

Interview

Defining Leadership

An Interview with Alan Hassenfeld, Hassenfeld Family Initiatives



Alan Hassenfeld

EDITORS' NOTE In addition to his current post, Alan Hassenfeld is Chairman of the Executive Committee of Hasbro, Inc, where he began his career in 1970. He was appointed Vice President of Marketing and Sales in 1978, became the President of the company in 1984, and received the titles of Chairman and Chief Executive Officer in 1989. In May 2003, he passed on the responsibilities of CEO in order to fully concentrate on his position as Chairman. He is the former Chairman of the Right Now! Coalition and Admiral of Rhode Island Commodores. Hassenfeld is the recipient of Honorary Doctorates from Bryant University, Rhode Island College, Salve Regina University, Johnson & Wales University, Roger Williams University, and the Waterford Institute of Technology.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Hassenfeld Family Initiatives is a philanthropy whose goals are to globalize safety and human rights within the area of children's products, empower women in developing countries, and undertake initiatives to improve the economy, education, and business opportunities in Rhode Island.

What do you believe is the biggest flaw in our leadership at the moment?

Right now, there really is a lack of leadership. People are not taking responsibility for their actions, and people who wanted the authority have to understand that when they accept the authority, they have to take the responsibility.

I do not know all of the details of the stimulus package, but I think all of us in America know there must be a stimulus package. I do not know the politics of the situation, but if I had been the President, with this being the most important thing that people were looking at, I would have called for three or four members of the House and the Senate along with the President's team, and literally brought them into a room on a bipartisan basis and told them they were not leaving until they had fashioned something meaningful for all Americans. There is too much of a Republican and Democratic focus and not enough thinking about America. So I would have left them in that room and waited until they had a plan, and then I would have let them out.

I respect many Senators and Congressmen as individuals, but you put them together, and they're almost like a gaggle of geese. I go back to what James Freeman Clarke said: "A politician thinks of the next election. A statesman thinks of the next generation." Right now, very few people are thinking of the next generation. They might be mouthing words, but all they really care about is getting elected again.

Is it realistic with people talking about "survival," to hope for that long-term view?

I think it's more important than ever. As we try to think about survival we need to have a long-term view, because right now, we're putting Band-Aids on the dike, and we are robbing from our future generations. Somehow, some way, someone has got to pay for what we're doing today. If we continue to ruin the environment and continue to run up deficits, the only people that are going to be here to pay are our children or our grandchildren or our great-grandchildren – we won't be here. This is like many of the things that were done in the '50s and '60s with some of the union contracts, where the unions didn't realize that, given the terms of the new contracts, people would retire en masse at age 55. And now we've had to change those things. We have a great opportunity right now for a paradigm change. There's an old saying, "Sacred cows make good hamburger." There can be nothing sacred right now. The only thing sacred should be the knowledge that we must change and we must all bear the burden of what change is going to mean. We all have to hurt a little bit.

Can change only be driven from the government, or in the end, does it really need to be driven by the private sector?

It has to come from the common bond that

many of us have talked about sharing. Talk is cheap, but it has to come from the government – from civil society – and it has to come from business. I love the civil society in most cases, as long as it's exercising good rational thinking. Sometimes it opens our eyes to things we otherwise might not see. We can come up with solutions that can be implemented, if we work as a team. Government is a problem because of the perception of government. In America, we have something called the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, and I totally believe in it. We're not allowed to bribe anybody. But in reality, the way campaign finance is being utilized today, it is bribery for access. You look around and every day someone else is getting themselves into trouble because they had lunch with someone. So somehow, we have to stop preaching to the rest of the world, and start listening to what we're saying ourselves, i.e. let us practice what we preach.

How critical is it for corporations to maintain a philanthropic focus during these tough times?

I'm passionate about corporate social responsibility and philanthropy. Even in bad times, you must continue to do what you're capable of doing without hurting your various stakeholders. Your company isn't going to be a good company unless it has good people. And to retain and attract good people, you have to be a company that has a heart, and that has a gravitas. The first group that you must take care of is the community in which you live, breathe, and work. You must continue to help improve health care and education, because through those, you're actually helping your own people. In our case, we're always going to be doing things on a global basis for children, because we know that all of our success comes from family and children, so we have a debt to repay. At the same time, we're sowing the seeds for the future, if we do things right. I'm not religious, and I'm not being philosophical, but you come into this world naked and with nothing, and you leave this world with one thing: your name. The most important thing that we seem to have forgotten about is our own responsibility to our own name, and to what we want to be remembered for. If you want to be remembered for making tons of money and having whatever you touch turn to gold, great. But most people in the world want to be remembered for having raised a good family, having enjoyed health and happiness, and having contributed to society – the simple things. ●