



Social Work Challenges for the 21st Century

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From the Editors: Social Work Challenges for the 21st Century

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The Forces of the 21st Century

On November 4 the United States of America elected its first President of the new Century as George W. Bush ran at the close of the 20th Century with a view that was a continuation of those policies and political strategies honed since the years of the Richard Nixon Administration.

In many ways Bush's leadership reflected a concern that certain tasks of the past were not complete and this is best reflected in the invasion of Iraq that appeared to be an effort to conclude the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91 that was conducted under his father, George H.W. Bush, the 41st President of the United States. George W. Bush's (43rd President) administration was formed and oriented in a world view that included the aggressive expansion of free-market capitalism and American-style democracy. Indeed this fervor to carry American viewpoints of social and cultural organization may be the latest manifestation of Turner's "frontier thesis" that animated much of American involvement across two centuries (Turner 1984). We noted this explanation of American exceptionalism in Volume 11 Number 1 in March of 2008 and see such themes as well in the worldwide interest in the American Presidential election in October of 2008. At the close of the Bush 43 administration, the economic mistakes implicit in this paradigm of economics and politics which had accumulated for more than forty years, produced a flood of individual and corporate bankruptcies that will continue through the next several years. While banking and other corporate consolidation accelerated rapidly in the last years and continued during the current administration, it was only a continuation of the previous several administrations emblematic of American slippage in leadership in many fields.

This financial consolidation linked much of the world's economy in a spider's web of interdependency and what was promised as improved economies of scale and more effective assignment of labor and capital across markets have proven to be a great increase in systemic risks often associated with very large systems. As Nassim Nicholas Taleb, hedge fund manager and doctoral student

of the mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot in the prescient *Black Swan* (2007), has suggested, we can never fully predict all system states because much of reality is not linear but fractal. Creating larger, more interdependent systems makes us all far more vulnerable to system crash, which will inevitably occur and defy ready prediction.

Barak Obama ran as an intellectual, and mobilized younger votes to participate at rates not seen in more than a quarter of a century. As the first African American presidential candidate, he also brought he also brought unprecedented hope and involvement to previously disaffected African American citizens. He ran on a motto of change and pledged to get the country out of the war in Iraq while assuring that the one in Afghanistan could be won. Obama did not specify many of the changes he assured the country that he would make if elected President; nevertheless, one is left with the sense that one great paradigm was ending in 2008 even if the succeeding paradigm was unclear.

The Obama election provides an opportunity to take stock of our culture and institutions and ask fundamental questions of how ready we are to meet the challenges of a very different world. We suggest in this Third Issue of Volume 11 that among the vital options, the creation of "learning organizations" through transformative leadership will be crucial in America's public and private sectors. If we are to regain our security and the quality of life created in the first sixty years of the 20th Century, we must invent the new paradigm of the 21st Century based on among other things a participative imperative in organizational functioning. This can be partly accomplished via action research. This is one central task of what we must do to grow beyond the command and control model of organizational design as well as the mass consumerist society that derived from large corporate and governmental models of the 20th Century

Challenges and Resources

We must address the challenges and resources that exist for the country as a new administration

takes office. The challenges are considerable. Through the efforts of the Bush administration more Federal involvement in banking, finance, housing and manufacturing has occurred than at any time since the Great Depression. Bailouts have been extended to the largest banks and an unparalleled consolidation of banking and brokerage is underway with United States' Federal Reserve and Treasury Department involvement extending even to other countries in "the bailout". Many fundamental industries appear on the verge of collapse with the automotive sector alone asking for 50 billion dollars in assistance. Some estimates are that a million jobs will be lost if the auto sector is not aided and that 1 in 10 jobs are somehow related to the automotive area. Such a large and prospectively even larger role of government in private enterprise exceeds any envisioned in the history of the country since World War II when during the war mobilization the government assumed a larger share of the national product.

The Role of Leadership

Part of how this unfortunate situation came into being must be traced to the quality of leadership in both public and private organizations in America. It may be easier to understand the decline in the auto industry than to untangle the collaboration of some the members of the Congress with banking, brokerage and housing interests. This collaboration created the recent economic bubble in housing and finance. The inevitable bursting of that bubble has accelerated the dismal state of affairs of the domestic auto manufacturing as well as other sectors of the economy.

After World War II American manufacturing emerged supreme in the world. With much of the physical plant of Europe and Japan destroyed by the World War and the suppression of consumer demand in the United States during the War, domestic manufacturers faced strong demands for their product without international competition. General Motors, Ford and Chrysler along with a few smaller manufacturers - Studebaker, Willys, Kaiser, Packard, and Nash - found ready markets

for all that they could produce. With rising prosperity manufacturers found that by using print, radio, and the new television advertising, they could convince consumers to replace their cars every three years or so. By the 90's the country had more cars than drivers. Cars were financed on time for three to five years, and for many middle class Americans the car became a product to be replaced as soon as the note was paid off. The cars were not worn out but buying a new car validated social standing.

All three major manufacturers carefully positioned through advertising which brand was associated with which socioeconomic level. The Ford, Chevrolet and Plymouth were at the bottom with the Lincoln, Cadillac and Chrysler at the top. Mechanically each auto in the vertical organization of each company shared many components yet advertising convinced the consumer that each was different.

Accelerating the demand for the product was the creation of the Interstate Highway System. The Federal Highway Act of 1956 was signed into law by President Eisenhower. Eisenhower's concern for the inability to move troops and equipment from one US coast to the other has led some to say it was initiated during the Cold War to disburse the country's population and thus make cities less vulnerable to atomic bomb attacks. Whatever the justification for the Interstate System, it increased the demand for autos, made far flung suburban development possible and promoted a more mobile population that learned to travel on long road vacations and to commute daily for work, shopping and entertainment.

But the choice of automobile mobility created a dependency on cheap petroleum. Until 1970 this had little consequence for the United States as we produced more oil than we consumed. But when these earlier choices required oil to be imported, leadership should have realized that this was a precarious state of affairs for the nation. It did not and that dependency led to the formation of OPEC and the attendant consequences of holding the nation hostage to foreign oil producers. This was followed, then, by a curtailment of imports

coming out of the Gulf Wars of the 1970's.

The shortage of gasoline and other petroleum products should have been a wakeup call to the long-term need for change. It did change consumption habits for many. Those were the years when smaller and more efficient automobiles from Honda, Toyota and Volkswagen got the first foothold in the American domestic automobile market. General Motors responded with the Corvair and Ford with the Mustang, but by the end of the 70's rather than creating successful models that were more fuel efficient, the domestic manufacturers had settled on large fuel inefficient vehicles. Collaboration with members of Congress led to Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency (CAFE) that rewarded the largest SUVs and pickups. Today all three domestic companies have a product line inferior to Japanese and European manufacturers. It is an open question if the leadership in the U.S. auto industry exists either at corporate or union levels to produce a product that will meet the competition and that the company can make money on.

The decline of the automobile industry is a useful lesson in the failure of leadership in dominant American industrial organizations. Insulated from competition, the preference of consumers and the reality of growing oil imports, there may not be time for domestic automobile manufacturers to recover. Complacency and efforts to avoid transparency and manipulate politics must be replaced with capable engineering, quality assembly and responsiveness to a changed market. Such a miserable state is a message to all American organizations.

We Must Return to Strong and Successful Educational Systems

From late in the 19th century until the 1970's America led the world in the quality and universality of education of its citizens and the wealth and power of its economy. How did a frontier country advance so rapidly in education and wealth? David Brooks reported in the New York Times on a provocative study by Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz (2008), that helps us under-

stand the need for learning organizations. They note in their book, *The Race Between Education and Technology*, that America's educational progress was amazingly steady between 1870 and 1950. The average American's level of education rose by 0.8 years per decade. In 1890, the average adult had completed about 8 years of schooling. By 1900, the average American had 8.8 years. By 1910, it was 9.6 years, and by 1960, it was nearly 14 years. This means the country went from most people having less than a high school education to most having about two years of college or technical training post high school.

Educational levels were rising across the industrialized world, but the United States had at least a 35-year advantage on most of Europe in this creation of fundamental learning opportunities. In 1950, no European country enrolled 30 percent of its older teens in full-time secondary school. In America 70 percent of older teens were in school.

Declines in Education and Social Capital

America's education edge boosted productivity and growth in all sectors of the economy. Yet like the decline of leadership and social capital as our article in this issue observes and that of Sal Montana indicate, the edge began to erode. Between 1975 and 1990, educational attainments stagnated completely. This also coincided with sharp drops in social capital including voting participation across America and the failure of public and private leadership to advance the American economy. Since then, progress has been modest. America's lead over its economic rivals has been entirely forfeited, with many nations surging ahead in school attainment.

This threatens the country's long-term prospects. It also widens the gap between rich and poor. Goldin and Katz describe a race between technology and education. The pace of technological change has been surprisingly steady. In periods when educational progress outpaces this change, inequality narrows. The market is flooded with skilled workers, so their wages rise modestly. In periods, like the current one, when edu-

cational progress lags behind technological change, inequality widens. The relatively few skilled workers command higher wages, while the many unskilled ones have little bargaining power.

Early Family Environments and Subsequent Educational Success

Brooks notes that the research of Goldin and Katz is complemented by a report from another economist, James Heckman of the University of Chicago. Heckman (2008) also concludes that high school graduation rates peaked in the U.S. in the late 1960s, at about 80 percent. Since then they have declined. In "Schools, Skills and Synapses," Heckman probes the sources of that decline using data from long term projects by educational and developmental psychologists that assess the efficacy of intensive interventions with young, preschool children and then with the children followed into adulthood. His findings suggest that neither declines in school quality nor the rising costs of higher education predict the decline in educational levels. Instead, Heckman directs attention to family environments, particularly potent in the first years of life, which have deteriorated over the past 40 years. Heckman points out significant gaps in educational attainment are present at age five. Some children are bathed in an atmosphere that promotes human capital development and, increasingly, more are not. By five years of age, it is possible to predict, with accuracy, who will complete high school and college and who will not. Native intelligence matters, but Heckman points to equally important traits that start and then build from those early years: motivation levels, emotional stability, self-control and sociability.

The researches of Goldin and Katz, and Heckman powerfully buttress the arguments of those who emphasize human capital policies. Globalization or immigration or computers do not in themselves widen inequality. What does promote inequality is the gap between the changing technology of the labor place and the world and the educational level of the worker and citizen. It is a moving target. Technology does not

stand still. Technology and knowledge development are accelerating. To maintain prosperity, the level and means of providing education must change and accelerate. Boosting educational attainment at the bottom is more promising than trying to reorganize the global economy. Taken together these two large and broad findings speak to the need of earlier family, neighborhood, and school support of education and extending the availability of education beyond high school.

Workplaces as Learning Organizations

For the nation to return to prosperity and world leadership in innovation will require not just an expansion of post secondary education but the extension of education and continuous renewal of the person and the organization. Education that continues through the work organization as well as other structures in the community and through technology is the path that will restore prosperity to the economy and leadership of the United States in the world.

Challenges for Social Work Continuing Education

As we noted in the last issue we have in social work a repertoire of knowledge and skills to face these very fundamental tasks of meeting basic human needs and creating community where storms, economic collapse, and migrations have disturbed equilibriums. With this issue we have sought to look squarely at efforts to develop human and social capital in organizations as a critical need in the nation and as a call to social work. The efforts of social work will return to its fundamental roots of helping individuals and neighborhoods secure the essentials of life including housing, food and safety. However, social work must also engage in the process of building organizations that promote human capital, learning, and knowledge development. This includes traditional human service organizations but all other organizations including manufacturing and retail enterprises. This is done through enlightened leadership and organizations not built on the command and control model of factory manufacturing but

learning organizations built upon insight and participation of all members.

Conclusion

In Volume 12, which will come in 2009, we will look in the three issues at techniques to increase leadership effectiveness in organizations, the role of social work in criminal justice and the impact of immigration today. We will look in some detail at events that are occurring in Mexico that drive migration from Mexico and the impact on several states.

There is reason to think that now the American experience is shifting from a world view of cheap energy, abundant land, and plentiful water to one of greater conservation. How this is done and how human needs are met will be a monumental challenge that will last most of the century. It will require the sort of community building that defined social work at the inception of the 20th Century and draw heavily upon social work knowledge and talents.

Volume 11 Number 3

This edition leads with an essay by The Editors that describes the development of the Survey of Organizational Excellence (SOE) and how it serves to build social capital in organizations and in communities. In the second article Salvador Montana, following Dennis Poole, uses SOE data to examine how social capital plays a role in organizational achievement. He provides a masterful examination of the history of social capital and how that is tied to organizational dimensions. Dong Yoon and Michael Kelly look at employee retention through the lens of the SOE. Retention of skilled employees is critical to organizational success and building trust in any organization. Monica Faulkner and Elisa Vinson Borah examine with SOE data workplace features and the quality of child welfare efforts. They stress the important case of the character of organizational processes and the impact on organizational goals. Jinman Kyonne looks as well at employee turnover and examines the level and quality of teamwork as a means to decrease turnover of workers.

Laura Parker concludes with a new feature of a regular book review, in this case a review of *Child Welfare: Policies and Best Practices* by Mather et al.

This set of articles reflects the concept of organizational assessment and how social workers can use tools to improve both the quality of organizational life for employees and simultaneously make organizations more successful and creative.

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