

Dysfunction Junction: “All Aboard!”

Sometimes I “get to see” things I wish I had not seen. I just witnessed first-hand both cluelessness and hopelessness from our leaders in Washington. This problem is not limited to one party or group! A group of North Carolina business owners and CEO’s traveled to Washington, DC September 22, 2011 for meetings arranged by the White House Business Council. The idea was to expose business leaders to policy makers so they better understand each others’ real concerns.

THE PROBLEM:

The problem is business leaders and policy makers speak different languages and have different life experiences. Their realities and daily activities are not on the same planet. They respectfully listen to each other but hear very little. Let me give you some examples.

We met two staffers in a Senate office. The Senator did not attend. When several business owners explained problems caused by banks unwilling to make or renew working capital or commercial loans due to fear of regulators, staffers said the Senator has “spoken on the record” about this problem. Really? Spoken on the record is the best you’ve got? I wish I was exaggerating.

We moved on to a Raleigh-area Congressman who DID meet with us and engage in some debate. He was much better informed than the Senate staffers. How-

ever, his frustration over the lending and regulatory issues showed when he said “I have written letter after letter to the agency and they won’t listen. Tell me what I am supposed to do next?” He also followed the official line when I asked him about rogue decisions from the NLRB (National Labor Relations Board) putting unnecessary pressure on employers from unions. He gave the “independent agency” answer, though I suspect he would “write a letter” to them if he disagreed with their path.

Finally, we ended the day at the Executive Office Building on the White House grounds. The staffers there gave more sophisticated answers. They acknowledged lending problems and other barriers to job growth. They pointed to minor improvements. They seemed genuinely surprised when one of the members of our group, who

sits on a bank board, explained how hard it is to get federal approval to make loans under the new small business programs.

However, and this was a real wet blanket for me, they displayed an extraordinary level of confidence that they can flip chart a complex plan for recovery, pass the bill, and create a million jobs. Not a single business person in the group expressed support for the Jobs Bill in Congress because they saw nothing in the bill that would cause them to hire. “Remember, our banks are choking off our life blood, and we see weak demand, so how can we hire?” We pleaded for simplification of the rules of hiring and commerce, not more complication. We asked them to consider real tax simplification. They went back to their flip chart to show us why they have it right.

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MY PREDICTIONS AND REQUESTS:

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Someone asked me if the day was worthwhile. No, if you measure value by accomplishments. Maybe yes, if you measure value by a better understanding of the dysfunction in our capital. Yes, if you measure it by meeting some good, hard-working business leaders on the trip.

My purpose in writing this is to encourage you to actively engage your political leaders. Please be very open and blunt with them. The time for platitudes and thanking them for breathing is over. I think they view compliments as a sign

you can be easily deflected and taken on a tour of the Capitol (plus, their egos are big enough already). They want and need to hear your real experiences in this economy, good and bad. They need to hear how you view past or future policy decisions. They need unfiltered and unvarnished stories from real employers, especially locally owned and operated companies. Professionally delivered, this does cause them to think and to consider your points. They get so little contact with real business leaders who share real stories affecting real jobs that you can have

a truly disproportionate impact on their thinking. They see enough corporate lobbyists.

Each Congressional office has an appointments staffer who will return your calls, set up meetings in DC or in NC, and arrange contacts with specialists on their staffs. Contact with the White House is much more difficult, but I will gladly speak with you about ways to do so.

Engage elected officials at all levels as if you have a real stake in the outcome.

Contact me directly if I can help you or your team.

Bruce

bruce.clarke@capital.org



Bruce Clarke, JD, is CEO of Capital Associated Industries (CAI), one of the nation’s largest employers’ associations, with offices in Raleigh & Greensboro, NC.
www.capital.org

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Executive Scan is written by CAI's CEO, Bruce Clarke, JD.

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Raleigh Office
919-878-9222

Greensboro Office
336-668-7746