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Expectant optimism: Creating the future with hope

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Celebrating what's right with the world is an excruciatingly unhip and uncool thing to do. We are carefully trained by safety-conscious parents, in-laws, institutions of higher learning, and the evening news to ignore or ridicule optimistic people.

-- Jerry Porras

During the question-and-answer period following a speech I recently gave, a question came from the audience, and I quote, "With as bad as things are in Michigan, how in the world can you be so optimistic?"

That is an easy one. The economic doldrums that we are in today are a result of the decisions of the past. We can do nothing about the past except learn what not to do. What a great gift we have been given of seeing what does not and will not work.

But even if you cannot buy into the argument that we have turned the corner and are moving from the past toward a bright future, you have got to remember the words of Steve Ballmer of Microsoft: "Nothing good happens without optimism."

We cannot create the region of the future if we continue to be focused on the ills of the past.

Now, do not get me wrong -- for us to pick up speed and build an economy for the next generation, we have a lot of tough work ahead of us. Every sector of our economy is in change.

We must embrace that change and understand that each and every one of us is responsible for creating the western Michigan we want.

The words of John Wesley come to mind: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

Pretty much sums up what we have to do for ourselves.

As I think about expectations, I am reminded of a story about a California school district where the teachers were told that certain third-grade students had scored well on a "late-bloomers" test. The test measured an innate ability of these students: Those who scored well had great potential and would be experiencing a learning spurt in the very near future, regardless of their past performance.

At the end of the school year, indeed, nearly all of these late bloomers had significantly better classroom achievement. I.Q. scores even went up in this group.

Not so surprising as this was the group that the test identified as late bloomers, right? Just as the test predicted, the kids that were supposed to bloom did. Now here is the Paul Harvey moment: There was no test!

The entire process was an experiment conducted by the school district. Those high-achieving students identified as late bloomers were just kids lucky enough to be selected at random. But how do we explain the increase in test scores and I.Q.?

It seems that when the teachers' expectations were raised to expect a learning spurt, they raised expectations, giving these students more time and attention. With the increased attention and focus they received, the students had more confidence.

With the added confidence by the teachers in their ability to succeed, the students' performance dramatically improved.

The lesson learned is that when people optimistically expected positive change, and coupled that with hard work and commitment, they got it.

In western Michigan right now, we can be thankful that we have many optimistic business leaders who are committed to working hard for the rest us. I urge you all to join them.

So yes, I am an optimist. I believe with increased attention and focus, Michigan too will bloom again. Our future depends on it.

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