

Wrong End of the Pipeline



AS I WATCHED the State of the Union address a few weeks ago, I was not surprised to hear President Bush speak to the issue of competitiveness. It's on the minds of lawmakers, especially members of Congress who face re-election this year in the wake of recent plant closings and huge job-loss tallies. It is also on the minds of those whose jobs are drying up and blowing away in an eastward direction.

Being a product of the Rust Belt, I get angry when I go home and see the shuttered plants that just a decade ago were turning out the best products ever made—from headlights and trombones, to pickup trucks and lawn tractors. And worse than seeing plants with locked gates is seeing massive, empty “brownfield” development sites waiting for yet another Wal-Mart, Blockbuster, and Dress Barn. How can we accept that we are in anything less than a full-blown competitive crises? I agree with the president when he says: “We must continue to lead the world in human talent and creativity. Our greatest advantage in the world has always been our educated, hard-working, ambitious people.”

This leads me to the president's all-hands-on-deck plan to train more math and science teachers. He is putting too much emphasis on the wrong end of the pipeline. Putting more teachers of math and science into classrooms is a great idea—we need to do it. There is, however, a critical need to sharpen the skills of people currently in the workforce. Among the need for immediate attention are leadership, interpersonal, and communication skills, according to a recent poll of ASTD members. More than 55 percent of those who participated in the poll noted that their own organizations are experiencing a gap in managerial or supervisory skills. Fewer than 12 percent noted that “basic skills” were in short supply. (See related article on page 12.)

Any program to improve the competitiveness of America that does not consider all approaches to rebuild its current workforce is folly. The crisis is right now and it is in the offices, plants, warehouses, and other workplaces in the United States.

The solution must be right now, too.

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