Productivity is Energy?

Getting Production From Any System Requires the Viewpoint That It’s Always Been a People Problem

By Selmer C. Murk
Chief Economist
International Building Institute

Given some validity in their projections, the economic seers feel that we’ve passed out of the recession and emerged into the beginnings of a recovery.

Given also the validity, of cyclical laws which presumably are still in force, we should be able to reasonably expect upward movement in the economy along with much improvement in our business ventures.

If that happens—and we have every reason to believe it will—a lot of the recent talk about the decline of productivity will wither away. After all, the construction industry will be heaven bent and in full voice to recoup the lost opportunities and to cut their losses.

“Let’s get back to business,” is the theme, “and start counting our bottom line numbers with black—not red—ink.”

Before that happens, can’t we just take another look at productivity as a fundamental component in the overall business and industry mix? Productivity is not all that sensational in the construction industry—and, Lord knows, it hasn’t been getting all that better through the years. Before things improve too much and we’re willing to give up a little here and there in the onrush of renewed business volumes, maybe we can make a one last look.

The Business Roundtable would love to see us keep an eye out for this bothersome item. They’ve been studying the construction industry for some time and even went so far as to issue a series of recommendations on how to improve productivity.

Maybe he’s not on the stock exchange and, perhaps, known only to his local banker. But isn’t there also something truly inspiring about a contractor who’s been ripped apart on a job that went sour, down to the bottom on his credit line, ready to go belly up, trading in fond memories of past achievements in place of sleepless nights—and yet somehow he rescues himself and soon enough is back in the thick of the bidding wars ready to do battle against his competitors.

Is there any stronger evidence that productivity is a matter of the mind?

How far removed is the same little ant from a political candidate who tries, and tries again to be elected, all but blinding himself to the obstacles created by shifting fortunes and a fickle public.

Who’s a good candidate for the troubled corporation? How about Chrysler?

The candidate? Try Ronald Reagan, OK?

In both cases, the odds were stacked up on the long side and a smartbettor would have placed his money on the possibility of failure. Yet, with energy, determination, and will the outcomes were changed around.

For the most part, too much impact is attributed to the disastrous influences of negative, outside forces. These could include obsolete equipment, constrained financing, governmental regulation, foreign competition, misdirected management, overstandardization and a host of other gremlins awaiting the opportunity to sidetrack.

That’s not to say that these elements don’t play a part in the scheme of things. But taking a realistic look at these influences, their role is largely effect rather than cause. After all, every other company faces these same
“It (productivity) isn’t oil or coal, not incentive or salary, and certainly neither equipment nor technology. Productivity, in its purest sense, is the result of a firm determination to do something—to make something—to be somebody.”

influences—and they aren’t folding it up and calling it quits. Most of the other companies are even making a profit.

It takes a strong mental commitment to see that renewal—i.e., updating of equipment and machinery—along with materials will offset obsolescence. A tough-minded manager sees all the economic obstacles poised against him—and then manipulates his company and these forces into a winning combination.

The loser is overcome as much by his own mental attitude as by external forces.

The key factor in all of these productive solutions is energy—and it’s energy which must first be in abundance to clear the way to make, defend, or sustain the commitment to produce.

During the past decade, it’s this absence of energy—of commitment—that’s been so noticeable from our country’s income-producing sector. It hardly makes any difference what you call it—willpower, desire, drive, motivation, or anything else—it all boils down to the same thing: energy.

The driving force behind our entire country is the income-producing sector. Once that sector falls down, the machinery for the remainder of our society will come tumbling after. What happened during the 70’s and now in the early 80’s to cause so much energy to drain out of the income producers?

It’s not all that difficult to be spoiled by success—or intimidated by adversity.

The principal opponent of ambition, and therefore of success, is complacency. Success didn’t come too easily, but it did respond to the energy outflow by arriving in abundance.

A championship football team loses to the cellar-dwellers not because the poor performers are suddenly a better team—but because the champs mentally are not as tough. By over believing in their own supremacy the champs let their productiveness slip away while the poor performers hoped for an upset and were mentally tough.

It often takes only a few plays and a few reversals for the champs to get them mentally and stimulate the energy level of the opposition.

A marriage partner can rest easy in the sun of having secured the sought-after relationship and then one day discover the romance has departed—along with the mate—because the mental energy level disappeared.

Competitors Gain

“The same can happen with a corporation which has long enjoyed the “Number One” role. Suddenly, the managers look around and find not only that “Number Two” has dangerously closed the gap but
Numbers Three and Four are also gaining.

Such a situation begins and ends with individuals. A great nation which has long occupied the top role rests easy on its laurels of strength and prosperity—ignoring the urgent warnings of some—until there are suddenly more co-equals and fewer supplicants.

Whether in a company or a nation, it takes only one or more individuals to energize the system. President John Kennedy excited and energized an entire generation—and got the nation moving again.

Pete Rose went to Philadelphia and showed that city’s baseball team the meaning of productivity . . . and hustle.

In both cases, energy proved contagious, passing from one to another until a movement had developed with a thrust and momentum all its own.

Where programs succeed, you will find a community of individuals begin moving in lock-step, in unison, all taking their individual strengths and lending it to the whole . . . in motion . . . in continuity . . . with a powerful momentum. That’s productive action. That’s productivity.

A program succeeds when the organization—whether two people or two thousand in a team, a corporation, a political movement, or a nation—is energized at the individual’s level.

As the construction industry enters this new phase of recovery, it would be interesting to observe which sectors of the industry move with a high energy level and which coast along content—drift with the momentum.

Some workers will be on the lookout for increases they feel are long overdue because there simply weren’t any money increases in the past couple of years. Productive or not, they want more—because they’ve always gotten it before, haven’t they?

If numbers were all that mattered, the outcome would be tragic. But more than numbers are involved. Today’s short term gain may be tomorrow’s drop to second place.

The capacity for improving technologically is at hand and it is entirely possible that the need to achieve more with less will find more and more people prepared to copy the ant. And we can—but only if we are determined and realize that productivity is, in the last analysis, a matter of energy.