



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Competition for excellence

Competitive environments are good for people, communities and economies. Healthy competition fuels the human imagination, generates creative enterprises of all kinds, and is the primary driver of sustainable business growth. Striving for excellence is fundamental to liberty, enhances the quality of human experience, and spurs the creation of vibrant organizations and partnerships. Make no mistake; competition means that we get to deal with winning and losing, dusting ourselves off and starting again, and all the hard work that accompanies achievement.

Don't lose the competitive edge

The opportunity to compete builds character, resilience, and a deep commitment to bettering ourselves and our teammates. A competitive spirit forged the American experience. Unfortunately, there are growing warning signs that the United States is in danger of losing its competitive edge.

Consider the following: In 2008, the United States was the world's leading economy, according to the World Economic Forum. By 2012 the United States had slipped to fifth, and by 2013 it dropped another two spots to hold seventh place.

In 2006 it took a new business 368 days to get established — acquiring a construction permit, accessing infrastructure, registering the business, accessing credit, coordinating protection of investors, paying taxes, being licensed to import/export, and having the capacity to enforce a contract. Today the same process takes 433 days. The Bureau of Labor Statistics

predicts that the rate of self-employment will decline from 6.3% in 2010 to 5.9% in 2020.

According to Gallup polling, only 30% of U.S. employees are highly engaged and enthusiastic about their work, while one in five is actively disengaged from his or her work. The remaining 50% could be considered as those who have “checked out” and are not committed to high levels of performance.

The World Economic Forum attributes the most recent decline in the U.S. ranking to factors including inefficient government bureaucracy, tax rates and regulations, access to financing, restrictive labor regulations, an

inadequately educated workforce, and poor work ethic. In essence, the strength of the economy is being depleted by the excess of regulatory burden and the slow, but sure, shift from a government of restraint to one of excess.

These pressures alone create an uphill battle to regain stronger economic footing and help to explain the institutional barriers that make business formation more difficult, which demotivates self-employment and entrepreneurship. Yet even more concerning is that both the World Economic Forum and Gallup point to declining self-motivation, work ethic, accountability and preparation of the U.S. workforce. The net effect of these factors is a less-prepared United States of America in an increasingly competitive global environment.

This data should generate deep concern across all segments of American society and ought to serve as a clarion call to reverse the current

trajectory of the U.S. economy. So what do we do to begin the hard work of climbing back up the ladder of prosperity?

The next generation

Long term, we have to build competitive capacity in our children, teens and young adults. This will require a distinct shift in societal philosophy where we turn our focus to providing experiences that nurture innovation, discovery and a sense of continuous improvement.

These opportunities are central to helping the next generation learn that the path to success is not a cruise, but a climb filled with

setting and pursuing one route only to find that adjustments must be made, setbacks must be overcome, and that considerable effort, dedication and teamwork will be required to reach the goal.

I often think about my dad and the people of my community who saw me get bucked off a horse for the first time as a kid. “Get back on” was the consistent message. In today's environment, the message might be distilled to “naughty horse,” “you don't have to ride if you don't want to,” “we will sue” or “there should be a law against getting bucked off.”

In far too many situations, we protect people to the point that they never experience failure or the joy of trying again and again until mastery is achieved. Parents may discourage tackling a new experience or spend excessive time doing the work themselves to assure that their child isn't disappointed.

When we award the participation trophy regardless of individual and team improvement, we are insulating the next generation to the point of suffocating both resilience and competitiveness.

Furthermore, we have to shift our national discussion to the concepts of accountability, self-reliance and motivation, industriousness, willingness to sacrifice short-term to gain over the long run, mastery, passion, purpose and the joy of competition.

Jefferson and the framers feared governance focused on providing an endless list of wants and needs. He wrote in 1802 that “if we can prevent the government from wasting the labors of the people, under the pretense of taking care of them, they must become happy.”

Unleashing the competitive spirit of the American people is a responsibility that each of us shares. The manner in which we conduct that responsibility will determine whether or not the best days for the United States are yet to come.

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