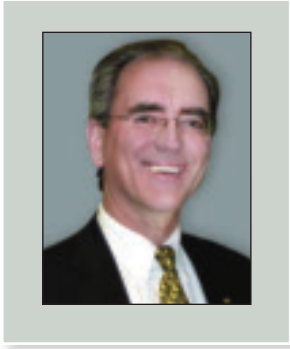


▶ MANAGING EDITOR'S DESK



Nelson Fabian, MS

When I was studying philosophy and Eastern religions, I came across a phrase the essence of which I have never forgotten. It went something like this: It is easier to get out of the way of a rampaging elephant than to try to get on it to somehow stop it.

The point is that sometimes things happen that we can't control. It is the wise person who chooses to both accept that and to do his or her best to work with the aftermath (of the rampaging elephant!).

Today, we sit and watch as the rampaging Great Recession and its legacy continues to play out. As painful as it is to watch rising debt levels, layoffs, cuts in programs, and so forth, neither you nor I nor NEHA is going to stop this elephant of an event.

I came across another quotation recently that has maintained a hold on me. I found it in Jim Collins' excellent book, *Good to Great*. The quotation follows from the story of Admiral Stockdale, who was held in captivity for eight years during the Vietnam War. Collins interviewed Stockdale and asked him how he survived when others didn't. Stockdale explained that the optimists never made it out because they couldn't handle the crushing disappointments that followed broken promises of prisoner releases. He stressed that people develop the capacity to endure and ultimately make it through such an ordeal only when they accept the harsh realities of their situation.

Collins coined the term "Stockdale Paradox" from Stockdale's story. He went on to note that the truly great companies all practiced this concept, which he defined as follows:

"Retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties AND AT

Increasing Capacity Even as the Size of the EH Workforce Declines: NEHA Cobrands With Decade

*Moreover,
we are determined
to find ways to
build capacity in
environmental health
through the use of
disruptive technology.*

THE SAME TIME, confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

When facing a difficult situation, such as what our profession is dealing with in this economic downturn, it is crucial that we accept the many burdens and changes that these times are forcing upon us while we maintain a strong faith we will come out of this OK in the end.

Taking these two quotations into account, it is important that the NEHA membership knows that our association holds no illusions that we can somehow protect our profession from the economic forces impacting us. (We can't stop the rampaging elephant.) What we can do, however, is actively tune into and use the lessons from this experience to prepare our profession for future success. (Confront the realities that we are facing while maintaining faith that we can prevail in the end.)

As we try to understand the aftermath of the economic issues playing out, one in particular stands out. Much has been written about

income and wealth disparity in the United States as we follow story after story about the shrinking of the middle class. It is instructive to note that many middle-class jobs involve some form of information manipulation. Information is processed through these jobs to produce higher value information outputs.

The Internet and a host of related technologies are changing that as these technologies provide less expensive ways to produce even higher value information outputs. The price being paid for a more efficient and productive economy is the loss of many of the information manipulation jobs formerly held by middle-class workers. And yes, this trend is also touching our field of practice.

Rather than deal with these kinds of brutal realities, I see many professions ignoring them. In response to reduced levels of funding, I see one professional society after another "taking to the streets" to argue how important their profession is and to point out what the dire consequences will be if further cuts to their ranks occur (as if anyone is even listening). It is as if the name of the game is to protect what we have, all the while pretending that somehow we can turn back the clock to some glorious past, say, 1987. To put it bluntly, that ain't gonna happen.

These kinds of reactions violate the Stockdale Paradox by ignoring the brutal realities that we need to be confronting and adapting to instead. No program, including those long held sacred by local governments (such as police and fire), is immune from the economic ravages and workforce changes roiling our communities today. According to the National Association of County and City Health

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Officials (NACCHO), the public health workforce (of which many NEHA members are a part) has shrunk by almost 20% since the Great Recession began. No number of protest signs or letters to the president are going to change those numbers.

In the blind rush to man the barricades and protect what we have, I am also seeing professions get caught up in the specious argument that cutting their ranks automatically translates into a loss of capacity (i.e., the amount of work that can be done). Implicit in this argument is the idea that capacity is a function of workforce size. Cut the size of the workforce and you automatically cut the capacity of that workforce.

This argument, which drives many of the protests now taking place, is just not valid. Worse, hiding behind it hinders our ability to confront the brutal realities of our day, which as Stockdale maintained, is the necessary step that we have to take to get ourselves to a better tomorrow.

As many of you know, I come from the world of engineering. In studying engineering I became familiar with the idea that technology can be seen as a “disruptor.” That is, the application of technology to a system or way of doing things can multiply by orders of magnitude the productivity (and capacity) of that system, just as we are seeing today through the loss of many middle-class jobs.

Technology can boost the output of a system and decrease the personnel investment necessary to accomplish a set amount of work. As economies move toward higher levels of efficiency, this trend will continue to accelerate irrespective of what anyone thinks or wants. It is one of those brutal realities that we face today.

It is important not to misread what I am saying. I am not overlaying any particular political or humanistic perspective on the essence of what technology is or does. *It just is*, that is, to understand technology is to understand how it changes the game and “disrupts” the order. Technology itself is value neutral. (It is in how we apply technology that we enter into the world of values, ideologies, intentions, etc.)

Let me now go back to the two quotations from the beginning of my column:

- The rampaging elephant: we're not going to reverse the economic forces impacting us.

Irrespective of what we think or feel, the Great Recession happened and its legacy

continues. Moreover, this economic event, whether we like it or not, has had, and continues to have, an impact on our profession (and of course, many others!)

- The Stockdale Paradox: we have to deal with the brutal facts even as we are determined to prevail.

We ignore at our peril the brutal realities that our profession is now facing. We are a downsized profession—whether we like it or not—and no amount of protesting or wishing that things were different is going to change that. *Yet we can still prevail in the end* if we can understand how the future is unfolding and how we can take advantage of these trends, which includes the wise use of new technologies.

NEHA is not committing resources to recreate 1987. That would be futile and a dereliction of our duty to prepare this profession for its future. Instead, we have our sights set on tomorrow and we are working to understand better how the events of today are likely to transform this profession so that we can prepare our members for success in that future.

As examples of this effort, last year we presented a play at the Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition that previewed how we might be working in the future (and I might add, with new technologies). I am happy to note that the session was standing room only. Furthermore, we will soon be presenting a new column in our *Journal* that will be written by a futurist—in fact, Google's top-rated futurist speaker—Tom Frey. Frey is an expert in discerning how work is changing and what we need to do to be in phase with how it is evolving. Tom will also present the keynote at our 2012 AEC in San Diego. His message will center on how we can prepare ourselves for success in the future. And then, NEHA just took the unprecedented action to cobrand with Decade Software Company.

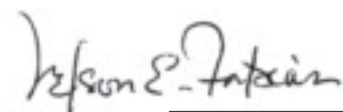
As we were beginning to appreciate that the work world of environmental health was evolving, our interest in the disruptive nature of technology grew. We decided that the time had come to work more closely with technology companies with the intent of tapping into their technologies to build capacity even as the size of our workforce was diminishing. To make matters easier, we determined that it would be wise to begin this venture by working closely with a single

company from among our many friends in this industry. We conducted an elaborate request-for-proposals process. After reviewing a number of well-prepared and attractive bids, we decided to select Decade Software to be our cobranding partner.

The mission of this program is to push capacity building aggressively within our profession by tapping into the power of new IT applications. In choosing to work closely with one partner (while continuing to work more generally with all of our IT partners), we envision that this program will open up opportunities for us to drive the work of our profession to higher levels of capability despite an environment of program, financial, and staffing cutbacks.

Through this column, I am happy to formally announce to the membership that NEHA and Decade are now partners. NEHA couldn't be more pleased with this partnership as our respect for Decade and its commitment to environmental health have been unwaveringly high and rock solid over the years. We will be working closely together to explore how we can jointly design and introduce IT products into the practice of environmental health and by so doing, increase the productivity and accomplishments of this profession. This initiative will also involve training and preparations for our members so that they can gain an upper hand on the future.

To see a profession undergo the trauma that ours has gone through has been painful. To watch this happen knowing that nothing can be done to stop it is all the more frustrating. Nevertheless (to echo the two pearls of wisdom from the beginning of my column), there is no excuse for idly standing by and just hoping that someday things might get better. NEHA's membership needs to know that NEHA has taken the initiative to understand the lessons of the economic events sweeping through our profession. Moreover, we are determined to find ways to build capacity in environmental health through the use of disruptive technology. In the process, we persist in our goal to help each and every practicing environmental health professional become more successful in the future. 🐘



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