



A Partnership for Progress

An Interview with Richard A. Stoff,
Chief Executive Officer, Ohio Business Roundtable

EDITORS' NOTE Richard Stoff is also the founding president of the Ohio Business Roundtable. Prior to creating the Roundtable, Stoff served 18 years in management consulting with two of the world's largest professional service firms. He was elected as a Partner with Ernst & Young, directing the firm's public sector practice in Ohio, and before that he served as a Senior Consultant with Touche Ross & Co. (now Deloitte & Touche). Stoff earned his B.A. in Political Science, with honors, in 1972 from Northeastern University and his M.P.A. in 1975 from The Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. Public policy runs deep in his family: his wife of 35 years earned both her law degree and M.P.A. from Ohio State, and his daughter and son-in-law both received their M.P.P. degrees from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.



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ORGANIZATION BRIEF The Ohio Business Roundtable (ohiobrt.com) is a partnership of the chief executive officers of Ohio's largest and most influential businesses. Established in 1992, the Roundtable's mission is to apply the knowledge, experience, and insight of its CEOs, working in partnership with public leaders, to solve complex problems affecting Ohio's overall social and economic vitality.

Has the mission and work of the Ohio Business Roundtable evolved over time?

While we exist as an organization to improve competitiveness, we see ourselves as being in the business of major systems change, which means, by definition, we take the long view on issues.

With the hundreds of public policy challenges that need to be tackled and for which state leaders need answers, a fundamental tenet contributing to the Roundtable's success is to focus CEO attention on only the biggest impact, long-term issues that are at the core of making the state successful.

For more than 20 years, spanning four governors, it's noteworthy that we have focused primarily on three issue areas: talent and education, economic development, and state fiscal and tax policy.

Being a catalyst for change requires staying power, and it's hard work. It means assembling a fact-base, conducting penetrating independent analysis, architecting solutions, creating a sense of urgency, and mobilizing CEOs to advocate for and see the change through.

Major systems change also requires trusting relationships between the state's business leaders and our elected officials.

We want our elected officials to succeed. Understanding this dynamic is key to success. We are fiercely nonpartisan but highly political. Especially with contentious issues like education reform, change in public policy happens through the political process and our members have enjoyed strong, positive working relationships with the governors and legislative leaders of both political parties.

Why hasn't more progress been made with education and can the system really be reformed?

Our public education system in Ohio has changed dramatically and has improved.

Our graduation rates are higher, our test scores are higher, and our college-going and completion rates are better too. The quality of schooling in Ohio and across our country is improving and business has been part of that, along with a lot of other groups.

To cultivate the next generation of innovators, we brought STEM education center stage with support from the Gates Foundation some 10 years ago. Our goal then was to double the number of bachelor's degrees in the STEM disciplines and we have achieved that.

Ohio is fostering a culture of innovation in education that's anchored in ever higher standards, and Governor Kasich's leadership here has made a real difference. We're revamping early childhood education to ensure that children enter Kindergarten ready to learn and we have enacted a new 3rd Grade Guarantee to ensure that children are reading at grade level, putting a stop to the harmful practice of social promotion.

There's a saying: "Culture eats strategy for lunch." Along these lines, we've just formed "Bright: New Leaders for Ohio Schools." Funded by the state, this disruptive innovation will recruit, train, and place the next generation of school principals – not just educators but non-traditional candidates from business, military, and nonprofits, both young Millennials as well as mid-career types, who will earn an M.B.A. while being assigned to a master principal for a year-long building immersion experience. After this intensive development phase, Bright Fellows will be fast-track certified and placed as principals in high-poverty, low-performing schools – where Ohio needs the best and the brightest leaders the most.

With all of these innovations, progress is glacially slow, and the system remains calcified and very hard to change. But the business community is the key because we can keep the pressure on transcending the inevitable changes from political administration to administration.

In a profession that yearns for a silver bullet, the truth is, we know what to do. We know what works. We know how to improve student learning and academic achievement. The answers are great teachers and superb school leaders anchored by a coherent policy framework of high standards, aligned assessments, and meaningful accountability for results. In a perfect world, we'd clone success with enough speed and scale, and just focus on flawless execution.

The tragedy is that with each successive round of fits and starts, such as the latest ideologically based noise against Common Core, we waste money and precious resources that can be put to better use in the classroom and potentially lose yet another generation of kids. I remain optimistic though, because we have made steady progress. It has not been as dramatic as we would like, but the opportunities for children entering Kindergarten are better today than they were 10 years ago.

How important is it to have a membership that is as engaged as it is entrepreneurial?

Ohio has amazing CEO leadership. My members first and foremost must prioritize on leading their companies, and I am thrilled to use whatever time they have remaining to devote to state public policy. In the end, a thriving state economy benefits the shareholders of all our member companies.

Could you have envisioned the success of the Ohio Business Roundtable in the early days?

Honestly, no. I took this on 23 years ago to help then Governor George Voinovich with a modest goal to create a "one-stop shop" for CEOs and the sitting governor to engage on state issues.

With each passing success, we knew there was value in sustaining it. Since then I've worked with three additional governors and for 14 CEO Chairs and some 500 CEOs from every corner of the state.

The magic of the Roundtable is that it's exclusively a CEO organization and the governor is the CEO of the state. On the big issues, CEOs have the ability to transcend the politics and put the better interest of what's good for Ohio ahead of anything else.

That's our distinctiveness and the reason for our success. ●