

Economy Not an Excuse to Bleed Workers

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By Alvin Clay III

About a year ago, White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel created a stir by saying, “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that is, an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.”

How one reacted to that quote was probably split along party lines. Emanuel was either a political opportunist poised to foist a radical agenda on a wounded and unsuspecting public, or a nimble public servant, able to shift priorities quickly in a crisis. Either way, there is truth in his statement.

In times of stress, people are willing to accept behavior they would not accept otherwise. The question is whether the behavior is truly an appropriate response to the circumstances, or an excuse to take advantage of people at a time of weakness.

A few months ago, a friend told me he thought employers were taking unfair advantage of the economic conditions, using them as an excuse to do things they’d always wanted to do but couldn’t get away with: Eliminating positions, cutting pay, reducing benefits, and demanding more hours had become common practices, even though they were not necessary, my friend argued.

I wasn’t comfortable agreeing with him, at that time. I had done some of those things in my own company. And I know I had no motivation to do unnecessary things because I could use the economy as an excuse. These were painful decisions that I would just as soon let pass. So I didn’t write the column. Then something happened last week. I was counseling someone who was having a particularly difficult time with an employer. The employer was demanding and unreasonable, calling the employee’s home at all hours, barking orders and complaints.

Ultimately, the employer became abusive -- screaming, cursing, and hurling insults. The employee had enough, and quit. The employer’s response? “You can’t quit. Where are you going to get a job in this economy?” And we wonder how businesspeople get a bad name. So the ugly side of “not letting a crisis go to waste” might actually be happening. Hopefully, it is not widespread.

As business managers and business owners, we need to avoid falling into the trap of allowing economic conditions to become a pretext for unethical, immoral, or exploitative behavior. Just because employees understand that pay raises may have to be postponed, and they understand they are fortunate just to have a job, doesn’t mean they are worthy of less dignity and respect.

All of us who manage businesses and employ people need to be careful that some of the logic of the abusive boss doesn’t influence our decision-making. Before we act, we must ask ourselves how our decisions will be judged when economic conditions improve and our employees and vendors have choices. Will we be the fair-minded

owner or manager who made the tough calls and balanced the needs of everyone when times were tough? Or will we be the arrogant jerk who took unfair advantage? Woe to us if we are the latter. And good luck finding any loyal workers to do your bidding.