Just Survey. Listen.

Discovery Process

Surveys only tell you what people want to say out loud. These four conversations reveal where your ecosystem is actually broken:

1. Talk to Founders Who Failed

The operators who closed have the sharpest map of where community support broke. But remember it's just ONE datapoint.

2. Talk to Businesses Doing the Work

That delta is your true program map. Where startup funding lands but businesses still die a year later, you have immediate work to do.

3. Ask Your Service Providers and other EDO's

What do you offer? Who is your ideal client? What do you refuse to touch? When should I refer? Their "no" list is your "yes" list.

Map it Out!

This helps identify gaps and overlaps. Show your funders and other stakeholders!

Case Study 1: Retail Gap

Pillar 01 In Action

WHAT WE NOTICED

Everyone built for tech. Nobody built for Main Street.

Brick-and-mortar retail is a \$4T+ engine and the beating heart of every downtown in this room. But almost every accelerator in Michigan was designed for tech startups or high-growth service firms.

A baker opening on Woodward — or your Main Street — walked in with a basic plan and walked out into a brutal lease market they didn't understand.

58.3%

10-year closure rate for retail — the highest failure rate of any major industry. They don't fail on the product idea; they fail on lease terms and inventory turns.



Retail Boot Camp (RBC)

Licensable Playbook

A 12-week intensive designed specifically for *post-transaction* retailers — operators who signed a lease and now need to survive it. Built by people who have opened stores, not studied them.

Program Parameter	RBC Model
Format & Length	12 Weeks · Cohort Intensive
Acceptance	Selective (Pre-qualified)
Entrepreneur Fee	\$499 (Skin in the game)
Track Record	17 Cohorts Completed
💡 Why \$499 matters: Small enough to be accessible, large enough that only serious operators show up.	

1. Lease Economics

Percentage rent, CAM, tenant improvements, and why "free rent" isn't free.

2. Inventory & Cash Conversion

Open-to-buy, sell-through. Why "profitable" and "out of cash" can both be true.

3. Visual Merchandising

Sight-lines, fixtures, the first ten feet, and making windows your best hire.

PILLAR TWO

Partner — Don't Duplicate

Before we build anything from scratch, we run it through a 3-question filter. If someone else is already doing it well, we pick up the phone and partner.



3 Questions Before Building

Lean Grid

QUESTION 01

Is there actually a gap?

Not "would this be nice to have." Is there a verified, underserved segment actively demanding this?

QUESTION 02

Can we run it at breakeven?

If it requires a permanent line item in a foundation grant budget, it's a program with an inevitable expiration date.

QUESTION 03

Is anyone doing this already?

If yes → call them and partner.

If no → and it is mission-aligned → we build.

The Temptation

"We should launch our own accelerator." Every EDO in Michigan is asked this. Council wants a headline. The board wants 'innovation.'

You have 2 staff and no curriculum. You don't need a new program. You need a rigorous filter for the request.

We Don't Out-Goldman Goldman

National Partner
· Local Operator

Goldman Sachs *10,000 Small Businesses* is a world-class national program. We would need a decade and a foundation-sized budget to rebuild that from scratch. So we didn't. We became the Detroit operator.

WHAT GOLDMAN BRINGS

National Scale & Halo

- Tested, world-class growth curriculum
- Massive national capital and alumni network
- National brand credibility and prestige
- Dedicated program funding and tools

WHAT TECHTOWN BRINGS

Local Trust & Execution

- Curated local cohort recruiting
- On-the-ground coaching and facilitation
- Deep community trust and credibility
- Direct integration into local supply chains

The EDO Unlock: National players can't run nationwide alone — they partner locally, city by city. That is an opening for your community, not a competitor.

Case Study 3: Ask An Expert

The \$0 Line-Item Solution

THE REPLICABLE PLAYBOOK

**They don't need a class.
They need an hour with a lawyer.**

Our most common ask isn't training. It's a warm intro to a specialist — an IP attorney, a retail CPA, or a fractional CFO. Market rate for a fractional CFO is **\$5K-\$7.5K/month**.

No EDO can afford to staff that panel. So we built a curated Professional Services Network (PSN) where top local firms donate fixed 1:1 consultation hours.

Why Firms Show Up: It's a pipeline of pre-qualified, local future clients. It is their marketing budget disguised as civic goodwill. Every chamber can run this.



PILLAR THREE

Try. Stop. Start Again.

Killing a program is the most underrated skill in economic development.
Starting one is the second most.

Set Kill Dates Early

Pillar 03 Guardrails

THE UNBREAKABLE RULE

18-Month Evaluation

If we can't state clearly what success looks like at 18 months, we don't start. If we launch and don't hit the numbers, we stop — before the program becomes an excuse to keep staffing the program.



Pilot Micro-Scale First

Test on exactly 1 cohort, 1 neighborhood, 1 industry vertical.
If it doesn't succeed in the smallest possible test, never scale it.



Define "Yes" in Writing

Two metrics and one narrative story. Written down and signed by whoever holds the budget before announcing to the public.



Announce Sunset Proudly

Honesty builds credibility. Boards and funders deeply trust an organization willing to say: "We tried, it didn't work, here is what's next."

Spinning Out Ops+

THE UNSEXY REALITY

**Founders often don't quit on vision.
They quit on back office.**

We listened to persistent founder complaints: *"I can sell and build, but I can't do payroll, HR, benefits, and bookkeeping every week without losing my weekend."*

So, we launched **TechTown Ops+** — shared back-office services delivered to small businesses. It grew so rapidly that we spun it out into its own separate entity with its own P&L.

EDO Lesson: You help businesses start. Practice what you preach and start your own. Earned revenue is important.

When A Program Becomes A Business

BRIEF 01

Priced Like a Service

Real, predictable fees. Customers who buy value, not applicants who apply for grants.

BRIEF 02

Funded Like a Business

Its own balance sheet, its own investment capital, and its own commercial accountability.

BRIEF 03

Aligned Like a Nonprofit

Small businesses first. Community impact first. That core mission remains non-negotiable.

What Works on Monday

Takeaways For Your EDO

Rule #	Core EDO Principle	What It Means For Your Team Monday
01	Listen for repeat complaints	This isn't about one offs. It's about programmatic solutions.
02	Partner with those doing best practices	National players want a credible local operator. You are one. Don't build what you can bring to your table.
03	Set success metrics and kill dates before launch	Write down what success looks like at 18 months. If you aren't hitting it, sunset proudly and reallocate budget.
04	Charge a real fee when you can	Equity of effort matters. Even a modest fee (\$499) filters for serious operators with real skin in the game.
05	License over building	The cheapest, highest-impact headline is always someone else's proven playbook executed well in your town.

License Our Playbooks

Proven Playbooks For Your Town

Every problem discussed today is already packaged into a battle-tested playbook. We offer our curriculum, facilitator guides, and recruiting templates to Michigan EDOs:

PLAYBOOK 01

Retail Boot Camp

Full 12-week curriculum, instructor decks, open-to-buy financial models, and student workbooks ready to deploy.

✓ Available for EDO Licensing

PLAYBOOK 02

Ask An Expert (PSN)

Firm recruiting templates, onboarding agreements, scheduling workflows, and legal disclaimers for 1:1 network.

✓ Access to our Network

PLAYBOOK 03

TechTown Ops+

Direct access for your local businesses to our shared HR, payroll, benefits, and bookkeeping infrastructure.

✓ Partner Referral Model



OPEN FLOOR · 15 MINUTES

What's Staring at You?

Odds are we have either built it, killed it, or partnered on it.
Let's talk about what your community needs on Monday morning.

Leave Your Business Card:

We will follow up with full overview packets, sample curriculum modules, and licensing information for your organization.



Ned Staebler



TechTown Detroit / Wayne State



techtowndetroit.org