



Paying the Tab



The U.S. economy has been out of kilter for some time. As a nation, we've been behaving irresponsibly—both individually and collectively. As consumers, we've spent and borrowed to the point where our houses are worth less than our debt. Despite the obvious crises looming with issues such as Medicare, Social Security, the rising cost of healthcare, etc., we've put off the difficult issues time and again. "Just put it on my tab," we've been telling the bartender. But instead of paying the bill, both Republican and Democratic administrations have been sneaking out the back door and leaving the tab for their successors. But it's not their successors I'm worried about, it's ours—our children and grandchildren are the ones who will be stuck with the bill.

On top of all that, the economy went kerflooey, and we've had to face some real economic emergencies. As a result, a lot of attention has been paid to the financial sector. Had to bail out all those bankers, mortgage resellers and so on. Then the auto industry collapsed after years of everyone saying it was coming. Had to bail them out too.

Most everyone agrees that our government had to do something to protect our economy and our nation from catastrophe. When the building is on fire, you have to put out the flames. So we loaded up our industrial strength fire extinguisher with lots of economic stimulus money and aimed for the hot spots.

But those other problems—those looming crises—are still out there. After the current fires are put out, how much longer will the building support its own weight?

Even worse, we face crises besides those already mentioned that may not be as visible or newsworthy, but which are just as important to the long-term health of America. With two out of the Big Three going through bankruptcy, America's biggest manufacturing industry has gotten a lot of attention. But what about the rest of American manufacturing, which is quietly suffering? What about the smaller companies and smaller industries whose problems are not so collectively large nor so easily focused on? The small- to mid-size American manufacturer also needs help.

If you work in one of these smaller industries or in one of these smaller companies, you already know that the work you do is a terribly important—even critical—part of our economy. You provide America with jobs. You drive invention and progress. You create wealth. You also provide America with the ability to make things under our own control and within our own borders.

And you already know that the government probably isn't going to notice you. No red, white and blue-caped hero is going to swoop in to save the day with a stimulus check or the tax credits.

So what should you do?

In the past, I've talked about using these economic down times to search for ways to improve your company, looking at lean principles

and similar tools and ideologies to minimize waste, increase productivity and improve the bottom line. Continuous improvement has to be continuous, even in the worst of times.

While you may not be in a position to compete for the Shingo Award (given to organizations best exemplifying lean principles), now is the perfect time to look at ways you can seize the crisis and turn it into an opportunity to reanalyze all facets of your business.

Each of our companies has key employees with knowledge and experience that's critical to our success. These are the people no company can afford to lose, no matter what the economic situation. Although they may not be busy today, they're definitely going to be needed when things turn around.

If you're the boss, don't be tempted to let these valuable resources go. Instead, use this opportunity to redirect their energies. Use their knowledge and experience to participate in or lead the teams that will research, reanalyze and redirect every aspect of how your business operates, how information is exchanged and how material flows through your company.

If you're one of those knowledgeable and experienced employees, now is the time to step up and prove your worth. Your boss isn't going to figure this out. You are. You know your job. You have the ideas about how to do things faster, more efficiently and more economically. Technology has changed, communication has changed, machines have changed, etc. How can you change to take advantage of all these new opportunities?

There are doubtless many ways you can improve your operations that you haven't yet explored.

But one thing is certain. It doesn't look like your Uncle Sam is going to bail you out. You're going to have to do it yourself.

Sincerely,

Michael Goldstein
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 Publisher & Editor-in-Chief