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LIFELONG LEARNING—THE LINCHPIN OF HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

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A long-used axiom in the personnel or human resource business is that “no company can rise above the quality of its people.” This is especially true in the long term and applies to any organization, including the United States of America. The debate, of course, will always center on: 1) what constitutes quality in the people, and 2) how do you train, educate or otherwise prepare the people for quality work, citizenship and lives?

The history of the “quality-of-preparation” debate about what our citizens receive in the public schools is as old as our system of schooling itself. But the modern era of this debate began in the 1950s with the widely-known “Sputnik” episode, and reemerged in 1983 following the release of the *A Nation at Risk* report. Since that time, presidents, governors, business leaders, educators and the citizenry at large have assailed our system of schooling for not meeting its challenge of preparing generations of workers, learners and societal members.

While the debate over quality preparation through schooling has ranged from increased math and science to open classrooms, teacher-proof curricula, back-to-basics, cooperative learning, and outcomes and inputs, it is only recently that a futures perspective and lifelong learning have earned their places in the discussion. Driven partly by the business community, and inspired and arguably embarrassed by the nano-speed of information technology growth, a new imperative has emerged in the public schooling debate—the concept of *lifelong learning*.

One only need look at the statistics offered by professional demographers to see what the key will be to future success and prosperity. Statistics such as:

1. The half-life of an engineer’s knowledge today is only five years. In ten years, 90 percent of what engineers know will be accessible by computer.
2. Up to 4 percent of the labor force will be in job training programs at any moment in the 1990s.
3. Schools will need to be able to train both children and adults around the clock. The academic day will stretch to seven hours

for children, while adults will work a thirty-two-hour week, preparing for their next job in the remaining time.

The continuation of learning throughout life is not new. It is the very reason the word “commencement” was chosen to represent graduation from schools or programs—that persons would be moving forward, that this was merely the beginning. While many a commencement speaker has used that concept for her or his speech, it is an attitude that does not permeate the educational industry through action. There is seldom noted a lifelong aspect to any particular learning activity, module, class or course. And true communications along the continuum of formal education—from preschool, to mandatory schooling ages, to training or college institutions, and then into business and industry—has been virtually nonexistent.

What has begun to make a difference is the way in which business and industry, and in some cases even government, has reorganized itself for the times. Business is asking for a different kind of worker and for different kinds of professionals for 1990s kinds of companies. Business consultant and Fortune 500 lecturer Tom Peter’s new book, sub-titled *Crazy Times Call for Crazy Organizations*, chronicles how the business community must organize itself for modern competitiveness. Much of Peter’s message translates to people and how they must be willing to learn, work, live and be different than in our industrial and immediate post-industrial periods in America.

The implications for schooling are numerous and profound. They affect the curriculum, the structure of schooling itself, and even call for changes in the staffing and teachers of our schools. Yet many of the changes or reforms relating to the lifelong aspect are attitudinal. Students must see every day that what they are doing has some relevance. They must also see and learn every hour of every day that what they are doing is not something that is packaged in 180-day increments, but rather will be the fiber of their success in life. They must learn that one does not get “out of” the third grade or “out of” high school, but rather that the schooling has merely been the initial major player in their preparation for the future, and must be traded for another major player at “commencement.” This new player may be a college, university or technical school. It may be a corporate or government internship or training program, but even it will not be a final shot. It, too, will be a “commencement,” perhaps even into individualized learning and development for intrinsic reasons, but the formal cycle will continue, regardless of the job or profession held.

For any lifelong benefits to be gained, the curriculum of schooling must move forward with a futures perspective. The elementary curriculum must be foundationally advanced of the junior high curriculum, which is in turn foundationally advanced of the high school curriculum, because the high schoolers will be the first to graduate and their needs are more immediate to the current year. The elementary students’ needs are relevant to the year of their graduation, and

must be “pro-rated” in advance to that time. For example, we cannot spend hours and years teaching cursive writing while every form says, “please print,” and students check out laptop computers like band instruments by the time they reach high school in eight to ten years. It is curricular time lost, community money wasted, and irrelevance ingrained into the students.

Students must be taught the so-called basics, but must also learn the new basics for a modern era. New basics such as “technological literacy,” are no longer options in American schools. Computers aside, one must be technologically literate to use modern pay telephones, banking ATM machines, voice mail and a myriad other tools of society. Learning to use these technologies as a new “literacy” from elementary school onward will instill the idea that they, as language, will always be changing, and that one does not really “learn” technologies at all but rather learns how to learn them.

Beyond the curriculum, the very structure of schooling must be modified to reflect a lifelong learning imperative and environment. The message of the importance of learning cannot be drilled into young people during an 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. school day and then be followed with a locked library and a ten-minute computer lab following the last class period. If a philosophy or attitude of lifelong learning is to be instilled into the schools, it must also be instilled into the community through the school’s modeling. The school must work to become the academic and intellectual center of the community. It must take on a role of openness and, to a fault, be *invitational* to all learning-centered activities in the community. Partnerships and bridges must be sought out and established with other educational institutions, the business community, the civic and governmental community and all other publics. Educational plans that tout, allow, and cause lifelong learning opportunities must become the standard. In short, the school will become more of a concept and less of just a building where children meet nine months of the year.

In America’s history one of the reasons for our success has been the quality of our people. In this century, we began with 85 percent of our workers in agriculture, and they were better than any nation’s competitors. During our industrial period and up to the early 1950s, production accounted for 73 percent of our workers, and they were better than other nation’s competitors. Today, less than 3 percent of our workers are in agriculture, only 15 percent are in production or manufacturing, and two-thirds are in the “services sector,” with *knowledge* as our most important product. We are truly in an information age with constant knowledge explosions. And the information age rule fast being learned is that being uninformed or out-of-date is a luxury we cannot afford. As we approach the turn of the century, learning, and the speed by which one learns, will not be just the competitive edge, but will determine who gets to play and who stays home.

Our charge as educators is to provide the vision and the leadership to fashion our current systems of disconnected schooling organizations into systems of, and about, learning through the continuum of life. These systems must be mobile, spontaneous, responsive and connected and intertwined throughout entire communities. For if America is going to continue to prosper and be globally competitive, it will again be through the development of its human capital—its people. And the degree to which *lifelong learning* anchors this human capital development—serves as the “linchpin” of the educational system—will determine if America is prepared to play or will have to stay at home.

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