

THE
CAPITALIST CENTURY

Soon the book on Hispanics was rewritten. Now many companies have specific initiatives not only to reach Hispanics as consumers but as potential employees. Why? Certainly not because of any lofty social agenda. Hell, no. It's because of need.

Smart corporate executives are saying, "If these people have skills and can keep me productive, I want them." It's as simple as that.

I would say that somewhere between now and 2015, Hispanics (and anyone who can speak Spanish, whether they're Hispanic or not) will become invaluable human capital. I see them moving quickly in the workplace, in fast and giant leaps. All because of concrete business needs.

The benefits should extend to all minorities, but companies can't simply wait for minorities to flood the workplace. If corporations don't invest in educating today's underprivileged minorities, then those citizens won't be prepared to be tomorrow's productive workers and future leaders. In the past, a blue-collar worker could make a middle-class living without higher education. All he had to do was pass a high school-equivalency test. But technology has changed everything. Today if you can't write, calculate, communicate, think, reason, and use sound judgment, you're in a world of trouble.

The public education system isn't getting the job done right now. Not at any level. So more and more businesses—especially technology businesses—will have to do it themselves. Some have already started to impact the education process by creating on-site training centers, for instance, that utilize current employees and managers as teachers. That should be a growing trend.

But there should be another movement in the area of education: You always hear people asking what America can do to improve math and science scores in our schools. I think businesses should concentrate on literacy. For most people in the work force, being educated means proving that you can continue to learn. It's a self-development thing. But you can't take advantage of programs like distance learning or onsite training if you don't know how to read.

Now, this might sound like a stretch, but I truly believe we as a nation will struggle to remain a superpower if we don't do everything we can to provide all people with the resources to build their skills and become productive participants in the economy. Back in 1989, I wrote a letter to then-President George Bush, putting him on notice that if we dropped programs like affirmative action, America would lose opportunities to develop willing and able workers. To me, that's a national security issue.

Make no mistake about it: In a world that is as treacherous, unpredictable, and dangerous as the competitive global market is turning out to be, maintaining anything less than su-

perpower status will be unacceptable. For America, this won't be possible without prized human capital. So the country will need to create workplaces where individuals—male, female, brown, black, you name it—can perform at their best. In other words, we need workplaces without harassment, without gender bashing, and without racism.

Management will have to lead the way. Executives do not have the luxury of staying out of the battle. If they are going to create workplaces that are conducive to top performance from all their employees, then they have to make their attitudes known. They have to make their presence felt on diversity.

Yes, I think there's hope. I see a growing number of young whites who are not shocked when they meet a person like me, a black person, with skills. They're not caught off guard when they walk into a courtroom and see a black judge. Or have a black boss. Well, some of them may still faint at the sight of a black person in the corner office. But compared with the way it was in the '50s, when I finished school, the progress is really overwhelming.

Let me say this: I worry that African Americans are falling behind other minority groups. I worry, as the disparities between ethnic groups become more apparent, that one group will turn against another. That will hurt us all. It will diminish America's strength, security, stability, and prosperity, and our promising future. Some folks believe that when the economy is good, racial animosities disappear. Well, the economy is at an all-time high, and it promises to remain there for a while. But ask anyone to give you the top ten items on the national public policy agenda, and race will be up there. It shouldn't even be in the top 20.

Believe it or not, American business can play a role in the national agenda to improve race relations. How? By supporting sensible, economically driven government programs like the Community Reinvestment Act, which prods banks to make loans in low-income neighborhoods. Look, every minority individual will not reach the executive suite or even thrive in a corporate environment. But the CRA provides entrepreneurial-minded residents in poor areas an opportunity to join the mainstream economy by being upfront, out-front, participants in the economic revival of their own neighborhoods.

In my view, it will be at least another decade before we're taking full advantage of programs like the CRA, or truly embracing more minorities in the corporate world. And that'll happen only if we treat diversity like a two-minute drill, as we'd call it in football. That's if we work day and night.

It's amazing, but when you consider how fast—and how much—America's economy is changing, we're still practically a developing country. Clearly, we've got a long, long way to go. ■