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Numbing Effect

I read an article recently in which the writer vividly captured the size of this financial albatross. In case you haven't paused to consider how big big is, here you go:

Back up one *million*

Ideas For Success | January

The streets are jammed today in Washington, D.C., as people converge to be present for the inauguration of the 44th president of the United States. It's an historic moment, coming at a time when the nation and the world face tremendous challenges. If this is the celebration of beginning a new day, then tomorrow Mr. Obama and other folks in power need to get to work fixing the economic malaise.

Over the first 100 days – always a measuring stick of the impact a new Chief Executive will have – there will be scores of ideas debated, adjusted and implemented. Hopefully, there also will be transparency and accountability, and respect for whose money the elected are actually spending. Climb aboard. It's going to be a fascinating journey.

Clean Start Last month, my wife noticed a puddle of water on the floor next to our running dishwasher. She placed a call to the national retailer where we purchased it a couple of years ago, and they scheduled a repair visit...for six days later. The young man arrived, spent 15 minutes turning it on and off, and informed us there was nothing wrong. He also collected \$70. Two days later a bigger puddle of water appeared, Kathy made a second call and a new appointment was set...seven days forward on Christmas Eve.

This time a more experienced repairman diagnosed the problem as a crack in the tub. He placed several calls to the warranty center, pleading with them to take his recommendation, then told us that rather than install a new dishwasher that day, their decision was to send a new tub, schedule another appointment – 12 days later – and incur an expense to their company of \$1,200 in parts and labor, for an appliance valued new at \$600. Of course, when the parts didn't arrive on time, we had to make another appointment – on January 13th – at which time our dishwasher finally returned to service.

There are many opportunities for your company to benefit from this story. First, from repairman number one: Make sure the people who represent you are properly trained to solve your customers' challenges. Second, from repairman number two: When you empower employees to handle situations, and they recommend solutions, listen to them; otherwise, your stated policy may end up costing you several hundred dollars more. Third, think hard before inconveniencing your customers for a month, because they just might tell everyone how you treated them. (Of course, the good news in all this is our three kids are now highly skilled dishwashers.)

Words of Wisdom Last year, I shared lessons learned a decade ago while working with Walt Disney World Resort cast members. I've been collecting quotes for many years, and have a database of more than 250 favorites. My intention during 2009 is to include a meaningful

seconds, and it's 12 days ago. Travel back in time one *billion* seconds, and you are watching Fonzie in 1977. Journey back one *trillion* seconds, and it's 29,500 years B.C.

Estimates put the U.S. bailout at eight trillion dollars and counting. That's more than just a few extra zeroes tacked on the end of a small number. It's a giant number that will jolt everyone into a future filled with challenges and uncertainty. Looking down such a dark road can be discouraging and perhaps depressing. However, humankind is all about survival – dating to the caveman. We'll find the way out of this, and the world will be better for it. Go get 'em, Mr. President!

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one in each issue. Hopefully, you'll find guidance and inspiration from the insight of these leaders:

"There are risks and costs to a program of action, but they are far less than the long range risks and costs of comfortable inactions."
– John F. Kennedy

With talk in Washington that a few trillion dollars more could be needed to turn things around, the words of the nation's 35th president are worth remembering. While the costs of getting out of this mess will saddle your grandchildren with a tremendous burden, that path might be better than doing nothing. Let's just hope these are the right answers; otherwise the tab will continue climbing.

Be Prepared Two weeks ago, we were driving on a Saturday afternoon to watch our son's 8th grade basketball tournament. While he was already there, we were stuck in traffic caused by an accident that shut down the only road to the gym. After 20 minutes of crawling to the front of the line, it became clear our only option was to make a u-turn and head back home, which meant missing the game.

Our 10-year-old daughter provided the perfect summary, when she said, "You mean no one ever thought this could happen? Why don't they have Plan B?"

Never was the importance of having Plan B more evident than in last week's amazing Hudson River landing. On Sunday, I spoke to a 15-year veteran commercial airline pilot who said they undergo recurring simulator training for how to handle various emergency situations. This approach to planning and preparedness meant that despite having only three minutes to take action, the pilots of US Airways Flight 1549 understood where to set the plane down to ensure the greatest odds of onboard survival and the least amount of on-ground casualties.

Waiting for things to happen before figuring out how you will react is too late. As a leader, it's imperative you consider maneuvers in advance. I read once where Southwest Airlines has a list of nearly 100 strategic actions they would take based on what happens in the world around them. You would be wise to spend time with your team developing a list of 'if, then' scenarios. With so much uncertainty ahead, steps you take today to prepare will be worth the investment, and could make the difference in your ability to stay in the game.

Until next month, continued success in all things.

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