

A Better Way

By Howard P. Klein, CPS, MS
managing partner, EZKR Accounting and Consulting, LLP

The public and the politicians are caught in a futile routine. When things go bad – economically, socially, ethically – the public and the politicians are quick to point out what’s wrong, find someone or something to blame it on, and then... nothing. Nothing really happens to fix the problem or to find a solution to keep it from happening again. So things stay bad or get worse. Our present dysfunctional and over-taxing government is proof perfect.

We have been watching this “dance” for many years, yet somehow the situation hasn’t been bad enough, cost enough or become painful enough to overcome public disinterest to effect sustained, substantial change. The politicians know that all they need do is promise the “right” kind of changes to get elected. Once elected, they can concentrate on helping the “powers” that helped fund their election campaign so they will be assured funding for re-election. Somehow, keeping their promises to the public, who elected them and who rely on them to do their job and make things better, becomes a low priority.

It doesn’t take a genius

Albert Einstein defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”. Then are we all insane? While we may not agree on the best way to fix things, we do all know what’s wrong – and at some point, it doesn’t really matter any more whose fault it is. If we want to make things better, we need to stop talking about who is a Republican or a Democrat, and focus on the fact that we’re all Americans, New Yorkers, and Westchesterites. It’s time to work together to find real, sustainable solutions to our common problems and stop doing the same things we have been doing over and over again.

If we’re going to enact meaningful change, a unique set of circumstances make this the ideal time to do it. On one hand, there are challenges: High unemployment, lack of credit and the collapse of financial markets have combined to create the worst recession in decades. Broke and broken, New York State is at the tipping point financially. Services are being cut across the board... and it’s not just the elderly and needy who are suffering. Last but not least, elected officials’ ethical misdeeds are causing voters to lose faith in them. The public must hold our politicians to a higher standard and not allow actions that are not what they promised or not in the public interest. And, if a politician is not performing well, the next election is the time for a change. We don’t need term limits, we need people to vote.

In 2010, almost every elected official in New York State is up for re-election. Listen to the people running for office, demand effective plans to make the changes they promise a reality. Tell the people you elect that you intend to watch them, and that you expect them to do what they promised. In Westchester, we have a new County Executive, Rob Astorino, who is focused on economic development and determined to reduce government spending. Hold him accountable for his promises and help him make it happen.

We as a public, and a business community, must deal with this situation. We can't sit back and wait for our elected officials alone to make the necessary changes and miraculously figure out – and do – what's best for us. The community needs to get engaged, become part of the conversation, and remind those who hold public office who they work for, and what's expected of them.

So, what can you do?

The first thing you *have* to do is CARE.

Second, realize that your contribution – your voice – can and will make a difference.

Get engaged. Start by asking questions and gathering information. Go to the school board meetings in your town. Visit the websites and attend the meetings of local business groups. Put some effort into understanding the issues and challenges we face.

Pay attention to the decisions our elected officials make on our behalf. Then, talk with them. Discuss what's working and what's not. Force them to have the tough conversations, and hold them accountable for the promises they made while trying to earn your vote. When you have their attention, demand more oversight on spending. Tell them do more with less to, just like the families in our county and state are doing. Also, demand more transparency. For example, put the County budget in front of the public with enough time to read, understand and comment on it. Our elected officials have a tremendous amount of technical expertise available to them – people who are willing to donate their time and services to serve the public. These are the kind of resources government cannot afford to waste.

Of course, we can't just ask more of our elected officials; we have to do more too. When we ask our elected officials to make the hard choices, we need to support them after they do it. That happens by understanding that there is a shared sacrifice, and calling on others to accept that fact as well. To make things better, we can't put our own self interest in front of the greater good.

With so many stakeholders – the general public, business owners, union representatives and members, politicians - the task of repairing our broken system seems overwhelming. But we have the ability to change things for the better, and it is our responsibility to do it. I'm asking you to start by doing one thing. After you read this article, decide NOT to just put it away and assume you can't help.

Margaret Mead said it best: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."