

Saved by the Bell

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Few things are scarier than the thought of premature burial. George Washington reportedly requested that his servants not inter his body for at least three days out of concern that he might be accidentally buried alive. The fear was so great in 19th century Europe that coffins of the well-to-do were occasionally outfitted with signaling devices—usually bells—that could be used to alert people above ground that the deceased was in fact still alive.

Collapse and misdiagnosed death were common during the epidemics of cholera, small pox, and plague. Additionally, the test to determine an individual's death—the absence of a discernable heart beat—was not the most reliable method of evaluating the presence of life.

Fast forward to the present. We have been buried, according to a few pundits, and left for dead. We have apparently collapsed from and succumbed to the epidemics of greed, excessive risk, and flawed decision making.

The Leader's Response

Leaders today must ring their bells to alert everyone that the assumption of our collective demise is inaccurate. Here are four ideas to reclaim the positive momentum for your community and city staff:

1. **Don't settle for the easy diagnosis.** Broad trends and assumptions make interesting conversation and lousy decision-making tools. Invest the time to look at the real numbers for your community, and increase the rigor and regularity with which you examine the data.
2. **Be clear in your communication.** Tell people the truth about the current state of affairs and projections. But, be clear that the question for resuming economic stability and growth is “when” rather than “if.”

3. **Talk about the future in positive terms.** The words you use have meaning. Communicate a positive expectation for the future rather than the assumption that all is lost.

4. **Trust the resiliency of the American people.** This marks the twenty-second recorded recession since 1902. The lengths of these downturns have varied from six to forty-three months. And, the end result has always been the same—the American people recovered and the economy grew even higher.

Napoleon said, “A leader is a dealer in hope.” Reach from beyond the proverbial economic grave. Ring your bell to paint a realistic and hopeful vision for the future. It just might save us.

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