

## Gilligan: Labor Day and our 21st century workforce

By John F. Gilligan

Posted Sep 1, 2018 at 5:24 PM

OUR VIEW

The historical context of Labor Day has radically changed since the first 1882 parade in New York City. Born out of the 19th century trade and labor movements, sometimes bloody, its aim was to recognize the contributions of the American worker to the strength, prosperity and well-being of the nation.

That was the rationale given in 1894 when president Grover Cleveland signed into law this Federal holiday. But the day was really the result of a hard-nosed labor movement to curtail the exploitation and dehumanization of the American worker and forge some fairness and dignity. This was the historical transitional period from an agricultural to an industrial based economy from which emerged middle-class America.

It was a time when industry needed doers not thinkers. Assembly line jobs were designed to minimize errors and be manned by human robots. Shovels were shaped to maximize productivity during an 8- to 12-hour day. It was a top-down, command and control system. Karl Marx hit the nail on the head in his analysis of the system as the dehumanization of the proletariat (working-class). But his solution, abolish private property, led to a living hell.

We know that history. Yet America grew to become the most powerful nation on earth with the highest living standard in the world. Our grandparents or great-grandparents lived that experience. But 9/11 and the Great Recession of 2008 woke us to startling 21st century realities.

America no longer maintains the highest standard of living. It's buffeted on all sides from global competition. Technology has destroyed myriads of traditional jobs. And we live in a data driven information age governed by ever evolving precision technology. But the greatest change of all is in the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity that marks this new world order.

The acronym VUCA, coined by management gurus, epitomizes the conditions to which we must adjust our lives and work. Deny it, if you wish, but, like a black hole, there is no escape.

The transition in the world of work from the past to the present century is from a work force to a talent force. Yet, it's a talent force that collaborates. Institutional survival depends on it.

Any CEO, administrator, manager or leader who fails to treat employees as a talent force is on the fast track to extinction along with his/her organization. Although robots can replace human hands, only humans can rapidly adapt to the disruptive forces of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

Given the velocity of change that permeates every aspect of our lives, collaboration is the key to success from business to government. No leader (a president, administrator, manager, politician) can know and see everything. In the VUCA world, the eyes, ears, minds, motivation, insights and creativity of every person are an absolute necessity. Ultimately, it's the employees that make a boss look good.

Some leaders are skilled in mobilizing collaboration and releasing human talent into the organization. But too many aren't. They are stuck in the bygone era of command and control mindsets. And it's the primary reason why their institutions can't surf today's VUCA waves.

Institutional success, be it business, education, healthcare or government, is a collaborative process among the diverse skills, perspectives, creativity and motivation of the talent force. That's the diversity needed to compete in the global economy.

Some of the greatest human achievements in the past decade: Crispr/CAS9 (gene editing), discovery of the Higgs boson (gives mass to subatomic particles), the detection of GW150914 (the first verified gravity wave) and the microbiome (gut bacteria that prevent diseases), were the result of thousands of people working collaboratively to solve some of the most complex problems facing humanity.

The lesson here is that human beings and organizations can collaborate. People of different races, ethnicities, nationalities, genders and religions worked together. The difference between these science communities and gridlocked institutions was not just in their diversity of talent, but in their collaboration and passion for a vision.

This is the kind of talent force needed to succeed in the VUCA age. Collaboration is the key. It's what transforms a work place into a talent place that can effectively cope with volatility, ambiguity, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The future of American depends upon it.

**John F. Gilligan**, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, is president emeritus of Fayette Companies/Human Service Center and past chairman of the Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce, Workforce Development Board of Central Illinois and the Illinois Employer's

Association. He lives in Groveland. Contact him at [jfgilligan@hotmail.com](mailto:jfgilligan@hotmail.com).