Dear Tennessee’s Business readers:

A previous issue of Tennessee’s Business focused on Centers of Excellence in Tennessee. We were privileged to see what is happening at such centers at various universities around the state. In that issue, this column discussed excellence, presenting an enlarged picture of what excellence really means. It concluded: “The examples of the Centers and Chairs of Excellence show that we can take quantum leaps forward. Let’s decide again to do so.”

The budget situation of the State of Tennessee could easily cause us to concentrate our attention on “getting by” and “making the best of a bad situation,” abandoning, at least temporarily, any thoughts of advancing toward excellence. That would be a long-lasting mistake of enormous proportions.

We are near or, more optimistically, at the bottom of the curve. It should go up from here very soon. Now is the time to make preparations for the best of times. While that may sound naive and simple, I believe it is, in fact, the basis of good strategic planning. From where we are, it is easier to see the unnecessary and the unwise. It is easier to categorize things under appropriate labels such as “critical,” “essential,” “appropriate,” or “superfluous.” Whatever the labels, differentiation between “core” and “peripheral” items is easier now than when resources are abundant, if only because we are forced to make the distinctions by financial constraints.

Let’s use this time to do long-term strategic planning and determine to come out of these difficult circumstances prepared to take maximum advantage of good economic times in the future. That means making tough decisions and giving frank and direct answers to questions such as What are our ultimate objectives? Are we doing the right things that lead most directly and appropriately to the accomplishment of those objectives? Are we doing things that others can do better and/or less expensively?

We should take this time to establish evaluative processes to raise and answer such questions, and those processes should be impartial and comparative. Processes must allow for true determination of contribution toward the ultimate objectives of any organization. Those things that are not contributing must be eliminated, and the resources currently being used reallocated to those things that are contributing or even to new initiatives.

If we expect to “get by” and we fund things to “get by,” we will in fact “get by,” but we will not achieve excellence. If we expect, fund, measure, and demand the attainment of excellence, we will get excellence. There will be things we simply choose not to do, but those we decide to do we should, can, and must do well.

It is a difficult time. Revenues to the State of Tennessee and most other states are well down. The economy is more “recessed” than it has been for a long while. Individuals have watched their personal portfolios of investments decline. Many have delayed retirement. Charitable giving is down. It will not always be so.

Let’s prepare for the better times and build a plan. As an old song says, let’s accentuate the positive—eliminate the negative. Let’s determine what we most want and need to do and demand excellence in those things. Let’s put our money where we place our priorities.

Excellence costs more, but it’s worth it. If we aren’t wasting money on things that don’t need to be done or at which we can never be the best, then the total cost may be the same or less. The essentials are simple—a plan and a determination to make the plan work. The devil is in the implementation. As things get better, we may be tempted to try things that are not part of the plan. We must resist that temptation.

A wise man once told me, “If you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you always got.”

If we want more and better results than we have achieved before, we must change what we have always done. Is there a better time to begin than now?

I say again, “The examples of the Centers and Chairs of Excellence show that we can take quantum leaps forward. Let’s decide again to do so.” Let’s start now!

Sincerely,

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