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Gazelles and Mules

By Ron Kitchens

Each week I receive dozens of e-mails from readers on my columns. Most of the people who write are geniuses; well at least the one or two that agree with me. Interestingly, most of the e-mails and notes are from people who focus on the same couple of issues — our economy and who is to blame.

The truth is I do not really care to dwell on who is to blame. As I see it, we have enough targets at which to aim blame. I just do not see where it has any value. As a matter of fact, I believe the more we talk about blame, the more we damage our own opportunities at a prosperous future.

When thinking about damaging our own abilities to succeed, I am reminded of my childhood. I grew up in the Missouri Ozarks where, yes, the term "Stubborn as a Missouri Mule" was coined. I got my first "real" job when I was 12 years old as a groom in a stable. For those of you unaccustomed to the terms of employment of a groom, you spend a large amount of your time on the end of a shovel cleaning out horse waste and, in my case, mule stalls. I learned a lot about mules in those years, and one thing I will never forget is that any mule can kick down a barn.

You see, if you tie a mule in a small space and he sees no way out, he will begin to kick at the walls of the barn. Eventually, he will kick those walls down until the roof of the barn collapses and kills him. At this point you are undoubtedly saying to yourself, "What does this have to do with our economy?" You see, I believe that constantly talking about blame and how bad things are is the human equivalent of kicking down the walls around us and expecting things to get better not worse.

So I choose to spend my time, talents and energy on what can be done to positively affect our economy. In other words, working to change those things that will help to ensure that we reach the greatness that the majority of us wish for our state.

I think most people would agree that our efforts in Michigan should be to create a business climate that fosters the growth of what are commonly called Gazelle companies. Gazelles are defined as those companies that have an annual growth rate of 20 percent or more. A great example of this kind of company is Stryker Corp., which is the only publicly

traded company in the history of the United States to have 25 straight years of 20 percent or more growth.

Indeed it is the Gazelle companies that have the capacity to rapidly grow both jobs and wealth in our state. And it is these companies that we should be focusing on as we discuss changes required in our business climate.

So what are the key issues for Gazelle companies? According to a recent survey by the Ivey Institute, the two most important issues for Gazelle companies are: 1) Attracting qualified people and 2) Retaining key employees.

So according to the good folks at the Ivey Institute and assuming that we do indeed want fast growing, successful companies, our path forward is pretty clear. We need to ensure that we are the place of choice for the smart, talented people we already have and the place that those same types of people want to call home.

The easy part of this is that there are lots of smart, talented people and we can ask them what they need. The hard part is we have lots of mules that would rather kick down the barn than deal with change required by Gazelles and their employees.

It is time for each of us who believe we can become a state of prosperity to stand and be counted. It is time to choose the speed and agility of the Gazelle over the stubborn hard headedness of the mule.

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