

What happens if we turn our educational system into a supply chain of workers to fit our jobs, a place to manufacture workforce competent doers, but not critical thinkers? Company President and former Chair of the Green Bay Chamber of Commerce examines the shortsightedness of business leaders and politicians who attack our K-12 and university systems.

GREEN BAY - Having been in business my whole career, I found most business people to have relatively good intentions. Obviously, there are the bad actors, but the same can be said for any sector in our community.

However, I find that most business people abdicate their voices to organizations like the Chambers of Commerce and the Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce when it comes to issues of substance, like education. That is not only unfortunate, but it is done at their peril. When it comes to education, the sustainability of their business future and the future of the communities they serve is at stake if they do not get it right.

I know a bit about what I speak as I was Chair of the Green Bay Chamber of Commerce in 2003. I chaired the Bay Area Workforce Development Board for 8 years, the Employers Workforce Development Network for over 4 years, the Wisconsin Workforce Development Association for about 2 years, and the Wisconsin Council on Workforce Investment for about 4 years.

One of the things that was very clear to me not only as a company president, but also as one deeply immersed in the challenges of our economy was that we have an education system that is only somewhat designed to give the workforce competent “doers”, but was somewhat challenged in creating quality “thinkers”.

It is not that the graduates of our technical colleges and universities didn’t go in with a desire to learn and explore, it is that the system is no longer designed to generate quality thinkers, but

rather doers with various levels of quality.

In some cases, the university system really made an error when they made the student the customer, as that resulted in some students with high debt and somewhat worthless degrees (but I digress as this is for another day). In other words, we have designed a system that is intended to feed the workforce needs of employers rather than the various needs of the both the employer, the community, and the environment which supports both.

And, because our government leaders continuously attack the K-12 system and heavily promote ideas like STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), we are getting people who only have developed the left side of their brain. Thus, they may be ok at doing, but because they haven't developed the right side of their brain where innovation and creativity flourish and they never become great thinkers.

Furthermore, even those that are good thinkers are soon institutionalized by the companies and organizations that employ them and soon become completely disengaged. Instead, we need to think of STEAM where we insert the Arts as a very integral part of education. STEAM will give us an innovation economy which will make us globally competitive while supporting the long-term viability and richness of our communities.

The concept of "institutionalizing their people" is important because this may help explain the business leaders' ambivalence to what our current governor, legislature and WMC are supporting when it comes to education.

When I had my Sustainability consulting company, I would ask my clients in the "C" Suite (CEO, CFO, COO, etc.) what was their most important asset and they would always respond the same "our people". I would respond "then why do you treat them so poorly if that is the case". They were genuinely hurt and offended because they truly believed what they said that their people were so important.

I then painted a picture of how it could look. Have you ever had a real two-way dialogue with your employees to determine what they thought was important, what they value in life, what they want to really do. Have you thought of focusing less on profits and more on purpose? Have you ever invested in your employees in things that they want even if it doesn't have a line item

benefit to the company; like running for a school board, or volunteering for a community board, etc. Have you ever considered allowing your employees to be involved in the community in a meaningful way on company time? Have you ever brought in the arts into your organization to rekindle the use of the right side of the brain?

At my last company, they prided themselves on the success they had with process. I had the opportunity to address their board last year, and I said this: “you are ok with process, but terrible with people. If you were great with people, you would blow process out of the water”. This was received well which showed that it clearly fell on deaf ears.

For business to allow Governor Walker and the current legislature to attack K-12 and the university system with funding cuts and other onerous policies is mind boggling. When we need high degrees of innovation and creativity in our economy to be competitive in a global sense, to defund the arts and other right brained curriculum in our public K-12 system and only focus on work related skills is not only troubling, but it is going to further increase the dearth of talent that the community and companies truly need.

And to try to destroy our world class public university system by not only drastically cutting funding, but by denigrating our talented professors and researchers is wrong headed on so many levels and will prove to be disastrous to the Wisconsin Idea. This tacit attack on people who are educated in critical thinking and instead fostering an atmosphere where our education system is only meant to be a supply chain of workers for business is undemocratic, myopic, and dysfunctional.

This kind of thinking and policy will in very short order not only kill our economy and middle class, but it will also lead to a dearth of the leadership that is much needed in our communities; whether volunteer, governmental, business, or NGO.

I am not enough of a conspiracy theorist to think that may be a sinister motive. But, for business and other leaders to sit quietly by and allow this to happen, will create a very negative legacy that will take mega-investments to reverse. We are all better than this.

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For more information, check out Paul's blog at www.paullinzmeyer.com