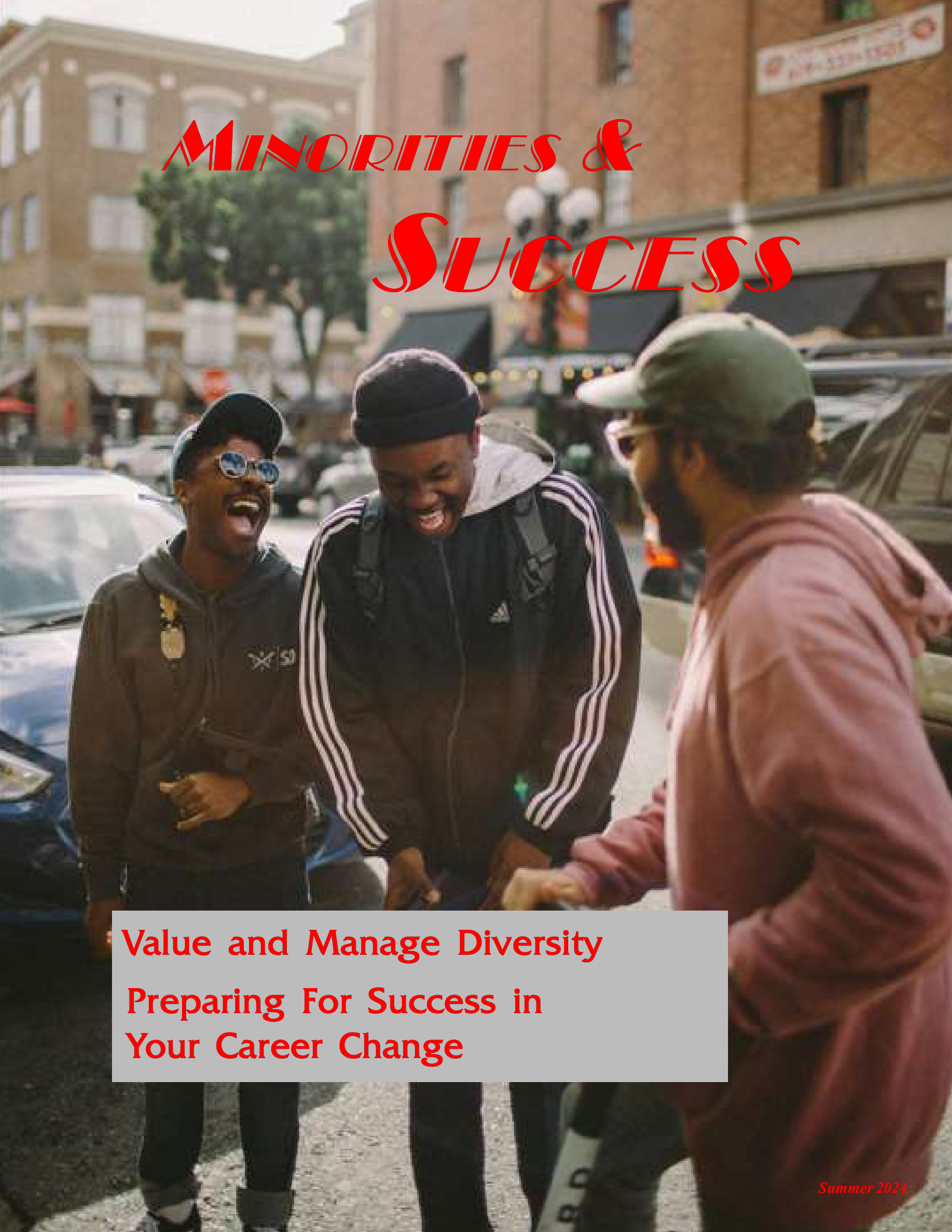

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Minorities & Success

http://minoritysuccess.us

Publisher.....MSPG, Inc.
Web Design.....Blue Cyber Media
Editorial.....Michelle Rad
Lay out Design.....Farimah Farahpour
Photo Cover Page.....Jed Villejo
Photo.....Redd-F

Your comments are encouraged.

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Vol. XXXIII No. II I ISSN# 1058-6318

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Three Killer Mistakes in Government Contracting

By Gloria Berthold Larkin

Owners of small businesses from all over the U.S. sold over 83 billion dollars of services and products to the U.S. federal government in just the last federal fiscal year. Of that total, those businesses that are certified as 8(a) sold $10.3 billion in services and products.* If you are not as successful in the market as you want to be, you may be asking yourself: "What do they know that I don't?"

Even successful contractors will tell you that they have made many mistakes learning the ropes in this market. After all, it is a tough, complicated and rigorous market that demands expertise, dedication and perseverance before success is achieved.

While all contractors have made mistakes when trying to enter or become more successful in the government market, successful business owners have learned from their mistakes, make the necessary changes and move forward to greater business opportunities and larger contracts.

As you read through the top three killer mistakes listed here, note those that you recognize and make the changes now. You will start to see benefits and the doors that were slammed tight will start to open for your business.

Killer Mistake #1

Does Your Business Look Like a Risky Business?

This is a core issue with government

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contracting. Often we are talking about not just thousands or hundreds of thousands, but millions of dollars in contracts. Contracting officers and other decision-makers have been trained to choose the least risky of options. As tax-payers, this is a good thing. And a business people who want to win contracts, once you know and understand this, you can take the steps needed to make your business stable, secure and as capable as possible.

What Exactly Does a Risky Business Look Like?

A risky business has no track record. It has no customers that could be asked for a reference. It has no bank account. It has no credit history. It has no web site. The owners use AOL, Gmail, Yahoo and other free email services for government communications. The business has not been registered in CCR. There is no commercial phone number, just a cell phone. It has no employees and no record of making tax payments.

Since all government contracting officers are, by the nature of their jobs and their legal responsibilities, risk-adverse, the more steps you can take to mitigate the risks the better your chances are of being successful.

Take These Steps to Mitigate Risk

There are specific steps you can take to make your business be as stable and secure as possible. First, know the requirements of being a government contractor. For instance, all federal contractors must be registered in the Central Contractor Registry (CCR), a federal government web site. When you successfully register at CCR (or with your state or local government if you choose to target them first), you show that you understand and have the legal basics required (company name, bank accounts, etc.)

If you have sold products or services to anyone else, you will want to ask three to five of your customers to be a reference for you. Contracting officers will check references and if your references are good, and are willing to say so, this makes you much less risky that those businesses that have no references (or ever worse, have negative references!)

Other Steps That Will Build Your Credibility

Create a professional web site describing your services and products and clearly define how you fit into the government market. You can use the Capability Statement format described in the previous issue of MEA if you need help with the recommended content. Use an

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email address containing your website name. Never use AOL, Gmail, Yahoo or other free email services for government contracting communications as they make you appear fly-by-night and unprofessional.

Use a commercial phone number listed in the name of your business. This phone number would be used as the main, or corporate, contact number. Government also wants a separate fax number as well. It is fine to use your cell phone as your direct line, but not as a main business number.

Killer Mistake #2

You Do Not Understand the Language

Whether you are starting at the local city level, the state level or even the federal government level, every segment has its own language, processes and procedures. If you do not understand the conversations, the acronyms or procedures, you make it much more difficult on yourself.

Learn the Lingo

You will hear new terms and acronyms at every meeting, outreach session and conference. If you are unsure of what they mean, it is appropriate to ask. People involved in government contracting get very used to speaking in acronyms, technical terms and buzz-words and often do not remember that even they had to learn the terms at one point. If you prefer to research first and therefore feel more comfortable conversing with contracting officers, you can use resources such assba.gov for study materials.

Example of Lingo: Purchase Vehicle

Government entities most often do not buy products and services the same way consumers or other businesses may buy. In the private sector, when we sell something to a consumer, we often write up a receipt after they give us the money. If we sell in the business-to-business market, when we propose a complicated or high-cost service or product to another business we often use a contract that both parties will sign which includes all of the required information and payment process.

Government entities have a more complicated purchase process (with one exception). Most often, they will use something called a purchase vehicle. This vehicle is not something one would drive, but rather it is a tool or method used to buy something.

The good news is a vehicle may be

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as simple as a credit card. The bad news is that a vehicle may be as complicated as writing a two hundred page response to a formal proposal.

If you have heard of a GSA Schedule,
that is a common purchase vehicle used by the federal government. Essentially it is a pre-approved contract where your pricing structure, your legal business entity and your services and products are all analyzed and final prices negotiated until you and the government agree. A GSA Schedule is a five-year contract, and it is renewable for three more five year periods making it a total of a twenty year-long contract.

Once you have an approved GSA Schedule, you have not made a sale, but you do have a license to hunt; and an easy tool or vehicle for the government to use when they want to buy something from you. There are other types of purchase vehicles called Government-Wide Acquisition Contracts (GWACs), Blanket Purchase Agreements (BPAs) or Indefinite Delivery Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) contracts. These are also good examples of why acronyms are used so much in government contracting.

Accept Credit Cards

One of the best and simplest method or contract vehicle used is a government credit card. The government will make billions of dollars in purchases every year for all types of products and services simply by using a VISA or MasterCard credit card. If you accept these cards in your business, you can make many more sales. Check with your local bank for the steps needed to accept credit cards in your business.

Killer Mistake #3

The third biggest mistake that business people make in government contracting is to not be prepared before asking for and meeting with decision-makers. Most government entities, and definitely the federal government, give you all the background information you need, however, you must do the research and homework first.

Do Your Homework...First!

If you want to find out what opportunities the federal government has available right now, you would look at the web site: fedbizopps.gov. While every opportunity is not listed, most over $25,000 are shown and it is well worth your time and effort to use this site as a mandatory stop in your research process.

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If you wish to learn what the federal agencies are projecting to buy during the rest of the fiscal year, but for which they have not yet created actual contracts, you can find each agency's Forecast of Contract Opportunities at their own web site, usually by searching for the "Small Business Office." This forecast is a "wish list" of what they want to buy, and a great place for you to determine if it is worth your time to pursue an agency as a target.

Another extensive resource available through the federal government is the Federal Procurement Data System-Next Generation. This is a secure web site available to everyone at: fpds.gov. This is a database of all of the recent past government contract information. It is good for you to use to find the agencies that have already purchased what you sell. If they purchased it last year, there is an excellent chance they will need it again this year and next year too.

Eliminating these killer-mistakes will help you turn the corner to success in the government contracting market. Use these tips to build a healthy, stable and secure government contracting business.

* Source: FPDS.gov

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Business Stories - Out of Place Or on Target?

By Dr. Jim Anderson

One question that I keep getting asked over and over by speakers that I am working with is if storytelling is such a powerful communication tool, then why isn't it used more in business settings? It's a good question, but the answer is a little bit complicated.

Where Did All The Stories Go?

I can't tell you how many business presentations I've sat though that at the end I couldn't have told you what was talked about if my life depended on it. It's not that the speaker was necessarily bad, it's just that nothing that they said caught my imagination and so nothing stuck.

This is where stories come in - people remember stories long after you get done talking. We remember them because it's a fundamental way that humans have exchanged information for as long as we've been around.

For some reason, people have decided that stories don't have a place in the environment of business - perhaps they don't think that they are "grown up" enough and that facts and figures should only be used. This is completely wrong.

What Is The Value Of A Business Story?

Dr. Caren Neile has been looking into the use of stories in the workplace and she reports that Makingstories.net president Terrence Gargiulo has identified 9 key values to using a story in a business presentation:

1. They empower the speaker.
2. They can be used to create a particular environment.
3. They can be used to bond individuals together.
4. They can help your audience to engage in active listening.

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5. They can be used to resolve differences between both individuals and groups.
6. They can encode information.
7. They can act as tools to help with brainstorming.
8. They can be used as weapons.
9. They can be used to start or enhance a healing process.

The professional storytellers define the act of storytelling as being "*... a face-to-face oral narrative that employs non-verbal communication and imagination*". One side effect of this definition is that when stories are told in a live business setting, they are much more powerful than when they are just written down.

What Kind Of Stories Work In Business Presentations?

Dr. Neile reports that Annette Simmons, who is the president of the company Group Process Consulting, believes that there are six types of stories that can be used in a business environment:

1. Who I Am: this type of story is used to gain an audience's trust by having the speaker explain where they are coming from.
2. Why I Am Here: this story type is a way to communicate your agenda to your audience.
3. The Vision: this story paints a vision of the future that the audience can see and can then decide that they want to be a part of it.
4. Values-In-Action: this story shares the good things that can happen when the audience has shared values and the bad things that can happen when those values are violated.
5. I Know What You Are Thinking: this story shows how connected the speaker is to the audience and that he/she has their best interests in mind.

How Can We Use Stories During Business Presentations?

Stories that your audience can relate to are the best kind of stories to use. This means that you need to spend the time to uncover the true stories that already exist within the organization: the successes, the failures, and people behaving both badly and wonderfully.

The power of business stories is that they provide one of the most effective ways to achieve agreement about how to resolve issues and meet goals. It's no longer a question of IF they should be used, but rather a question of HOW MUCH they should be used.

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Starting Your Own Business -

The Pros and Cons You Must Consider

By Rhett Kniep

Starting your own business...

Just the sound of that phrase conjures up pictures in the mind of the entrepreneur. Freedom. Money. Fulfillment. Starting your own business is an opportunity available to millions in the great nation of America in which we live, but with every opportunity there come liabilities. As wise business people, we are compelled to consider the advantages... and disadvantages, of a start up business.

To begin, let's look at the pros.

1. Freedom. Is there anything more valuable than freedom? Since the presence of freedom allows for all the other benefits we find in life, it stands to reason freedom would have to be at the top of the list of pros for starting your own business. If you can pick your own trade or service, do it in the manner in which you choose (with few limitations), do it for as long as you choose, and then sell that business to someone else when you choose... you have freedom, and freedom is not only the platform from which all other business benefits spring from, it is the greatest single benefit.

Freedom to make your own choices, work when you want to, vacation when you want to... what price freedom?

2. Money. More money has been made and can be made by self-directed enterprise than any other

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way of work. If you need proof of this, look to history. Read stories of entrepreneurs. You can go back hundreds of years, or you can look to your parent's generation. Either way, you will find the fortunes of this country have been built on the foundation of small business. There are massive fortunes in big business, to be sure, but every big business began as a small business; one or several individuals identifying needs and wants and seeking out ways to fill those needs and wants in a profitable manner. You may be able to secure a decent salary at a good company, but the money you can make in private enterprise dwarfs it many times over.

3. Fulfillment. Fulfillment is harder to define than the other more tangible aspects of business enterprise. While running a business can bring huge financial rewards, deeper and more meaningful are the personal development gains that come from it. Whether or not one makes a lot of money, if he or she can experience personal development and growth as a result of their business venture, they have profited. Some entrepreneurs find ways to build a lifestyle business, based upon what they love most and are talented at doing. Others find the very process of building a company of any kind brings out qualities in themselves they were not even aware of.

Starting your own business is a journey of personal fulfillment. There is more satisfaction in creating your own enterprise than in developing someone else's, because your business is of you, and about you, and for you.

Now, we take a look at some cons, the downsides to starting your own business.

1. Time. The precious, irreplaceable commodity of time. There is an overabundance of time shortage, and it's never gonna change. Unfortunately, starting your own business requires lots of time: time to create the perfect plan, time to investigate the market, time to build relationships with suppliers and subcontractors and affiliates, time to find workers and employees, time to market your goods...

When something takes time from your life, it means something (or someone) else is not getting it. This aspect of starting your own business keeps many people out of the venture. It's a high cost to pay.

2. Stress. Working for someone else can bring on plenty of stress: meeting the boss's expectations, dealing with

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annoying co-workers, following someone else's schedule for you. All of these and more are a reality to people every day in the workforce. But the stress of starting your own business and running it successfully can be hellish. When you are boss, you pay the bills, you pay the suppliers, you pay the fees, and you have to make sure YOU get paid so you can pay everyone else. It isn't easy.

Stress is as much a part of starting your own business as is the freedom you gain. In life, there's no having your cake and eating it too. To have the benefits, one must be willing to deal with the costs.

3. Insecurity. The advantages of small business are many, but security is not one of them. Why? The lack of security is a cost you pay to gain a benefit: adventure (aka freedom). I have yet to find anything in life where you have adventure and security at the same time.

Think about it. When all is set, and every plan fulfilled, and every debt paid, and every loose end secured, where is the adventure? When we are medicated, fed, and comfortable, we are BORED. Yes, its true, whether people admit it or not. There is no adventure in having everything perfect and secure.

You can see starting your own business creates a lack of security that a solid position at another company might not. When you are the captain, you know that if you don't perform and make it happen, the ship goes down. And no one else will plug the hole and make it float again. It's on your shoulders alone. That lack of security is a cost to pay when having your own business.

Starting your own business has great benefits, and great costs. People throughout history have scaled the rocky cliffs of challenge and difficulty and reached the summit of business success. This is capitalism, and it rests upon the willingness of entrepreneurs. You can be a part of this fulfilling adventure but you must weigh the pros against the cons to make sure you consider the payoff - worth the payout.

Rhett Kniep is a licensed real estate business broker and building contractor. For over a decade he has successfully worked in the real estate investment business, buying and rehabbing and selling investment homes, commercial real estate, and businesses. He enjoys sharing his learned insights in business sales and development with others.

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Preparing For Success in Your Career Change

By: Kelli Smith

As you move through life, your needs, goals, and interests can change. If you've lost your spark for your current career, you may decide that it's time for a major change in occupation. While this can be a scary process, following these tips and guidelines can help you make a career change successfully and more easily.

Review Your Current Career

First off, you may want to decide if it's your career or your job that needs changing. If you find that your company or industry holds promise, you may want to consider if there is another position within the company that would be more compatible with your job skills and interests. Don't be afraid to talk to your boss and to ask around in your company about other available positions. Employers have an investment in their employees, and an employee that expresses the need for growth and more responsibility can be considered an asset.

List Your Skills and Aptitudes

Take inventory of your strengths and weaknesses before making a change. Your list of attributes should consider not only what you think you do well, but also where you have received your accolades in and outside of work. Also, be honest with your list of "needs to improve."

Assess Your Interests

You should also write down what you enjoy doing in your spare time. Is there any way you can take a hobby and make a career out of it? If you find this process difficult, you can use career assessment tests online or at a college or university. These tests analyze your personality traits, skills,

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and interests. Some excellent assessment tests include the Meyers-Briggs (personality assessment), the Jackson Vocational Interest Survey (interests), and the Strength Finders Profile (skills and aptitude).

Finding Inspiration

Many successful career changers will tell you they took their passion and turned it into a career. A great book for putting your interests and dreams to work for you is Wishcraft: How to Get What You Really Want by Barbara Sher. This book will show you strategies for determining your interests and discovering your skills and strengths. It can also help you develop a game plan to achieve concrete results.

Analyze Your Income and Savings

Making a career change can mean a change in income, especially if you've decided that you need more education or training. Before moving forward, sit down and analyze the time and money needed to get a degree or certificate in your new career. You need to decide if you'll be able to continue your current job while attending school to fully determine your monetary situation.

Do Your Homework!

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics is an excellent way to learn about different careers and the income potential, expected growth, and training and educational requirements. Research your chosen field by going online, reading trade magazines and testimonials, and talking to those in and around the profession. Volunteer or take a temporary job in your new field of interest. Doing so will allow you the opportunity to decide whether or not your new career is a viable one for you.

Take Your Time

Remember, be honest in your assessments and take time to research carefully. Career changes are a big deal, and we want yours to be successful. Time spent now in preparing for your new career will lend to your success and enjoyment of it later.

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Value and Manage Diversity - The Top Talent Will Come to You

By Susan Klopfer

"Say what?"

As soon as she left the graduation stage, diploma in hand, Jill received a whisper from her favorite professor, "Remember to be aware of the prevailing corporate culture, wherever you go."

Jill paused to wonder just what the professor was talking about, faintly recalling the word "culture" from her organizational sociology class.

Her professor was only concerned that her best student might have a tough time "fitting in" at any company in this rural, conservative state. Jill, an arty person, wears self-designed clothing, sports a tattoo and remains culturally close to her Louisiana Creole roots, reflected in her mixed language.

In any work environment, a dominant set of rules or customs arise over time that guide the way work is done, becoming what is called the organization's culture.

Researchers Deal and Kennedy popularized the idea of developing positive corporate cultures in their 1982 book Corporate Cultures. This idea became a central role in corporate strategy, with some organizations still clinging today to the idea of having a strong and tight corporate culture where all employees must "fit in" to be productive and happy.

In 1988 one sociologist defined four types of corporate cultures: the academy (exposing members to different jobs so they can move within the organization), the club (which is concerned with people fitting in), the baseball team (with its well-rewarded stars who leave for better opportunities) and the fortress (concerned primarily with survival).

Other models soon appeared, and it was thought that employees would work better and be happier if they were

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in the "right" corporate culture, one they naturally fit into. Not untypical were dictates like, "Managers should model the behavior they wish to encourage, and then reinforce the desired culture with visionary statements or slogans, celebrating employees' successes or promotions, distributing newsletters, hiring culture-compatible staff..."

Today's employees increasingly come from diverse social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, with different personalities and experiences. So how does this idea of knowing and maintaining a fixed culture stack up with today's recognition of managing and valuing diversity, recognizing diversity's important role in increasing markets, and as a response to globalization?

Not well.

Today's managers, rather than finding the "right" job candidates to "fit" the existing culture or corporate mold are better served by paying attention to the management of cultural differences,concerning themselves more with valuing and managing diversity.

Writes R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr., a diversity management expert: "Women, Hispanics, Asian Americans, African Americans Native Americans and others outside the mainstream of corporate America bring different, important and competitively relevant knowledge and perspectives about how to actually do work, how to design processes, reach goals, frame tasks, create effective teams, communicate ideas, and lead.

"When allowed to, members of these groups can help companies grow and improve by challenging basic assumptions about an organization's functions strategies, operations, practices, and procedures" - in others words, by challenging and diversifying the existing and "understood" corporate culture.

When companies start thinking about diversity holistically - providing fresh and meaningful approaches to work - "and stop assuming that diversity relates simply to how a person looks, where he or she comes from, how they will "fit in," they will be able to reap the full rewards [of diversity]."

As for Jill, she just might be better off in today's economy by setting up her own graphics shop.

Both she and her professor could be certain the corporate culture of this new business would support broad diversity, making Jill far more competitive with a host of larger businesses that still don't get it.

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Personal Responsibility, Self Confidence and Success

By Bud Bilanich

You can become self confident by doing three things. First, choose optimism. Believe in your heart of hearts that today will be better than yesterday, and that tomorrow will be better than today. Second, face your fears and act. Procrastination and inaction feed fear and rob you of self confidence. Action cures fear. Third, surround yourself with positive people. Don't let the naysayers into your life. Hang around with people who are positive about themselves, their careers and life in general.

The general idea of a book entitled The Luck Factor was that you can make your own luck by committing to taking personal responsibility for your career and life success. You do this by following five steps:

1) Decide you are in control.

2) Do something to show yourself you are in control.

3) Think through all of your options in a given situation.

4) Choose an option and act. If it doesn't work, choose another option.

5) Be adaptable. Change with the times.

I'd like to discuss how these five steps can help you build your self confidence.

First, self confident people feel that they are in control of their lives and careers.

The sooner you make an active

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decision to choose control, the quicker you will start building your self confidence. It's difficult to feel confident when you feel out of control and a victim or fate, circumstances or other people.

Second, self confident people demonstrate their control of their life and career success by acting positively.

They are willing to take risks because knowing that they are in control, they are confident that their actions and risks will work out for the best.

Third, self confident people aren't rash. They don't act impulsively.

Instead they think through their options in any given situation. Then they choose the option that they think is most likely to result in success. They consider options that others suggest. Self confident people are secure in themselves to accept good ideas, no matter where they find them.

Fourth, self confident people act decisively.

They are not afraid to choose an option and run with it. They know that the worst thing that can happen isn't all that bad. They will have to go back to the drawing board and choose another option. Self confident people act. They don't procrastinate or let the fear of making a poor choice paralyze them into inaction.

Fifth, self confident people are adaptable.

They know that the world changes quickly and that they need to adjust in order to keep up. They don't hold on to old ways of behaving that have worked in the past once it becomes clear that those old behaviors are no longer working. They move confidently in new directions.

The common sense point here is simple. Successful people commit to taking personal responsibility for their lives and careers. They also exude self confidence. When you commit to taking personal responsibility for your life and career, you build your self confidence. It's a win/win. The more responsibility you take, the more your self confidence grows. When you commit to taking personal responsibility for your life and career, you act. And action builds self confidence, unlike inaction and procrastination which kill it. So commit to taking personal responsibility for your life and career.

You will not only put yourself in charge of your success, you'll build your self confidence in the process.

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Communicate and Prosper!

By Helen Wilkie

How much has poor communication cost your company in the past twelve months? Chances are, you have no idea. Chances are even better it's a lot more than you can afford.

But you won't find the numbers in the financial statements or year-end departmental reports. Nothing shows up saying "lost productivity due to miserable meetings" or "missed business opportunities through sorry selling skills" or "employee quit because there's no communication around here."

Why? Because most people aren't sure what communication really is.

Consider this: When companies conduct internal needs assessments, communication virtually always surfaces near the top of the list. But if you ask ten people who put it on the list exactly what they meant, you'll get ten different answers. People often can't pinpoint the problem—they just have a vague feeling communication isn't happening. Unfortunately, this vagueness relegates communication to the bottom of the action list.

Truth is, communication isn't some warm and fuzzy "nice to have"— it is nothing less than the lifeblood of your organization. If blood doesn't circulate at just the right pressure and speed to all parts and extremities of the human body, that body sickens and eventually dies. So, too, does an organization where communication doesn't flow freely.

Communication isn't limited to vision and mission statements from the top; it's not just news releases publicizing financial results or new product announcements; it's not just internal or client newsletters, annual reports or videotaped messages to the troops. These are all important, but they form just a fraction of the communication—and miscommunication—that takes place every day in the workplace.

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What I call applied communication is written, spoken and non-verbal interaction among people in order to get things done. It takes co-operation to create a product. It takes collaboration to approach a new market. It takes teamwork to implement a strategy. It takes this applied communication to oil and run the machinery of business. And if that machinery breaks down—as it often does—a great deal of money is lost. It's in this area, applied communication, that we need to look for the financial drain.

Loss of time

What does your time cost the company for each hour you are at work? A good rule of thumb in calculating hourly cost is: annual salary divided by 2000 (based on 50 40-hour weeks). When you know this figure for your own time as well as that of your staff, you can begin to calculate the cost of applied communication at work.

Meetings

Regardless of its purpose, a meeting is an exercise in applied communication: you speak, you listen, you interact. I've never met anyone in business who has not complained about meetings: too many, too long, too boring. I would add to that: too expensive.

Consider meetings that are supposed to last an hour but somehow expand to use up most of the afternoon. Calculate the hourly cost of total participant time and multiply by the length of the meeting—and keep in mind that the higher level the participants the more expensive the time. The result may not sound too alarming, until you consider how many of those meetings take place in your organization every day, every week, every year. Do the arithmetic.

Correspondence

Letters, reports, memos, and now the ubiquitous e-mail—written communication is an integral part of doing business. Unfortunately, statistics show that corporate employees spend altogether too much time writing it, and badly at that, so that those on the receiving end spend too much time reading it!

If a $40,000-a-year employee spends just two hours a day reading, writing and managing e-mail, that's a $9,000 annual cost. Judging from what people tell me about their work habits, two hours a day is a conservative estimate. And what about those at much higher salary levels who spend much longer writing every day? Do the arithmetic.

Presentations

People at all levels present information in a variety of settings in the workplace every day. These presentations

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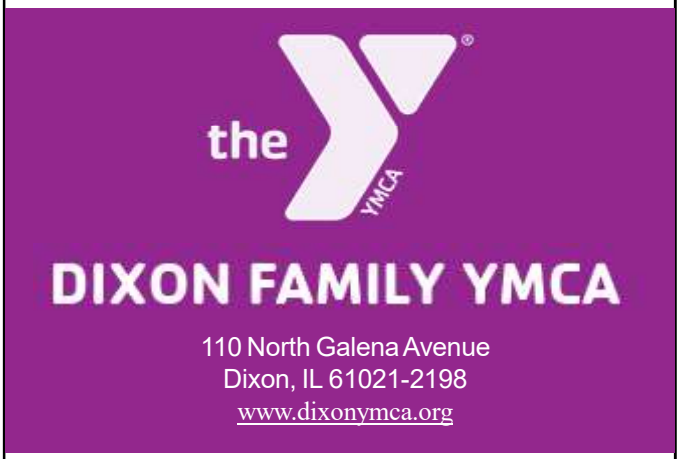

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not only consume many hours in the creation and preparation, but also the expensive time of those who must listen to them. Unfortunately, poor presentation skills often result in a futile exercise that communicates less than a simple written report. How many useless presentations take place in a major corporation every day? Do the arithmetic.

Loss of business

Sometimes salespeople know their "pitch" so well that they totally ignore any input a prospective customer might give them. They barely shake hands and sit down before they start talking. They blithely prescribe their product or service as the cure for a problem, without even finding out if such a problem even exists.

But an effective sales process is, in fact, a conversation, a two-way exercise in applied communication. Done poorly, it can result in lost sales and missed opportunity for ongoing business relationships.

Customer loss doesn't happen only in the sales process, but can also be spurred by an inept "customer service" exchange. When someone calls to complain, the client relationship is at a fragile point. It can be repaired through the right message well delivered, or broken beyond repair by poor communication. When we consider the total lifetime value of a customer relationship, we can truly appreciate the real dollar cost of poor communication.

Loss of people

Whatever people tell their bosses about their reasons for leaving the company, exit interviews often tell a different story. One of the most common reasons cited is that they don't feel anyone listened to them.

Day after day in the workplace, millions of people go through the motions of talking with each other in person and on the phone, constantly connected through technology, and never truly communicating with one another. Study after study tells us that recognition and respect are more motivating than money, and one of the best ways to show people they are valued is to listen to them. Sadly, listening is probably the most underused of all the communication skills.

So people leave. How much then does it cost to replace them? Studies give a wide range, from a low of 25% of salary, plus benefits, to a whopping 150%. Employee replacement represents yet another huge cost that can at least sometimes be charged to poor communication.

By improving the way people (and I mean people at all levels) interact in order to get things done, we can increase productivity—with its attendant positive impact on the bottom line.

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Better Prepared For College Or Work

By Megan Wilson

The U.S. has a terrific opportunity to bring dynamic public schools to its neediest children, but it just might blow it. Called charter schools elsewhere, community schools are independent public schools of choice. That's not an oxymoron. They are new kinds of public schools, freed from most bureaucratic hassles, open to any child who chooses to attend and held to account for their results. We've visited dozens around the nation as a part of a new project. Most of those we've seen are terrific. They come in all flavors: progressive institutions with lots of hands-on learning, back-to-basics schools with stern discipline and old-fashioned curriculum, schools for at-risk kids, even a virtual charter school that operates in cyberspace. The intent was to make our students work harder, take more classes, and naturally the students would be better prepared for college or work.

The lawmakers deserve kudos for passing a solid statute that allowed such schools to be born. Thankfully, we are able to learn from the mistakes of other jurisdictions that pioneered this reform strategy. For example, a new law authorizes some states and county school boards to issue school charters, meaning that obdurate local boards cannot paralyze the whole process. Transportation must be provided so that all children can realistically choose these schools. Start-from-scratch schools are freed from the hammerlock of union contracts. The statute also allows current public schools to "convert" to charter status, though these have less freedom. While "years of study" is very key to any student's success in college or the work force, I've come to

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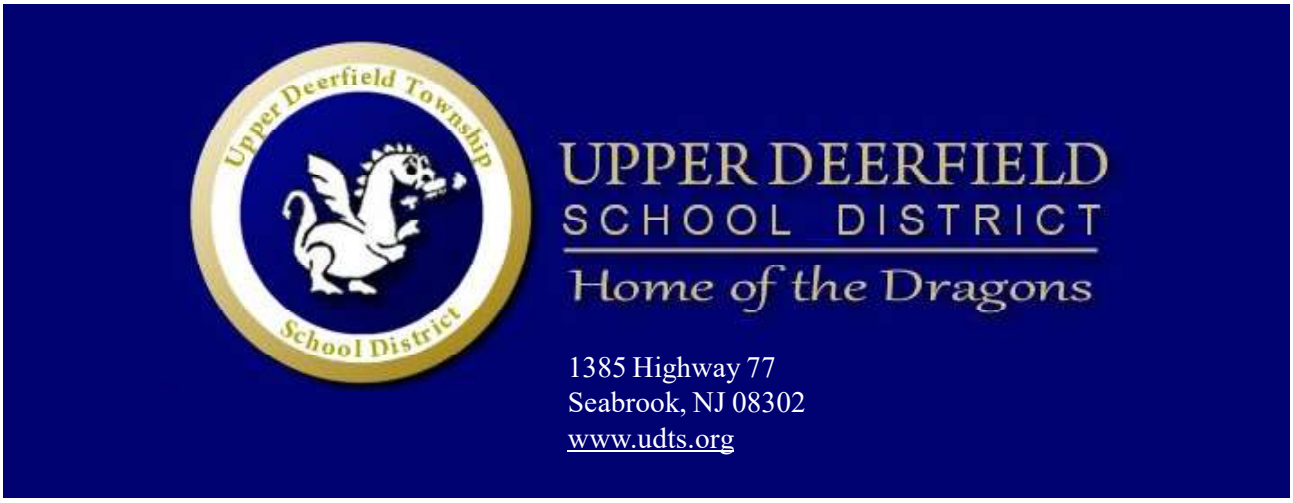

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believe that the degree of difficulty of the classes a student takes is just as important. General English and math are not as challenging and don't give the same level of preparedness as college science and calculus do. There appears to be evidence that while some students are taking more years of study, it may not be in the kind of classes that lead to higher levels of achievement. There also appears to be evidence that this trend is not limited to one state but is also a national phenomenon. Work seems to be important to educational success, not busy work.

Yet the community-schools program already is stumbling into an avoidable trap: accountability problems. Just what results should these schools be expected to produce, and how will they be demonstrated? Recent reports have highlighted charter-school accountability weaknesses in some states. Allegations of fiscal mismanagement and academic underachievement are wounding this promising venture. The basic concept of a charter school is to produce superior results in return for curricular and operational independence. But superior to what? Measured how? Getting this right is key to a successful charter program.

Every community school must meet the standards spelled out in its charter contract. This puts considerable burden on whatever entity is writing the contract. Because most local boards of education haven't been inclined to write any, essentially all the charter action so far is at the State Board of Education, which, unfortunately, isn't bearing this burden as well as it should. Two problems have arisen.

So far, the state board seems to feel compelled to grant a charter to every applicant. We salute the zeal — nobody is more bullish about charter schools than we are — but this lack of selectivity is practically unheard of nationally, and is a worrisome precedent. Charter school authorizers should be demanding and picky. We have to assume that a few schools slipped through that weren't really ready.

Worse, some states are lax in regard to student achievement. Reportedly under political pressure, the state board has agreed that all a new community school must do to stay in business is to match the test scores of students in its surrounding districts. Talk about setting the bar low. To add the additional credits to our curriculum, it was necessary to go to some shorter periods. Less time in each subject, more time in the hallways, a consequence unforeseen by the drafters of the legislation. The problem with simplistic laws designed to solve our complex societal problems, is that they are easily and often enacted, but

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seldom analyzed to determine their effectiveness. There needs to be a legislative accountability counsel established to keep track of laws. Legislators need to know the actual vs. predicted outcomes of the bills they pass. I would go so far as saying that no education-related law should ever see the light of day without first determining a way to monitor its effectiveness. Reform should be based upon accountability not good intentions.

So, it's not that the state board doesn't understand tough-minded educational accountability. But it isn't bringing that tough-mindedness to bear on charter schools. It should. These schools need to be held to ambitious academic standards and judged by their measurable results, not just their marketplace appeal. They should set a precedent for conventional public schools by showing that, with the benefit of independence, it's indeed possible to produce far better results than most regular schools are doing, particularly for poor and minority youngsters. It isn't enough for the community schools to do as well as the schools to which they are alternatives. Most of the community school developers we know are keen to show that they can do better. The state board should insist on this, so that the promise of charter schools is fully tested. The state's children need — and deserve — nothing less.

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Lazy or Learning Disabled? You Decide

In a world where academic performance and productivity are often used as measures of success, students who struggle to keep up may face harsh labels. Two of the most common are "lazy" and "learning disabled." But these terms, while sometimes used interchangeably in casual conversation, describe very different realities. Understanding the distinction between them can have a significant impact on the individual's future success and well-being.

Defining "Lazy"

Laziness, in the simplest terms, is a lack of motivation or willingness to exert effort. A lazy student might skip homework, neglect to study, or put minimal effort into classwork despite having the ability to perform well. For someone labeled as lazy, the core issue is behavioral. They are capable but choose not to apply themselves. Factors such as procrastination, lack of interest, or external distractions often contribute to this.

However, labeling someone as lazy can be problematic. People rarely avoid effort without reason. In many cases, external factors such as stress, mental health struggles (e.g., anxiety, depression), or a chaotic home environment can present as laziness. While they may look like a lack of effort on the surface, these behaviors could reflect underlying issues that are not immediately obvious.

What is a Learning Disability?

A learning disability, by contrast, is a neurological condition that affects how an individual processes information. Learning disabilities, such as dyslexia (difficulty reading), dysgraphia (difficulty writing), and dyscalculia (difficulty with math), create legitimate barriers to learning. Students with learning disabilities often struggle in school not because

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they are unwilling to work hard, but because their brains process information differently.

Identifying a learning disability can be tricky, especially when academic struggles are misattributed to laziness. Many children with learning disabilities are misunderstood and may develop low self-esteem or anxiety about school because they are perceived as not trying hard enough. Despite their efforts, they may fall behind, leading others to view them as unmotivated.

The Overlap Between Laziness and Learning Disabilities

At first glance, laziness and learning disabilities may seem worlds apart. But there's an important intersection. Many students with undiagnosed learning disabilities can appear lazy. Imagine being a child who spends twice as long as peers to read a passage or solve a math problem—over time, frustration builds, and the student might eventually give up. This disengagement, from an outsider's perspective, looks like laziness, when in reality, it's a response to feeling overwhelmed.

The issue becomes more complex when students begin to internalize negative perceptions. Being called lazy or unmotivated, especially if a learning disability is the root cause, can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. The student might stop trying because they believe they can't succeed. This cycle is damaging and preventable if the right supports are put in place early on.

Recognizing the Difference: Key Indicators

So, how can you tell the difference between a student who is genuinely struggling due to a learning disability and one who may not be exerting effort? Here are some key signs to consider:

- **Inconsistent Performance**: A lazy student may have fluctuations in their work, excelling in tasks they enjoy and neglecting others. A student with a learning disability, however, often shows consistent difficulties in specific areas (e.g., reading, math) regardless of the effort they put in.
- **Effort and Frustration**: A learning-disabled student may be highly motivated but still underperform in particular areas. They often put in extra time and effort but feel immense frustration due to their struggles. In contrast, laziness is usually accompanied by a lack of

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frustration or concern for poor performance.

- **Avoidance of Specific Tasks**: A student with a learning disability may avoid specific tasks that trigger their disability. For example, a dyslexic student may be reluctant to read aloud. While it can look like avoidance, it's often rooted in the fear of embarrassment or failure.
- **History of Struggle**: If a student has struggled consistently for years, especially with certain subjects, this can be a sign of a learning disability. A lazy student, on the other hand, might experience short-term performance dips tied to interest or motivation levels.

What Can Be Done?

When students are suspected of being lazy, especially over extended periods, it's crucial to ask the right questions: Why is this student not motivated? Are there underlying issues at play? Rushing to judgment can mean overlooking more profound challenges.

For students with potential learning disabilities, early identification is key. Parents and teachers should collaborate to recognize signs and intervene early, seeking assessments from psychologists or specialists who can diagnose learning disabilities. Tailored support, including individualized education plans (IEPs) and specialized teaching strategies, can transform a student's academic experience.

If the issue is truly one of laziness, a different approach is required. Building self-discipline, finding ways to make learning engaging, and addressing any mental health concerns can reignite a student's motivation. In many cases, addressing environmental factors like family stress or peer pressure may also unlock a student's potential.

The Power of Understanding and Empathy

At the heart of the distinction between laziness and a learning disability lies the need for understanding and empathy. When teachers, parents, and peers take the time to understand why a student might not be performing to expectations, they can help unlock that student's true potential. Too often, students are labeled as lazy without a deeper examination of the barriers they might be facing.

An empathetic approach acknowledges that every learner is different and that what works for one

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student might not work for another. It also recognizes that external factors—whether learning disabilities, mental health issues, or personal challenges—can significantly impact academic performance. Rather than making snap judgments, this approach calls for a willingness to dig deeper, ask questions, and tailor support accordingly.

Building a Supportive Environment

Creating a supportive environment where students feel safe and understood is essential for success. This starts with open communication between parents, teachers, and students. Teachers who are attuned to the challenges their students face are better equipped to provide the right interventions. Small changes, like offering extra time on tests, adjusting teaching methods, or providing alternative learning materials, can make a world of difference.

Schools should also foster a culture of acceptance, where learning disabilities are openly discussed and not stigmatized. Educating students and staff alike about the diverse ways in which people learn can help reduce the shame or embarrassment students with disabilities often feel. When students see that learning disabilities are nothing to hide and that help is available, they are more likely to seek out the resources they need.

The Role of Early Intervention

One of the most crucial factors in helping students with learning disabilities thrive is early intervention. When learning disabilities are caught early, students can receive the support they need before falling too far behind. This might involve working with specialists, such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, or special education teachers, who can provide targeted strategies to address specific challenges.

For example, a student with dyslexia might benefit from reading programs that break down words into phonetic components, while a student with dyscalculia might need visual aids or manipulatives to help grasp mathematical concepts. The earlier these interventions begin, the more effective they can be in leveling the playing field.

But early intervention isn't only important for students with learning disabilities. Even if a student is genuinely struggling with laziness or lack of motivation, early action is key to helping them develop the discipline and self-regulation skills they need to succeed. This might include working on time management, study habits, and goal-setting, as well as addressing any underlying emotional or

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psychological factors that may be contributing to their lack of motivation.

The Harm of Mislabeling

Mislabeling a student—whether as lazy or learning disabled—can have lasting consequences. Students who are called lazy may begin to internalize that label, believing that they are incapable of success. Over time, this can lead to a downward spiral of disengagement, low self-esteem, and academic failure.

Similarly, students who are incorrectly diagnosed with a learning disability might be given unnecessary accommodations that don't address the root of their problem. While accommodations are essential for students who need them, they should be targeted and based on accurate assessments. Over-accommodating students who don't have learning disabilities can lower expectations and deprive them of the chance to develop resilience and problem-solving skills.

Looking Beyond the Label

In the end, whether a student is struggling due to laziness or a learning disability, it's important to look beyond the label. Both situations call for a compassionate, individualized approach that seeks to understand the student's unique needs. Rather than focusing on punishment or blame, educators and parents should focus on providing the right tools, resources, and encouragement.

Everyone has different learning styles and paces, and what works for one student may not work for another. The most important takeaway is that students should be given the opportunity to thrive in environments that recognize their challenges and strengths alike. By building a system that supports every type of learner—whether through identifying learning disabilities, addressing motivational issues, or creating flexible pathways for success—we can ensure that no student is left behind.

Conclusion: Deciding with Care

Determining whether a student is lazy or has a learning disability isn't a simple matter of observation. It requires careful assessment, patience, and an open mind. Laziness might be a temporary behavior due to lack of motivation, but a learning disability is a lifelong condition that requires support and intervention. Either way, it is crucial not to jump to conclusions or apply harmful labels.

When we take the time to understand the underlying causes of a student's struggle, we can make decisions that are fair, supportive, and constructive. In the end, it's not about deciding whether a student is lazy or learning disabled—it's about creating a system that supports all students in becoming the best learners they can be.

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Arizona and the 'Menace' of Ethnic Studies?

By Juan Bernal

What gives in Arizona? First they reject the celebration of Martin Luther King Day; then the Arizona legislators submit a tough law targeting all who appear to be illegal immigrants; and now Governor Jan Brewer has signed a bill prohibiting the Tucson school district from offering certain types of ethnic studies in the high schools.

The Associated Press reported that the measure signed Tuesday (5/11/2010) prohibits classes that advocate ethnic solidarity, that are designed primarily for students of a particular race or that promote resentment toward a certain ethnic group. The courses prohibited include courses in African-American studies, Mexican-American studies and Native-American studies, which have been offered by the Tucson Unified School District (see Associated Press story, 5/11/2010, by Jonathan J. Cooper). The justification is that such courses, while teaching ethnic solidarity, encourage resentment toward other groups. According to state schools chief, Tom Horne, these programs promote "ethnic chauvinism." Moreover, some students who don't belong to the ethnic group at issue have reported that they experienced antagonism by instructors and students.

These are some of the reasons given for the prohibition of such courses. But I would argue that there are plenty of reasons on the other side; many of us hold that such courses provide enough benefit to students that far outweigh the putative liabilities. Let's consider the issue in more detail and try to see things from the perspective of the Arizona politicians. But before that, I have a few personal remarks to show that I

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don't have a bias against the state of Arizona.

Arizona has always seemed a decent enough state. I love the natural beauty, the rugged desert landscape, and the incomparable Grand Canyon area. I have relatives and friends who live in Arizona, and the people generally seem friendly and intelligent. An Arizona State patrolman once went beyond the call of duty to help me and my wife when we had been involved in an automobile accident. So I retain positive feelings toward the Arizona law enforcement community; and I continue to believe that Arizona is a great state and largely populated by good people. However, next time I visit the state I must remember to take my passport along.

In light of the many positive qualities of the state, the actions of Arizona politicians are curious, to say the least. It is not an exaggeration to say that they appear to be antagonistic toward racial and ethnic minorities. For a time Arizona politicians refused to honor the great civil rights leader, Martin Luther King; thus giving insult to African Americans and anyone who values the work and progress of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Lately they have cited the facts of real trouble with drug cartels, violence, and drug smuggling at the border with Mexico to justify a new law requiring that anyone who "appears to be here illegally" provide documents proving their legal right to walk the earth inside the borders of the United States. "Appear to be here illegally": I wonder what that could mean? Guess which ethnic groups that law targets? It surely won't be all those northern Europeans and Canadians who might have overstayed their student or work visas. (You can bet there are plenty of those people in Arizona.) No, the targets will be poor, working class people who appear Mexican or Central American.

Returning to the ethnic studies issue, why forbid Native-American Studies? The various groups of Native-Americans in and around Arizona (Navajo, Hopi, Apache, etc.), who have probably suffered the longest at the hands of the more powerful white, European invaders, will likely wonder what they have done recently to be included in the group of undesirables. (?)

I have spent many years in class rooms of all sorts: elementary and secondary schools in Colorado, technical training in the U.S. Air Force; college courses in all levels of study in colleges and universities in California, and finally technical courses offered by governmental agencies and private corporations. But I have never had the privilege of an ethnic studies course of any kind.

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So I cannot speak from experience. I have neither gained any educational benefit nor suffered any ethnically inspired distortion of facts or values in such classes. In my high school days, ethnic studies courses did not exist. During the later periods of my college and university studies, ethnic studies courses were in their early phase; they were available but not too prominent in the college curricula. I was too busy with my formal and technical courses necessary to attaining my degrees; thus, I was not able to take advantage of any ethnic studies offered. But I surely would have profited from learning more about our history and social realities, studies which do not shy away from the ugly facts of such history and social reality.

Based on conversations with those who have taken such courses and recalling my reading about the experiences of others, I would say that students gain much educational benefit and do not suffer the alleged negative consequences (distortion of history and hostility to the oppressors of past periods of history) from such studies. Yes, I have heard from some white students who felt they were in hostile territory when they entered such classes and who experienced some resentment, even hostility, by the ethnic group in the course. But I have also heard from other students, of all ethnic backgrounds and races, who were grateful for such instruction because they learned much concerning the history of inter-ethnic and inter-racial interactions, tensions, oppression of one group by another and such. Surely, you would not argue that it is beneficial to keep people ignorant about those facts of our history?

During my high school years, history and social studies classes did not even mention my ethnic group; Mexican Americans and other Hispanics were invisible in the acceptable history and social studies taught at our schools. I don't even recall that much, if any, mention was made of African Americans ("Negros," in the 1950s) or of the Native Americans ("Indians," in the 1950s). History was taught as if the only important players were white males (mostly of Europeans descent) and that they alone contributed to our great nation. Furthermore; American History was taught as if everything our country did was admirable and noble. All ugly facts and periods of American history were simply neglected. We learned little or nothing about the treatment of Native Americans, the destruction of entire cultures, our country's acceptance and promotion of slavery for many decades prior to Emancipation in the 1860s, and our long history of racism, bigotry, and

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oppression of minorities, not to mention the oppression of women. Those things simply did not contribute to patriotism and good citizenship, so those facts were simply ignored. Of course, there weren't any suggestions that our country carried on unjust wars against other nations and that our government and international corporations contributed to the oppression and poverty in other countries. This simply did not happen according to the wisdom of the educational establishment of the time.

Maybe that kind of official bias in education is part of what the political establishment in Arizona is trying to revive. Don't mention those bad parts of American history! After all, ethnic studies courses bring out those unsavory, ugly aspects of American history. Consider that Native-American studies will emphasize the experience of Native Americans since the invasion of Europeans, contrary to official versions of history which tell students about the heroic European explorers who discovered this part of the world and opened it up to European exploration, settlement, "civilization," and enduring exploitation. The experience of the Native Americans, whose cultures were destroyed, is not a happy one, and it is not one which puts American History in a flattering light. So maybe we should go easy on these Native-American studies, Arizona suggests. The intended purpose of such courses might be good; admittedly they attempt to give some understanding of the experience of Native Americans and foster pride in being a member of that besieged group. But in the process, they also stimulate resentment against those who treated Americans in such a brutal fashion, so the Arizona politician tells us. This is the type of thing that we should either ignore or 'whitewash' in some way.

We can imagine similar remarks made regarding African-American studies and Mexican-American studies (sometime called "Chicano studies"). African-American studies focus too much attention on the institution of slavery, the struggle of human beings to escape slavery and to gain some measure of civil rights. This, in turn, focuses too much attention on the failings of our laws and institutions until the recent past. It is best not to spend too much time there. Mexican-American studies courses also spend too much time talking about ethnic bigotry and injustice of the past; and recent efforts to improve the lot of Hispanic minorities. Again, this underscores too much the extent to which society and our institutions have not succeeded in treating everyone justly, regardless of ethnicity and skin color. This could

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inspire resentment with regards to past practices and the oppressors of those times. This is not good for our contemporary society.

Better to bypass all that! While we're on the subject, maybe we should take a closer look at those courses which emphasize the experience of women and the Feminist movement. After all, our wonderful country did not see fit to grant women the right to vote until the 1920s. Surely that fact does not inspire patriotism and greater love for country. Better sweep all that under the rug! So speak the Arizona political establishment.

Trying to give some credit to this perspective of the Arizona politicians, we might add that we should not subject naïve young students to the harsh disillusion that might result from learning the facts of history and social relations. After all, many young and impressionable students, including some of minority ethnic groups, have bought completely the myths and white-washed history that the 'patriotic' establishment promotes. You have surely heard the main points of this mythical history: America promotes freedom and opportunity for all; America is the best society in the world; in our international relations, we only try to bring freedom to others nations. In short, American has always done what is good and continues to do only what is good. This is the version of history promoted by Ronald Reagan and repeated by the likes of G.W. Bush. People who have bought into such myth might be confused and hurt if they're exposed to the types of things taught in Ethnic studies courses. So it is better, for the good of all concerned, to avoid such courses. Surely, we should not endorse such courses in our educational system.

But doesn't all this begin to resemble regimes that rewrite history and keep people ignorant about that which can hurt the established order? Isn't this the type of thing one would expect in the old Soviet Union or in some totalitarian theocracy where all must think only the State-approved thoughts, or risk annihilation?

The study of Ethnic Courses does not result in people who are subversives and antagonistic to our democratic form of government. Such study, like all legitimate education, results in people who are informed and operate on the basis of realism and enlightenment. If that represents a threat to the Arizona political establishment, maybe it is time that the good people of Arizona take a closer look at the types of individuals they elect to office.

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