

February 3, 2009

While SA melts down, “no-business” activities flourish

Tony Manning

In his book, *The Great Crash 1929*, the famous Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith offered a penetrating analysis of the events that led the world into depression. He writes that as markets melted, there was a proliferation of “no-business” meetings – gatherings of important people spouting hot air with no prospect of changing anything.

That is precisely what is happening in SA today. As the global financial system falls apart and economies everywhere slow to a crawl or go into reverse, our leaders stubbornly fail to deal with matters that will hold the country back for decades.

Politicians are fighting for power after the forthcoming elections. Judging from their utterances, many clearly do not understand what’s happening to the world, or how bad things will get in SA. They huff and puff and make ludicrous promises to voters whose lives they will surely make more and more miserable.

Service delivery at all three levels of the public sector is, in too many cases, getting worse not better. Three key elements of our national infrastructure – power, roads, and water – have become serious impediments to “a better life for all” and to future economic growth, and they will become increasingly costly to fix. Across the country, there are growing numbers of protests by dissatisfied citizens.

But it’s not the public service that’s in love with “no-business” meetings. Companies in the private sector also have too many of them. When you call them for help, the people you need are too often tied up talking to each other. A quick analysis of diaries would show that more time is spent on internal matters than outside with buyers and suppliers.

But aside from everyday work, there are other ways time gets wasted.

In most organizations of any size, huge numbers of people are diverted from their work to participate in “change management” workshops. These faddish “no-business” events cost a fortune yet yield piffling results.

Conferences, too, are popular. On any given day, there must be thousands of people taking time out from doing something useful to boosting the profits of conference organizers, venues, caterers, liquor firms, equipment specialists, audio-visual producers, speakers, entertainers, printers, badge and gift suppliers, and a swarm of others who saw this business opportunity. But one thing you can bank on is that no important decisions will be made at these sessions, and nothing will change for the better afterwards. As “no-business” meetings, they rank right at the top.

February 3, 2009

Then there's "networking" – one of the most fashionable yet useless activities of all. It's code for goofing off, and is regularly trotted out as an excuse for being away from the office for a long time. It gives people cover to attend conferences, indulge in long lunches, spend insane sums on fancy brands of Scotch, or play golf during the week.

Organizations should snap awake and recognize that we are deep into a new age of frugality. Performance matters as never before. Every employee should be held accountable for results. Anyone who doesn't make a difference that matters should be shown the door. "No-business" meetings – and all other "no-business" activities – should be banned.