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Business-as-usual mindset threatens ecological version of 2008 crash

By Bob Doppelt

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Humans often repeat the behaviors that previously led to calamity. So it is with the economic crash of 2008 and today's climate emergency.

My communications with numerous local organizations about cutting greenhouse gas emissions to meet the goals of Eugene's Climate Recovery Ordinance found reasoning and actions that eerily mirror those that preceded the financial collapse.

Before the 2008 meltdown, most Wall Street and government officials believed the economy was humming along just fine. Their short-term focus blinded them to the grave danger growing below the surface.

Only after the crash was it revealed that unsustainable borrowing and hazardous financial products had created a debt-fueled bubble that inevitably burst, devastating millions worldwide.

Wall Street did not understand the risks associated with its practices or products. The few who recognized the perils failed to loudly alert the public and, rather than pressing for fundamental change, proposed small technical fixes. Lacking frank information, borrowers accumulated far more debt than could be repaid.

Today it is ecological debt, more than financial, that is the greatest threat. The relentless burning of fossil fuels and degradation of forests and other life-supporting ecosystems have put the Earth's ecological and climate systems in such arrears that civilization is threatened.

I communicated with people from from public agencies, energy providers and large energy users. Most, but not all, voiced awareness of climate disruption. A few, such as the city of Eugene, are planning or implementing some innovative projects. However, emulating the blindness seen before the 2008 crash, not many grasp how their continued use of fossil fuels and other practices have contributed to the civilization-changing crisis.

Many organizations have assessed the emissions directly generated by their energy use. Even then, two said their emissions were not a problem because they were smaller than others in their field. None seems to have quantified the far

larger emissions produced throughout the value-chain of the products and services they use or provide.

A few organizations have examined how more extreme wildfires, storms, floods and other effects of climate disruption might affect them. But just as financial firms failed to consider systemic risks in 2008, no organizations have assessed how the interlinked economic, social and ecological shocks unfolding worldwide are likely to impair them.

Consequently, just as business-as-usual continued even as the underlying financial tempest worsened, most organizations I spoke with continue operating as if their practices and products have no consequence or, at best, are pursuing marginal changes.

It was disheartening to learn that even in Eugene — with so many well-educated, smart, innovative people — inexcusable deflection and inaction persists.

Overcoming these errors requires transforming organizational goals, operating principles and culture. Local leaders can make these changes by learning from companies like Interface Inc., one of the world's largest producers of commercial and residential modular carpets. Years ago I met its late founder and chairman Ray Anderson for a book I was writing. He told me how distressed he was after realizing how his and other companies were destroying the planet, saying there is “no business case for ending life on Earth.”

Anderson decided to commit his firm to honestly acknowledging and eradicating its ecological impacts. Most business leaders dismiss this possibility. Yet Interface has prospered as it eliminated 99 percent of its carbon emissions per unit of production, reduced water use by 93 percent, and cut waste by 93 percent. Today, it uses bio-based or recycled resources for 72 percent of its raw materials, and gets 98 percent of its energy from clean renewable sources. It now seeks to reduce our ecological debt by developing a carbon-negative carpet tile.

Local leaders can learn from many business, government, educational and non-profit organizations that have overcome the willful ignorance that led to the 2008 financial crash and are now paying down society's ecological debt. The powerful sense of purpose and innovation that results will create countless benefits.

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