

Economic development: Get specific about leadership, be responsible for taking action

I'll start this column with my favorite quote from comedian Lily Tomlin: "I've always wanted to be somebody, but now I realize I should have been more specific."



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In my continuing commentary on the AngelouEconomics report prepared for the Charleston Regional Development Alliance, I will now attempt to be more specific about what needs to happen next. The paragraphs in italics are from the report, and I've highlighted some parts of the text in bold for emphasis.

The marketing challenge

More than 750 people participated in developing this plan. When asked to name the primary obstacle that would stand in the way of implementation, respondents stated "inertia" more than any other variable. Many wondered if the region's history of slow, methodical change would hinder its ability to quickly implement this plan or respond to opportunity as aggressively as its competitors.

*Internal marketing, therefore, may be the most significant challenge standing in the way of economic development. To address the issue of inertia, Charleston's leaders will need to launch a campaign to inform the community about this plan and how they can become a part of its implementation. **The CRDA should organize an implementation team structured to support the plan long-term, even if the team's structure varies from the current system.***

Will our history of slow, methodical change prevent quick and effective implementation of the plan? Yes, unless we do something really different this time. That's not me talking, that is a majority of more than 750 people responding to the question posed by the Angelou staff.

Traditional patterns of leadership

For purposes of this discussion I will define leadership as "the ability to initiate and direct specific and effective action to achieve a community objective."

One of the behaviors I've seen repeatedly in

our patterns of civic and business leadership is that we often wait for leadership to come from somewhere else. In other cases, an individual or group accepts responsibility for taking action and then talks the issue to death, never taking any action of consequence.

Another element of the problem is what I would call "terminal deference to the sensibilities of everyone else." By over-emphasizing the need for different organizations to get along with each other and stay off each others turf, we create a state of paralysis in which no leader or organization is willing to push the envelope to get something accomplished, no matter how important that particular objective may be to the community as a whole.

Who will lead this time?

With respect to the AngelouEconomics plan, people are still asking "who's in charge" of seeing that the plan is implemented. Here is what the report says on that subject:

The region must take the next step in organizing its economic development initiative and adopt a system in which the CRDA assumes a strong leadership role in coordinating support from the rest of the community. [Emphasis added by Angelou]

Historically, the Alliance board has taken the position that the CRDA should not address internal economic development challenges within the community, but focus only on the "external" task of recruiting businesses to relocate or expand in the region. Past Alliance volunteer leaders have told me that the policy stemmed partly from a desire to avoid ruffling the feathers of other business and political leaders by getting involved in advocacy for education reform or port expansion, for example.

I think what the Angelou report is telling us is that the alliance and the region can no longer afford the luxury of that "softball" approach to leadership on economic development.

There needs to be a clear and unequivocal commitment by the alliance board to take the lead role in the community when it comes to ensuring that the plan is executed quickly and effectively by the various participants as recommended in the report.

The usual suspects: Haven't we met?

People who are plugged in to the ebb and flow of business and civic leadership in the region know that a relatively small number of leaders play something akin to musical chairs

between the various key business and civic organizations here, rotating from one board to the next in a continuous loop.

There are pluses and minuses to this state of affairs. On the upside, these people get to know each other and, as they change hats, they can facilitate cooperation and coordination between different organizations. And fortunately, it is also true that many of our most dedicated, effective and talented civic and business leaders are in this group because they are willing to put in the time and have considerable influence with other key players in the community.

But there is a downside. First, this pattern works against efforts to broaden the community's leadership base by giving others the chance to learn by actually leading. Second, this pattern inhibits cultural change in the way we execute leadership roles because the same people always do things the same way and consult each other about how to conduct their community leadership activities.

Help! I need somebody (not just anybody)

The first step in any 12-step program is to recognize that you need help. Through feedback to Angelou, we have told ourselves as a community that the greatest barrier to success is our own inertia. We are like a smoker who wants to quit but doesn't know how. We need help.

At a recent ThinkTEC event, venture capitalist Ted Dintersmith told the audience that local start up companies should seek out the growing number of retired senior executives in our region to serve on their company boards and provide wise and effective advice on how to grow their companies.

Taking Dintersmith's cue, perhaps the alliance board should ask a group of these executives to act as "leadership coaches" and help us break free from the ingrained habits and behaviors that have prevented us from making sufficient progress on the economic development front.

And while we are at it, let's get really serious about recruiting a new generation of younger leaders from our business community and giving them real (as opposed to phony) opportunities to perform in leadership roles as we implement the Angelou report.

Of course, that would take us out of our comfort zone, wouldn't it? And we wouldn't want that, would we?