

Looking beyond just saving jobs

Colin Read: Everybody's Business

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— Does anybody know where civility goes when the economy threatens our homes and our jobs?

The "not me" debate is raging. The recession is painful, and we all feel the brunt. It is entirely human to try to preserve jobs in times like these.

Yet, we continue to ask the wrong question. Instead of asking how we can protect our individual interests and preserve our jobs, we should be asking how we can work together to forge a more perfect economy. It won't be easy, but it will be worthwhile.

This is no time for divisive opportunism. Ideology distracts us from the real need to find a solution that sows the seeds for greater productivity. Meanwhile, special interests are paralyzing creativity and Congress both. I am sure that provisions for family planning, tax breaks for movie investors, and honey-bee production in the original American Recovery and Reinvestment Act are all very good initiatives. However, job creation must be the priority. In the words of Winston Churchill, this is the time for blood, toil, tears and sweat. This is not the time to slip a pet project or tax cut through Congress.

We can't expect much help from the creative people on Wall Street. Those who profited are long gone, and yet Wall Street is still the biggest recipient of recovery funds — by far.

Other nations can't bail us out either. We want them to buy our products, but we proposed new legislation that prevents us buying theirs. Such "beggar thy neighbor" Smoot-Hawley policies in the Great Depression, while appealing on the surface, bred retaliation at another time when global economic cooperation was equally important.

We must shift the debate from the promotion of our individual interests or ideologies to the promotion of the interests shared by all. This is a time for common ground, not the common pursuit of self interest.

Unfortunately, we remain stuck in conventional, predictable and self-serving thinking. Workers argue against job cuts, educators argue for more education spending, governors want bailouts for states, and automakers tell us about the value of the auto industry. Wouldn't it be refreshing if each group offered up productivity and service improvements first, before demanding more spending or reduced cuts? Resources follow productivity, but productivity does not necessary result by throwing money at a problem. Indeed, productivity often falls with indiscriminate spending.

If we can produce more, we can expand the economic pie and afford everybody a bigger piece. If instead we artificially preserve unneeded jobs, we may prevent some from joining the unfortunate ranks of the unemployed. But if our solution does not create more production, we are just dividing a fixed pie more thinly. We are only spreading the burden and setting ourselves up for greater competitive disadvantage.

Too often, though, our fearful tendencies cause us to tinker around the edges. Minor cost reductions here or there, perhaps the purchase of fewer pencils and laptops, maybe attendance at fewer conferences, will only get us so far. In this global world where we compete with those who have neither laptops nor conferences, we need change that is more profound.

Consider, for example, the raging Municipal Lighting Department debate. Layoffs were proposed to reduce costs at a time when city residents and businesses contemplating shutdowns can ill-afford rate increases. We all can agree this is not a good time for rate increases, and we all would like to avoid layoffs. Unless we think outside the box, we can't have both, and we have not found much common ground.

We need a bold response in the face of fear. Let's be more imaginative. MLD and others string cable and provide utilities. Why do we constrain their work to arbitrary boundaries drawn on maps, arbitrary job classifications, or arbitrary silos of competitors. Let us use this as an opportunity to contain costs while expanding services through a reinvention of government and industry alike.

Ultimately, if the careful deployment of human resources means we must sometimes trim our human resources to remain viable, competitive, or innovative, so be it. Indeed, if our focus had always been on competitiveness, we would not be in this mess in the first place. It took a crisis to demonstrate that no entity can afford to be uncompetitive any longer.

Let us use this crisis to create a new work ethic.

Now is the time to be entrepreneurial.

Now is the time to work smarter and harder to produce that better mousetrap people would be willing to buy.

Now is the time to find ways to expand our capacity and to take on more customers, patients and students in clever and novel ways that may even enhance, rather than diminish, quality.

Now is the time to embrace change.

What is holding us back? First, none of us want to change until we have to. Rather than be willing to reinvent what we have always done, some see change as threatening their power base and economic cocoon. They would rather protect what they have created, even if it means ruin for others.

Some also like to criticize a plan without offering up a serious solution. To be a critic is too easy. We cannot afford disingenuity.

Finally, some say we must commit to a plan because to do nothing means disaster. For example, Congress was pressured by Wall Street to pass the Paulson plan in October under the threat that failure to do so would mean economic ruin. This is flawed logic. While failure to address the problem will lead to disaster, embracing a bad plan can create even more problems.

Yes, we have to do something. And this something must promote our common good. We need to strip off the special interests and the ideology and develop a plan that creates new jobs and promotes our global competitiveness. If a plan is designed to make everybody comfortable, it will only make the problem worse. And if a plan makes us all work harder, it can't help but succeed. This I guarantee.

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