

Power: Retraining workers wise investment

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

Corporate America is gradually realizing how investing in employee retraining pays real dividends, according to a business executive who has studied the concept . . . and applied it.

Companies like Motorola, Chrysler, General Electric and other companies have invested millions of dollars upgrading the skills of production workers as well as fast-track executives, Philip H. Power, the former chairman of the Michigan Job Training Coordinating Council, said Wednesday at a meeting of Leadership Oakland at the corporate offices of Kelly Services in Troy.

One of those companies investing in its employees is the Suburban Communications Corp., which Power founded and continues to oversee as chairman of the board of directors. The company publishes 71 community newspapers in Michigan, Ohio and the upper Midwest, including the Observer & Eccentric group in Oakland and western Wayne counties. SCC employs 934 people.

"And guess what?" Power said to about 40 people participating in the intense leadership pro-

gram, "productivity increases." Leadership Oakland, founded by the Council of Chambers of Commerce of Oakland County, Inc., is an intense, nine-month training program dealing with the economic, educational and cultural aspects of Oakland County. The address by Power focused on "Economy: Business, Industry & Labor."

Power, who is also a regent at the University of Michigan, has been focusing on the relationship between education and the work force for more than a decade. He is a trustee of the National Center on Education and the Economy and was a member of the Federal Job Training Partnership Act National Advisory Committee.

His address provided food for thought, according to Leadership Oakland participants.

"I was particularly interested in his (Power's) comments about fixing the K-12 educational system," said Marc Perry, president of BART (Blacks in Advertising, Radio and Television).

Power said the educational system needs new standards, charter schools and an emphasis on school-to-work transition. Students are ill-prepared for the work

place, he said.

The transition to work begins when parents threaten "to kick their graduates out of the house," Power quipped.

Eddie G. Powers, president and executive director of the Southfield Chamber of Commerce, said the discussion raised important considerations. "Re-education is for everybody from the top down," he said.

"It was entertaining and enlightening," said D. Stewart Green, a Birmingham attorney. "It's not the first time I've heard the message, but it's clear that technology is changing the way we all do our jobs. I particularly liked the story about the three things needed for the factory of the future."

Green was referring to Power's jocular reference to future factories needing a computer, a man and a dog. The computer runs the plant and the man feeds the dog, he said. The dog is there to bite the man if he gets too close to the computer.

Power emphasized that learning is a life-long obligation. "The best — and perhaps only — economic security for workers," he said, "will be based on their skills

and their ability to market themselves repeatedly over time."

American institutions — as well as individuals — must adjust to changing needs, Power said. One idea he said he recommended to U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich, a personal acquaintance, is earmarking part of unemployment compensation funds for retraining those out of work.

Organized labor balked at the concept, Power said. But innovations like that will be needed if the American work force is to retain high-skill, high-wage jobs. "If the (American) work force can't hack it (doesn't have the required skills), then companies will simply move the work elsewhere," he said.

Doreen Oiko, deputy chief of police in Auburn Hills, said the ideas presented by Power were "dynamic and thought provoking. Whether you agree or disagree, he raised some issues that should be brought to the forefront. I wish we would have had time to talk about them at length."

"His comments prompted me to read his column," said Oiko, referring to Power's column that appears in many of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

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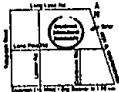
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| 2 I'm not afraid to take a chance now and then. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 I'd prefer to make a living by performing a useful service. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
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