

World Knowledge Forum 2012

October 10th _Bob King_ Co-prosperity

If Bob King had his way, we would all behave like kindergarteners.

The current president of the United Auto Workers spoke today at the 13th World Knowledge Forum on his philosophy that companies and unions need to work together to maximize social justice and economic benefits. Kindergarteners must learn to work together, and it is essential for the men and women who run companies and unions to work with, not against, each other. Mr. King calls the outcome of this approach ‘co-prosperity.’

In the past, the U.S. auto industry and the unions had mostly confrontational interaction, what Mr. King called a “gotcha approach,” where one party attempted to solidify its position over the other. This has been revolutionized over the past few years, according to Mr. King.

“There are three critical components to achieving co-prosperity,” he said. “One, you need a strong, high-integrity CEO. Two, you need strong, high-integrity union leadership. Three, you need the two parties to build a culture of creative problem-solving.” Mr. King further emphasized the qualities required of those in charge, stating that “In a global economy, you waste tremendous resources if you have adversarial leadership.”

Leadership at both the Ford Motor Company and the UAW was credited with breakthroughs that have been achieved, particularly in light of Ford’s recent economic troubles. Mr. King suggested that without some sort of mutually beneficial agreement, there was a strong possibility that Ford would have gone bankrupt, and he recognized the leadership’s open-mindedness as one of the reasons negotiations went well.

“We made a plan together,” he said. “If you can understand the other party’s issues as well as they do, it leads to a different level of respect and understanding.”

Trust and the sharing of ideas were central themes throughout Mr. King’s speech. He emphasized that partnership in problem-solving is further reinforced by the benefits it provides both the management and the union workers. “It creates the atmosphere where the union feels comfortable in being creative, in being dynamic, in being innovative.”

This innovative and creative attitude, he said, would inevitably add up to company profit through better productivity and efficiency. “Unless we give the consumer the best quality product at the best value, there’s not going to be job security or income security for our membership.” The end result of this communal attitude is, according to Mr. King, a better product at a better value.

“We are committed to the success of the company, because that does the most to protect in the long term. It’s what is best for our members.” Mr. King stressed the importance of job security for the white- and blue-collar workers at the factory level, not the stockholders, executive management, or CEOs, whose tenure is usually short term.

Mr. King understood that for the idea of co-prosperity to work, the leadership in place must be the correct one. “Unions are most often a reflection of the management,” he said, and that management must be receptive to a changing culture in the global landscape.

While cultural change was not without its difficulties, Mr. King took the time to summarize his philosophy. “There are three keys to a problem-solving culture: integrity, mutual respect, and information sharing.”

Simple enough for a kindergartener to understand.