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Restructuring the economy of the Appalachian Highlands

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by Mary Trigiani

Strategy. Books have been written about it. Careers have been built upon it. From the time ancient military figures laid plans for vanquishing opponents, to today, when it is a business necessity, strategy runs the gamut of acceptance to skepticism. The skeptics tell us Strategy is the reason for Analysis Paralysis. Too much navel gazing, too much money spent on plans, not enough acting. Yet strategy is something every human performs during the course of the day. With observation, logic and execution, our lives are productive. Strategy gives structure to our values and beliefs, enabling us to enact them in concert with other human beings, to leave the world better than we found it.

The values and beliefs of our region are known to us. Today, however, they are eclipsed by the news of our challenges and our loss. In a world that often seems to revolve around the negative and the coarse, the contribution and the vision of Appalachians have been eclipsed by the fascination with what holds us back. Our roots as entrepreneurs and visionaries who led and supported the birth of a nation are invisible. We appear separate from our nation and our world. The entrepreneur's candor, sense of urgency, frugality, embrace of sacrifice – ironically the foundation of every corporate giant in the history of humanity – are not associated with Appalachia.

Embarking on a universal strategy to strengthen and grow our economy is eminently possible. Beyond the strategic priority of defining our product as a sturdy regional economy, we must satisfy the strategic condition of how to unify and integrate our strengths and resources to shape a sturdy regional economy. And resist the temptation to make our economic resurgence about marketing alone. We must be entrepreneurs in spirit and

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deed, making every penny work and going head-to-head in challenging one another, out in the open, on what we are doing and what we are spending. A regional strategic plan can begin with four action sets.

Aspire. Ponder “entrepreneurial” as the descriptor of our product for a 15-year span. (This will not preclude large players; it will give them context for joining us.) Articulate the variety of factors that differentiate us and give us some advantage. Consider five industry sectors that need nimble players: small scale, agile manufacturing; software coding; new age agriculture; new age energy; and rural healthcare. Every sector requires technology savvy, for which our students, from primary school forward, are displaying aptitude and desire; we engage educators in aligning science, technology, engineering and math curricula with employers who need our graduates. We expand the intersection of art and science, one of our traditional advantages, to introduce new patterns of work. And we cultivate a mindset of delivering return on taxpayer investment.

Define. List the counties in the region. Look at every agency, resource and program with an eye to whether it is delivering jobs to the region or having a positive effect on the process. Catalog the grants – state and federal – coming into the region on an annual basis and pool them around a smaller number of initiatives. Review the players in economic decisions and identify the stakeholders, including those currently disenfranchised. Create a skills inventory: what we have, what we need to work in the targeted industry sectors. Outline a model for targeting corporate and foundation partners in the private sector dedicated to reaping with us the rewards of economic resurgence.

Measure. As we pursue long-range change, we recognize tactical progress – requiring that we measure, record and report the results of every initiative. What do key stakeholders observe about work and life here? What jobs have resulted from taxpayer investment and what work do people leave to pursue? How many people are we graduating from high school, community college and university with certificates and degrees that feed our specific industry targets? What is the cost of what we are doing? Are we moving on from what does not work, editing or even shutting down expired initiatives and deploying the associated assets into something that produces results?

Deliver. Beyond meetings, engage in dialog and project work, with milestones, to inject discipline into execution. Make measurement and analysis part of every task. Act as if this is a profitable company, in which every division must perform under one purpose. Build in obsolescence– after something is done, disband the project or agency and tackle the next challenge.

John Doerr, the Silicon Valley investment giant, advises entrepreneurs to measure what matters. We can invigorate our centuries-old legacy by defining what matters and holding each other accountable for measurable execution. This is the moment to tap the strategic energy and entrepreneurial spirit we inherited.

This is the second of a three-part editorial by Mary Trigiani, senior vice president, New Peoples Bank. Coming next: the renaissance of a region.

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