

Is the only way really UP?

We in New Mexico are used to seeing the world from the vantage point of the basement being as we are last or near last in so many of the good things that used to be typically American like a good education, widespread literacy, innovative entrepreneurialism and job creation. Instead of focusing on those problems, we've chosen to claim bragging rights to the old saying that "the only way is up" and are busy attempting to convince ourselves that success is just around the next mesa. Trying desperately to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear from decades of failed management, the optimists (I'd call them *myopic*-timists) are trying to avoid the truth by inventing their own. They claim that New Mexico's misfortunes are part of a larger national problem - one that involves (you guessed it) racism, a penchant for an in-equitable society that advantages those who've managed to amass wealth...and generally way too much individualism.

There's plenty of blame to go around for our sad state of affairs, and one of the principal offenders is our preference for recycling the same old, incompetent, publicly-employed managers AND politicians. We justify promoting unskilled and inexperienced people to positions that demand a high level of competence by saying, "the pool (of possible candidates) is just too shallow and we must make do with what we have." The result is classic and unavoidable *strategic incompetence*. And when that incompetence is combined with an ingrained preference for political incest (rotating the same people into new positions where they are bound to fail) we lay the groundwork for the spread of incompetence to all areas of government.

Political incest is New Mexico's stock in trade. It's our valuta, our wampum, and it's how we measure our success. "How many of your family did you get hired by the State? That many? Great! Now we have a friend in X department that will do us a favor." And so it goes. Favoritism gets things done here, and I'm not talking about pay for play or bribery, though they do exist. I'm talking about the good old boy system of just plain quid pro quo'ism based on family ties. It's a circular, non-merit-based highly-protected and generations-long system with no off-ramp which is why we cannot break free of it.

I experienced some of it myself when I worked in State government and continue to experience it today as a private citizen. Those that engage in it are right about one thing, however. It's alive and well at the federal level. The one big difference between our system and the feds' is that New Mexicans have made it an art form and we're not really concerned about hiding it. So what do we do with all those people inside that revolving door of the easily corruptible political family circle who are constantly chasing positions of authority or re-election? Do we limit their ability to parlay their positions to better ones with term limits? Do we create regulations that prohibit extended family members from holding certain positions in the same departments or organizations? Maybe we should tighten up hiring practices by demanding that candidates have at least a modicum of experience before being awarded a Governor-appointed job.

The truth and the bottom line is that we are experts at wasting human capital because of our basic one-party system that prioritizes party loyalty over competence. If we don't come to grips with that salient fact of New Mexican life and work to eliminate our propensity for perpetuating nepotism and political incest we will never move steadily up the good lists. Until such time, I guess we can always sit back and be 'New Mexico true' to our state's motto, *crescit eundo* - "it (planned mediocrity) grows as it goes."

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