

On My Mind
1/13/06

According to "How Full Is Your Bucket?" - a recent addition to populist literature on how to get along and get ahead - if we all paid attention to filling others' buckets with positive thoughts and actions instead of emptying them by criticizing and complaining, we'd all be happier, more satisfied and more productive. Though easy to read, with simple suggestions and explanations, the book is based on years of research, according to authors Tom Rath and Donald O. Clifton. Examples are provided throughout of the difference that praise, instead of criticism, can make in people's performance and effectiveness.

So I'll start by trying to fill, or add to, Ben and Tim's bucket. They certainly haven't wasted any time in getting things underway. Appointments to both cabinet and administrative positions were announced right away with, according to some observers, less cronyism and more attention to ability than usual. New financial ventures have already been announced, and are, presumably, also under way.

More attention was paid to the Carolinian community at this ceremonial inaugural than at any other in the history of the CNMI.

More emphasis was placed on improving the economy, promoting business, than at any previous inauguration.

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For all that, though, it does seem as though some things are being changed too hastily, without thinking through the implications. Just as I was about to suggest that, given the discomfort of almost everyone at the ceremonial inauguration except the Carolinian honor guard, it was high time to be a little more realistic about what constitutes formal attire in this tropical environment, and go back to wearing short-sleeved open-necked shirts, Governor Benigno R. Fitial has directed all government employees to wear long-sleeved shirts and ties at work every day but Friday.

Not only does this deny the CNMI's tropical climate and island custom, not only does it impose more costs on government employees, most of whom probably do not own very many long-sleeved shirts and ties - much less the also acceptable, according to the order, jackets - but it also incurs an enormous waste of electricity, as agencies will now be fully justified in keeping their office air conditioners set to very cool temperatures in order to accommodate everyone's wearing long-sleeved clothing and ties. Given the utility company's power problems, this is not at all helpful, to put it mildly.

Sure, it's a good idea to make certain that government employees are properly attired when they interface with members of the local or foreign business community, with potential investors, and the like, but the new dress code also forces those people to wear suits and ties, when they ordinarily might choose not to do so, given the local climate. It would have been far more reasonable and just as suitable, for instance, to direct that all employees wear plain, light-colored short-sleeved (woven, not knit) shirts - preferably open-necked.

And for formal wear, instead of those hot, bulky, generally poorly tailored and poorly fitting long-sleeved jackets over shirts and ties, how about forming a committee to come up with a design for more stylish, more appropriate formal island wear? The Philippines, of course, have their barong shirts, but since the CNMI apparently does not want to adopt those, there's no reason it couldn't come up with something equally appropriate but uniquely suitable to the CNMI.

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Another instance of not considering the consequences is the dictum issued by Fitial during his inaugural speech (interestingly enough, not reflected in published copies of his speech) that 'everyone must have a pro-business mindset, or be prepared to be assigned elsewhere.' "Business" was not defined, but in light of the examples he provided of business promotions he'd already undertaken, it appears that once again the implications of what was being said were over-looked.

The governor announced that his goal was to see the CNMI's visitor count reach one million during his administration. He did not address what he expected those million visitors to do while they were here. To date, the CNMI's major tourist attractions have been its historic sites - both ancient and modern - and its tropical setting - its sea, sky and sand. Assuming those are expected to continue to be the major attractions, then it should be of paramount concern that those features remain attractive - that lagoon pollution be decreased, that coral and other marine flora and fauna be protected, that the vistas, the greenery, the bird life of the CNMI be preserved.

If the governor's "pro-business" mindset is to be compatible with his goal of one million visitors, that "pro-business" mindset must be defined to include a pro-environment mindset as well. So far, however, that does not seem to be the case.

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One more example: the proposal to establish a brewery in the CNMI. It is well-established fact that good beer depends on good water. Certainly, Saipan does not offer that. So it would appear that Rota is the likely candidate for housing this proposed new industry. One can only hope that before the idea goes much further, determinations will be made as to how much water the proposed brewery will require, and just how extensive - and how quickly replenishable - Rota's good water supply really is, the concern being that the brewery could drain Rota's good water supply in a very short period of time.

In fact, it would be a good idea, it seems to me, that an ad-hoc panel be set up to review the investment proposals being submitted to the governor, to determine - even before the investors enter the permit arena - whether the idea is even suitable to the CNMI. For example, there is a company that has already met with the governor promoting a different approach to the handling of solid waste on island. This company proposes to set up a system that will take various components of the waste stream and through treatment with a proprietary mix of chemicals turn them all into useful products such as concrete blocks. The company also said it intended to take down and dispose of the Puerto Rico dump - over a period of six years.

But the CNMI does not need such a system. With help from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, there has already been a thorough study of alternative solutions to the disposal of the dump, of alternatives for treating the waste stream. After public hearings and much discussion, a solution was arrived at that is working: the CNMI now has a properly functioning land-fill, it has begun to set up re-cycling programs that work for the CNMI, and it has reached consensus as to what it can afford to do with the Puerto Rico dump: turn it into a public park. There's a saying that "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." That applies here - the CNMI's handling of its waste stream is working; it does not need fixing - and this is the sort of project the ad-hoc panel could weed out before investors get too deeply enmeshed in the permit process.

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I also wonder whether the governor stopped to think through the implications of his midnight swearing-in. It was bad enough to find out that we all sat and sweated through what amounted to a farce, a "photo-opportunity," a ceremonial swearing-in - allegedly because the governor feared a "vacuum" in leadership to which no previous governor-elect had ever given a thought at any of the six preceding swearings-in - but it was worse to find out, this past Friday - if the *Variety* is to be believed - that the real reason for the midnight swearing-in was the governor's superstitious belief in the luck of the number eight.

If he wants to be open and honorable, the least he could have done was to forego the swearing-in, and simply deliver his inaugural speech, which, presumably, he did not do at that midnight ceremony. Instead, the impression has been created that he has already deceived the public - from the very beginning.

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An omission of a different sort was the silence regarding what may well be the CNMI's biggest problem of all: the damage being done its social fabric by the addiction of so many of its people to the ubiquitous, everywhere, poker machines - machines, moreover, that are not only poorly monitored but increasing in number.

Journalist Frank S. Rosario reported in an article in last month's issue of *Pacific Magazine* that poker machines now are the second highest source of revenue in the CNMI - to the tune of some \$36.6 million in fees and business gross receipt tax collected. Only the business gross receipts tax, at \$57 million, generates more revenue.

That may make it tempting to leave the poker machines in place, but one has to ask: at what price? The social costs are devastating - underfed neglected children, non-functioning homes, torn marriages, untreated illnesses, unpaid loans, forfeited mortgages, addicted and untreated parents, aunties, uncles.... On the other hand, if the monies being put into poker machines were put into the local economy instead - to buy food, clothing, furniture, school supplies, toys, cars, pay rent, etc. - the local economy would grow enormously, generating all the more revenue from the resulting increase in gross receipts taxes. The government apparently does not know how much money is put into the machines, but if the industry pays \$36.6 million in fees and

taxes, just imagine how much it must take in to be able to afford to continue in business!

Is the governor content to let the CNMI's growing reputation as a "den of iniquity" - full of poker machines and "massage parlors" (another "industry"/social ill not mentioned by the governor in his inaugural speech) - continue?

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At least we haven't - so far - encouraged industries that go about advertising a need for full-time shooting instructors - with no experience necessary - as apparently does Guam's Western Frontier Village - the ad appeared in last Thursday's *Pacific Daily News*.

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Movies this week: 3 PG's, 3 PG-13's, 1 R. Given the insipid nature of some PG's, not to mention the PG-13's, even that's not much of an offering.