

APRIL, 2008

This newsletter features topics related to managing change and improving our work environments. If there are topics you would like to see covered or feedback you have about this newsletter, please submit your ideas and feedback to the following link: <http://www.anneoffner.com/contact.htm>



For the most part, the economic news is grim. We, and our leaders, have overspent and acquired too much debt. Real estate is in an extreme buyers' market. The Fed is playing a role in business that is unprecedented. The list of events goes on and on, and as I write this, I find my heart rate racing and my brain worrying into a spiral of concerns for the future. So I decide instead to follow my mother's maxim: "Most of the things I worried about in life never happened." I have decided that worry will only bring me down and cause me to waste my efforts.



I did a little research and found out that yes, the economy is not

doing well BUT, there are some pockets that are actually exceeding expectations:

- ✓ Locally, Monsanto is thriving due to increased volume in the soybean business, expanded corn-trait penetration, and increased revenues from Round Up products: "Monsanto Co. raised its full-year ongoing earnings per share guidance for the second time in as many months due to strong demand for its seeds and traits and Roundup businesses."ⁱ
- ✓ According to a March 28 article in the St. Louis Business Journal, "...it was builders who posted the most impressive year-over-year revenue growth in 2007...The Michelson Organization, ARCO Construction Co. Inc., Ben Hur Construction Co., PayneCrest Electric Inc. and Sachs Electric Co. -- each generated between 56 percent and 81 percent growth last year for a combined \$1.48 billion in total revenue."ⁱⁱ Much of this was driven off interest rates set in prior years, but they credit large projects, a diversified client base, and hard working employees as key to their success.
- ✓ The Missouri Technology Corporation (MTC) has begun seeking venture capital "to create a new fund that will invest in the state's life-science companies." They hope to attract \$12M that will go toward financing startup companies "that are too

young and unproven to attract more conventional institutional venture capital."ⁱⁱⁱ Proponents of biotech in Missouri believe such funds are important to boosting our economy.

- ✓ Beyond Missouri, Wal-Mart is also doing well: "Amid the market turbulence of the last six months, Wal-Mart's stock has risen nicely and has pasted the Standard & Poor's retail index."^{iv} While sales grew slowly but steadily, the article suggests that the company's "cheapo reputation is serving it well."
- ✓ While I've been told this is actually a lagging economic indicator, some architectural firms have steady work: "Firms that focus on the institutional sector—which includes schools, hospitals, and government buildings—actually posted an increase in billings during February, with a category-specific ABI score of 54.9, up from January's 51.7."^v
- ✓ Lucky for those of us who love movies, Hollywood is not suffering in the down economy: "Box-office revenues went up in five of the past seven recession years dating back to the 1960s, according to the National Association of Theatre Owners... Hollywood is more than holding its own, with revenues running 4 percent ahead of last year's, according to box-office tracker Media By Numbers."^{vi} I'm not saying we're in a recession – but if we are, we know that entertainment will probably be a stable force.



Aside from keeping up with the news, sometimes we just need to learn to trust what we know. In times of uncertainty we can find stability this way.

I rely on the comfort of the psychology theories I've talked about in past newsletters. For example:

- ✓ Martin Seligman's "learned optimism" says that pessimists might be more realistic in their predictions but more often fall prey to depression and optimists might stumble more and be overly optimistic but more often succeed in their efforts (April, 2007 newsletter).
- ✓ Carol Dweck believes that if we have a growth mindset we will be more likely to develop flexibility, welcome constructive criticism, and find greater peace of mind and success in our careers (Feb, 2008 newsletter).
- ✓ Career development theories show support for the value of knowing our own abilities and preferences in order to make good career decisions. The more knowledge we have about ourselves, the more likely we are to identify situations that will best use our talents (April, 2006 newsletter).

And I recognize that none of us can make it alone – in order to function we need other people with perspectives and resources that we ourselves do not possess. I was learning to ski this year and heard my instructor call out to us, his students, "let go of your fear, it only slows you down!" Easy for him to say I thought to myself as I panicked at the top of every slope I encountered with the certainty that my skis would not listen to the "no fear" slogan. And then, during one particular lesson on a very snowy afternoon, I gained enough confidence on the slopes to understand what it meant to let go of the fear. As I learned to rely on my ski instructor and friends, the last two days I skied this year were a barrel of fun – and even though I fell down a few times, it was not so scary!

I am certain, by the way, that Martin Seligman would pat me on the back for turning my pessimism into optimism and

Carol Dweck, I'd like to imagine, would have cheered me on as I embraced the growth mindset. Sometimes in order to get through tough times, we need to rely on the sage advice of a more experienced person.



Of course, there are lots of theories that explain why we don't behave in the most constructive or collaborative ways. My brother, Jerry Offner, a Yale-educated anthropologist, sent me a note recently to remind me that psychological theory is not the only means of explaining why we behave the way we do. He told me this about George Foster, a mid-20th century anthropologist who focused on peasant

studies in Mexico: "George Foster developed the idea of the 'image of the limited good.' He noticed that Mexican villagers perceived the world as having only so much good in it so if someone was doing well economically, they were taking away from others in the village--an early statement of the zero-sum game analysis.' Jerry calls this self-limiting behavior the "dismal box of the image of the limited good."

As we navigate the treacherous waters of an unsettling economy, and perhaps a year of disappointing financial market activity, I suppose the best approach we can take is to know ourselves well, seek out those who will provide support or nudge us toward adopting a new perspective - and operate responsibly within the "dismal box of the limited good."

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This newsletter is edited by Larry Offner of West Palm Beach, Florida.

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ⁱ St. Louis Business Journal: <http://www.bizjournals.com/stlouis/stories/2008/03/24/daily15.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.bizjournals.com/stlouis/stories/2008/03/31/story3.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.stltoday.com/stltoday/business/stories.nsf/story/A4F1BFE6BDC11490862574210008C860?OpenDocument>

^{iv} Newsweek: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/116592>

^v Businessweek: http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/mar2008/id20080321_011758.htm?campaign_id=rss_daily

^{vi} The Boston Globe: http://www.boston.com/business/articles/2008/03/11/movies_are_thriving_despite_the_economy/