

Speaker: Find success with many leaders

The Post-Standard



Thursday, March 12, 2009

By Rick Moriarty, Staff writer

Companies trying to dig themselves out of the current economic malaise would do Heifetz well to encourage many of their employees to lead and not rely too heavily on a select few at the top, a leadership expert told a local audience Wednesday.

"In healthy companies, lots of people practice leadership," said Ronald Heifetz, founder of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, in remarks before the Famous Entrepreneurs Series at Onondaga Community College.

Unhealthy companies do the opposite, he said.

"They rely too heavily on people at the top," he said.

Why is that bad? Because even the most brilliant corporate leaders get things wrong sooner or later and sometimes they get things wrong a lot, said Heifetz, author of "Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading."

He cited Japanese carmaker Toyota as an example of a company that has benefited from encouraging leadership among many of its employees. Toyota, a leader in fuel-efficient vehicles such as the best-selling hybrid, the Prius, encourages workers to suggest new and more efficient ways of doing things, he said. It also produces lots of models of cars without relying too much on any one, he said.

General Motors, on the other hand, is a company that does not appear to have empowered many of its employees to show leadership and be innovative, he said. Though there no doubt were employees at GM that could see the dangers of relying too heavily on gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles, they were not in a position of authority and their opinions had no effect on the company's approach to the marketplace, he said.

As a result, General Motors lost an opportunity to shape the market rather than focusing on models that, while profitable when gas prices were low, were doomed when gas prices rose, as they did last year, said Heifetz.

"They bet on the big cars that used a lot of gas," he said.

GM has been losing billions of dollars over the past year and is relying on government handouts to avoid bankruptcy.

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