

StarTribune

Business forum: 'Goal integration' can break U.S. impasse

Article by: FRED ZIMMERMAN

October 6, 2013 - 1:59 PM

The United States appears to be handling its politics incorrectly.

Years ago, the noted management theorist Mary Parker Follett observed: "There are three main ways of dealing with conflict: domination, compromise and goal integration."

Neither domination (where one party gets what it wants) nor compromise (where neither party gets what it wants) are satisfactory ways of resolving conflicts, she concluded. The best way, she explained, was creatively reworking the problem so both parties end up better off than when the conflict arose.

This she called "goal integration."

Both federal and state governments seem to be operating with successive "dominations." One party gets into power, rolls over the other party, does a bad job and gets voted out of office. Then the other party gets into power and does the same thing. Meanwhile, citizens of all persuasions get disgusted.

Decades ago, compromise was employed — at least much of the time. True, neither party got what it wanted, but the United States did progress within an atmosphere of cross-aisle cooperation and respect.

Republican Sen. George Aikin and Democratic Sen. Mike Mansfield, both leaders in their factions of the U.S. Senate, frequently had breakfast together to work through what could be done to make the country better off. President Reagan and House Speaker Tip O'Neill worked well together. When Democratic Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn was asked to give a speech on behalf of the fellow Democrat opposing the Republican Majority Leader Joe Martin, Rayburn replied "Speak against Joe? Hell, if I was in his district, I'd vote for him."

True goal integration has been tried less regularly, but has enabled some extraordinary accomplishments: the interstate highway system, the GI Bill providing education to veterans, the Marshall Plan for rebuilding Europe, and the nurturing of science and technology that has helped to create so many jobs.

There are ways the problems of the nation could be reworked to provide better systems today — if only we could work together creatively.

Maybe all aspects of the Affordable Care Act are not perfect, but the U.S. health system was roughly twice as expensive as those in most industrial nations while still leaving millions out of the system. Maybe the good parts can be retained and the problematic parts improved.



Could goal integration have helped avert the federal shutdown? Here, protesters gathered last week at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.

Evan Vucci , Associated Press



Fred Zimmerman

Feed Loader,

As with many other impasse situations, both sides have thoughts worth considering. Our nation is perilously in debt to a level that is unsustainable. That fact is not debatable. On the other hand, too much of the nation's compensation is supporting activities not helping the country or its citizens. That isn't debatable either.

Improving education is a laudable goal. The U.S. education compares unfavorably to other emerging and developed countries. But shorter school years, shorter days, limited homework and lucrative-but-unfunded retirements of much of the educational talent is not helping to achieve that goal.

Most citizens seem to believe that some selected governmental actions can be helpful. Our nation is safer than many other nations. Yet, in the 1960s, when the U.S. economy was providing healthy job growth, there were nearly 7 million more people employed in manufacturing than in the government. Now, there are 10 million more in government. So, there is concern about spending.

While the back-stabbing members of Congress bicker, the United States is racking up huge fiscal and trade deficits that both marginalize the country's influence and limit its ability to create jobs. Fewer people invest, because nobody knows what is going to happen. Then we rely on the Federal Reserve Bank to hold interest rates at near zero.

For those people who plan on living off their savings during retirement, the Fed action might be viewed as theft.

Government performs important services, but these are not always where the money goes. In 40 of 50 states, the highest-paid public employees are athletic coaches.

David Noble, highly regarded American Studies professor from the University of Minnesota, has detailed the need for both governments and citizens to recognize that limitless economic growth is not possible within the fixed resources of our planet. His book, "Debating the End of History," suggests that more intelligent cooperation will be necessary in order for us to survive at all.

While major political parties employ uncooperative my-way-or-the-highway tactics, our collective behavior is choking off both investment and job formation.

Maybe if we all instructed our elected officials to stop trying to put the other party out of business and work more intelligently and cooperatively, we might be surprised at what could be accomplished.

About the author: Fred Zimmerman is professor emeritus of engineering and management at the University of St. Thomas. His e-mail is zimco@visi.com.

© 2013 Star Tribune