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State Farm Luncheon

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State Farm Luncheon  
John M. Dunn  
March 27, 2013

Opening
Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to be here. State Farm and Western Michigan University have a long-running and very strong relationship in several areas that are important to all of us--teacher education, professional business education and minority opportunity. I consider it a privilege to be invited to talk today to State Farm representatives on a topic that is so clearly one of your company's core values--ethics--or as we like to call it on my campus, doing the right thing.

The intersection between what we do as a university and what State Farm demonstrates as a company value really comes in the area of opportunity for the next generation of professionals. The State Farm Foundation and company have for many years provided scholarship support to young people at WMU who are studying to become teachers and to young people who show promise as business leaders. Those scholarships have been aimed at building the number of minority students in those disciplines. Our students and our faculty and staff are enormously grateful for that kind of support.

Our Haworth College of Business has had strong support from State Farm, with senior-level executives serving on its advisory board and sharing their insights in the lecture hall and with a strong scholarship program, particularly in the area of financial planning.

We recently thought it only right to demonstrate the quality of the programs State Farm supports. In October, we had the opportunity to send a couple of our top students in our sales and business marketing program to Central Missouri State University to compete in and win the 2012 National State Farm Marketing and Sales Competition.
One of our students took the top prize overall and another came in fourth--beating their counterparts from places like Dusquene, and Louisiana State and Wake Forest universities as well as the universities of Southern California, Houston and Northern Colorado.

**Doing the right thing**

Your topic today is ethics in business. We spend a great deal of time in our professional programs--particularly business--addressing that topic and trying to prepare our students for the challenges they will encounter. Over the past decade and in the aftermath of Enron and the Wall Street meltdown, we enhanced that part of our curriculum with an emphasis on ethics in specific disciplines such as accountancy.

My emphasis today, though, is not the discipline-specific challenges, but rather the more global responsibilities we have in maximizing the use of resources. You and I may have built our careers in very different industries, but it is clear to me that we both work for organizations that have carved out a set of basic values that transcend the natural differences we find in the work place.

On the WMU campus we spend a lot of time and energy on talking about sustainability and our responsibility to make the most of the resources entrusted to us. That's led to some wonderful developments and made our campus a leader in campus sustainability.

But I encourage our campus to look carefully at the most precious resource entrusted to us--people. I want my campus to focus its energy on making sure that every part of that resource is able to reach its maximum potential. We succeed as a university when that happens. And the communities we serve face a better future when we make that happen.
Sustainability, ethics, doing the right thing--in the broadest sense, it all boils down to the responsibility we all have to the people we both serve and employ.

**Diversity—in its totality**

First, I'd like to suggest that one of the most important lessons I want University students to leave us with is the value of diversity. That's a word that's become almost a caricature of the incredibly important value it describes. When we talk about diversity on campus, we talk about it in its broadest meaning. We ask student to respect and embrace the differences that each of us brings to our interactions with others. We've voiced a mantra of civility in addressing some of the most contentious differences of opinion, but what I want members of the University community to believe is that differences are not just something you tolerate. Differences are something to be embraced and celebrated as a critical aspect of our society's strength.

Differences of race, religion, gender and ethnicity are just the beginning. Those are the easy ones to recognize. We work every day to make sure we're addressing those.

Differences of beliefs and world views can be contentious. But even the most egregious political or religious differences expressed are a reflection of our strength and commitment to freedom of speech. They serve as an illustration of our commitment to work through differing points of view.

Our strength comes from considering and sometimes embracing the value of the differences we all bring to the table--differing viewpoints, geographic backgrounds, political philosophies, learning styles and even temperament. The more we embrace the differences in others, the more we give ourselves permission to be ourselves and not fit into someone else's idea of what constitutes the ideal.
The Extravert Ideal
Here's an example I've been using lately. For many years as a culture, we have celebrated learning and workstyles that revolve around teamwork and continual communication in an open group setting. We have come to value what one best-selling author calls "the extrovert ideal." Our schools and our business models are built around this ideal. Think about cubicles, open office environments, team meetings and group brainstorming. Being an extrovert is mandatory, and parents often worry when their children are not outgoing or extraverted enough to fit that ideal.

A funny thing has happened recently, though. Research from universities around the nation has documented what a significant part of the population already knew. We're not all extraverts. In fact, some of our most productive people and historical heroes are or were introverts--Albert Einstein, Mother Theresa, Rosa Parks, Dr. Seuss (Theodore Geisel), Chopin, Steve Wozniak, Bill Gates. I'm not talking about people who are shy. I'm talking about people who are thoughtful, introspective and more comfortable working alone.

• In fact, if the research is correct, more than a third of the people in the room this afternoon are introverts--people who work better in quiet and solitary environments and prefer an evening with a good book to a night out with friends. And there's evidence that such preferences are not learned personality traits but rather something hardwired into our brains. The studies are laid out in a best-selling book by Susan Cain--"Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking." She's been invited to present her analysis to executives at Google, Microsoft and the U.S. Treasury.
Researchers have also discovered that building our infrastructure and systems around that extravert ideal is not only not beneficial, it is also counterproductive for introverts who valiantly try to remold themselves to match the extravert ideal.

It is counterproductive as well, Cain tells us, because discussions are too often carried by "the loudest, not the brightest" people in a group. That's something many of us have already figured out as well from watching cable news shows.

Cain predicts a "quiet" revolution may be coming as those people who revel in solitude come into their own. The next activist group may well rally around the cry, "Introverts of the world unite." This may not be as far afield as you might think. A recent local newspaper viewpoint was written by a militant introvert who sagely noted that "E=MC^2 was not the work product of a party animal."

It's our responsibility as professionals to reimagine, rethink and rebuild our systems in a way that ensures we're receptive to and able to release the creativity of the next Albert Einstein, Warren Buffet, Bill Gates, Steven Speilberg, J.K. Rowling or Charles Darwin. If we are wise, we will not abandon the team-building and group-friendly features of our workplaces, but instead intersperse them with facilities conducive to reflection and solitary accomplishment. Both are important.

The point is simply that when we fail to recognize and embrace the unique ways people interact with the world, individuals inevitably suffer. Our society as a whole suffers as well because we miss out on having the full and efficient participation of people with significant gifts to share. When we recognize that each of us adds value in his or her own way, we grow as a society.
There's an enormous personal benefit as well. If you're learned to recognize that value, you'll find it easier to accept your own unique style and capacity. Your own growth as a citizen and a professional is enhanced when you give yourself the space to be who you really are and when you have the comfort level to operate in the way that allows your peak performance. Your ability to accept the diverse background and traits of others gives you permission to demand (quietly, if you're a true introvert) that others respect what's unique about you.

**Closing**

My wish for you is that as you consider the critical ethical challenges of business ethics today, you include in your discussions consideration of how best to maximize your use as a company of the most important resource entrusted to you--your people.

I leave you with a quote from retired longtime airline executive Gordon Bethune who today is in demand as a management consultant.

"I like to think that a lot of managers and executives trying to solve problems miss the forest for the trees by forgetting to look at their people -- not at how much more they can get from their people or how they can more effectively manage their people. I think they need to look a little more closely at what it's like for their people to come to work there every day."

Isn't looking closely at that experience really the essence of doing the right thing? I think you'll agree that it is.

I hope your conversations today are productive. I thank you for asking me to be part of the mix. And I would be remiss if I did not invite you to visit our campus and get to know Western Michigan University better. Thank you.