Kentucky Economic Development Conference  
March 2010  

By John A. Roush, Centre College President  

Outthink, Outwork, Outlast! I really like these words. They are distinctly American, optimistic at their core, profoundly good at every level. So, thank you for inviting me to give this keynote address. I count it a privilege to share with you and, I hope, prompt you to think more clearly and more daringly about these three labels – outthinking, outworking, outlasting.  

Let me begin on a lighter note. Anyone who knows me will tell you that I am an unabashed optimist – sometimes to a fault. And, while my life has been blessed from the start, there have been, nonetheless, those days that even I would consider “bad days.” We all have them, though I would guess that all in this room would claim that bad days for them are the exception – not the rule. But, on those days when you think the sky has fallen, the sun won’t be coming up, the rain will never stop, remember:  

You know you’re having a bad day when . . .  
- The worst player on the golf course wants to play you for money.  
- You get to work and find a “60 Minutes” news team waiting in your office.  
- Your birthday cake collapses from the weight of the candles.  
- Your twin sister forgets your birthday.  
- Your 4-year-old tells you that it’s almost impossible to flush a grapefruit down the toilet.  
- It costs more to fill up your car than it did to buy it.  
- Everyone avoids you the morning after the company office party.  
- The bird singing outside your window is a vulture.  
- You compliment the boss’s wife on her unusual perfume and she isn’t wearing any.  
- The restaurant check has been on the table for ten minutes...and no one has touched it.  
- Nothing you own is actually paid for.  
- Airline food starts to taste good.  
- Everyone loves your driver's license picture.  

Like I said, there are bad days and, then, there are really bad days!  

Today, though, is a very good day and, with that in mind, let me turn our attention to more important matters. I have three things to discuss with you this morning. (I always have three things.)  

Let’s talk a bit about what it means – or doesn’t mean – to outthink, outwork, outlast the “other guy.” First, I would suggest to you that being smart is insufficient!  

In the class I teach during CentreTerm, I remind my students on day one that being smart
(as all of them are), being blessed with a good mind, is a powerful asset, a distinct advantage, a true blessing, but it – being smart – is insufficient. The evidence for this truth is all around us and in every facet of the human experience – academics, athletics, music, theatre, sales, research, production, and all the rest. Hard work, the capacity for sacrifice, the understanding of “team,” the encouragement and support from others, that thing we all call common sense that, often it seems, is not so common, are all additions to having a good mind or even a superior mind that are essential – I repeat, essential – for leading a life of accomplishment, success, joy. This truth is a foundation piece of being prepared to outthink, outwork, outlast one’s competition.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his 2008 book, *Outliers*, seeks to identify those circumstances in life that predict extraordinary success for some among us. I commend the book to you, as there are many of his conclusions with which I agree, and there are some with which I disagree. There are two propositions Gladwell offers with which I am in complete agreement: one, and in line with my comments about being smart being insufficient, he maintains that one needs to be “smart enough.” Being a genius, however one might choose to define such a label, is not essential. Gladwell maintains that extraordinarily successful people must be smart enough, but, more importantly, need to have emotional intelligence – the capacity to work with others, to negotiate, to communicate, to work as a member of a team, and to understand the importance and value of culture in an organization. Two, a common theme in his book is the “10,000-Hour Rule, where he claims that greatness requires enormous commitments of time – he suggests 10,000 hours or about 10 years – on task, in study, at practice. I am not sure Gladwell is right about the number of hours, but I am in complete agreement that becoming a person of high accomplishment is more about hard work and sacrifice and the important support from family and advocates and teachers than it is about “natural ability.” The take away? Outthinking, outworking, outlasting the competition – whether it is from within one’s region, from other states, or from other countries – is more than just having the very best idea. The ones who outthink, outwork, outlast will be the folks who have a team of professionals and key volunteers who are smart enough, and, then, have the advantages of being committed to the execution of a well-conceived plan and approaching their work with a tenacity and teamwork that, at the end of the day, inspires others to join in.

To make my point more particular, let me talk about a son of Kentucky whose early life and, sadly, much of his adult life was one of struggle and disappointment and brilliance and legend all at once. I speak of President Abraham Lincoln. What do we know of Lincoln? Was he a person of brilliance? His early years would suggest not. His work later in life would suggest yes. Would we have guessed in grades K-three that he was destined for greatness and adoration – a greatness that was recognized and affection awarded only after he was assassinated? Probably not! Did he come from a family of privilege? No. Did he have a warm, caring, supportive relationship with his parents? No. At least we know that he and his father did not have such a relationship. Abraham Lincoln was an extraordinary success in life almost in spite of it all, though I am quick to add that his mother clearly saw in him a chance for greatness, as did some of his teachers and mentors, including John Todd Stuart, Centre alumnus and the man who is credited with encouraging Lincoln to give up blacksmithing and become an attorney. But, my friends,
make no mistake, Abraham Lincoln probably would not have been at the top of his class, though he was clearly smart enough.

Lincoln did possess some obvious characteristics for leadership that allowed him, later in life (while still living as a person suffering from self-doubt and depression) to save the Union and begin the removal of the national curse of slavery. His capacity to provide leadership to our nation at a most pivotal moment is without equal. Lincoln knew that true leadership is often realized by exerting quiet and subtle influence on a day-to-day basis, by frequently seeing followers and other people face to face. He treated everyone with the same courtesy and respect, whether they were kings or commoners. He lifted people out of their everyday selves and into a higher level of performance, achievement, and awareness. He obtained extraordinary results from ordinary people by instilling purpose in their endeavors. He was open, civil, tolerant, and fair, and he maintained respect for the dignity of all people at all times. His core values of honesty and integrity were a part of all he did, all he said. He was all about the business of outthinking, outworking, outlasting – intentional about these things every day, all day.

My second point. If we are making future plans to outthink, outwork, outlast, then in what kind of nation and in what kind of world will we working, achieving, leading? What might this America look like in 2050, a mere 40 years from now. Are we pointed toward a future deserving of our best efforts, our highest aspirations, a future that warrants our attempts to outthink, outwork, outlast? I think so – decidedly, in fact.

You should expect me, I think, to identify for you bodies of work that might be helpful to you as you continue your journey. With that in mind, and not wanting to disappoint, I would commend to you a new book titled, The Next Hundred Million – America in 2050. Written by Joel Kotkin, a professor of practice at Chapman University in California, his book is a forecast of sorts about this America in 2050. His take on these next 40 years is decidedly optimistic, perhaps too much so for some. I found his text to be filled with facts that do encourage, but he also is quite clear that there are no guarantees in the forecast he lays out for these United States or the larger world. Let me highlight a few points that make it clear our nation is altogether worthy of our best efforts to outthink, outwork, outlast.

“. . . by 2050, according to some conservative estimates, America will be home to at least 400 million people, roughly one hundred million more than now.”

“. . . because of America’s unique demographic trajectory among advanced countries, it should emerge by midcentury as the most affluent, culturally rich, and successful nation in human history.”

These “. . . 100 million more residents also will place new stresses on the environment, challenging the country to build homes, communities, and businesses that can sustain an expanding and ever-more-diverse society.”

“America will inevitably become a more complex, crowded, and competitive place,
highly dependent, as it has been throughout its history, on its people’s innovative and entrepreneurial spirit.”

“The United States in 2050 will look very different from the country that existed just a decade ago, at the dawn of the new millennium. Between 2000 and 2050 the vast majority of America’s net population growth will be in its racial minorities, particularly Asians and Hispanics.”

“By midcentury, the United States will be a predominately “white country” no longer but rather a staggering amalgam of racial, ethnic, and religious groups, all participants in the construction of a new civilization whose roots lie not in any one country or continent but across the entirety of human cultures and racial types. No other advanced, populous country will enjoy such ethnic diversity.”

Kotkin, even in his first chapter, continues his strikingly positive, though informed commentary on the American experiment – its military matters, where this next 100 million may choose to live, the role of technology, the little-known weaknesses of some countries that are, in the minds of some or many, predicted to outdistance the US in any number of areas up against America’s fundamental strengths, and on and on.

I really cannot even begin to provide you with a summary of this book, but I will finish this second point – Are we pointed toward a future deserving of such effort, such aspiration, the kind of future that warrants our efforts to outthink, outwork, outlast? – by reading from the final paragraph of his first chapter:

*The Next Hundred Million is not a story of power brokers, policy disputes, or media perceptions. Rather, it is an inquiry into the evolution of cities, towns, and neighborhoods, and of industries, churches, and families, both in newly emerging regions and in venerable older ones. It is in these more intimate units, in what Jefferson called our “little republics,” that mid-21st-century America – a nation of four hundred million souls – will find its fundamental sustenance and its best hope for the brightest future.*

None of us can know, of course, whether Professor Kotkin, is right or even half-right about our America in 2050, but he makes a convincing case that our choice to outthink, outwork, outlast is both worthy and likely to pay dividends for those who follow us. (When I break for Q & A, you may want to ask me more about this text.)

My third point related to what it means and takes to outthink, outwork, outlast is one that will be quick and easily understood, though immensely hard to accomplish. To emerge victorious, however one chooses to measure victory, will require leaders who possess deep and abiding courage – men and women who stand prepared to do right, to help establish trends, to consider fundamental change without fear.

You should know that there is no personal quality I find more compelling than courage. People of courage live their lives with a sense of freedom because they are determined to
do the right thing, no matter the cost.

Personal courage for me is not the “run-into-the-burning-building-to-save-a-child” type of thing or the front-page news variety for doing something heroic. I am talking about the every day, it’s-a-part-of-my-life courage that manifests itself in choices you make, the way you treat other people, your capacity to dream big, and all the other positive attributes of citizenship and civil behavior.

Describing courage often gets reduced to some simple sentences, and this is not a bad thing. One I like best is “Do the right thing.” Pretty basic advice, and it sounds so easy, particularly to us as adults. But, to consistently do the right thing is one of the greatest challenges we face, at every age. To be a person of courage is a goal or habit, if you will, that each of us can achieve. All of us should hope and pray that we would be remembered by friend and foe alike as a person of courage. One who had the courage to be honest, loyal, steadfast, devoted, kind, principled, forgiving, and committed to doing the right thing whatever the cost. One who understood the difference between right and wrong, and even the subtle differences between doing what was expected and doing one’s best. I know what’s right. So do you. Do we have the courage to make good choices in order to outthink, outwork, outlast? If you are a prayerful person, then you should pray to God, as I do, that we will exhibit such courage in the days, weeks, months, years that lie ahead!

Being a person, a leader of courage needs to become, like many good things, a habit – a habit that allows one to summon the courage to do the right thing again and again and again. This, too, I believe is a foundation piece of what it will take to outthink, outwork, outlast!

As I close and stand prepared to field your questions, let me offer three final observations about leadership – the subject matter about which I speak and write most often and, arguably, the phenomenon about which I am reputed to have some measure of scholarly expertise.

Being a good and effective leader is much more about developing and maintaining a practice of curiosity, inquiry, and the testing of good ideas than it is about acquiring and applying an established set of facts or skills. Authentic, modern leadership in formal organizations, if I may be permitted one final sports analogy, is akin to being a skilled athlete who has mastered the fundamentals, but who approaches each play fresh, always observing, learning, and applying new knowledge, even in the heat of action.

Good and effective leaders know that there is no magic to being successful—they understand through experience and intuition that each day will require courage, knowledge, flexibility, honesty, humility, focus, trust, judgment, aspiration, inspiration, and more. Leadership might be thought of as a cross between common sense and being smart – evidence once last time that good and effective and even inspired leadership is not rocket science, but it can have the effect of rocket fuel in your organization.

Good and effective leaders understand that they will be required to be courageous, and
they stand prepared to do so during those weeks, on those days, oftentimes only in those moments when the only choice is to stand tall, do the right thing, be courageous – even when you find yourself taking such action in the absolute darkness of night, knowing that no one will notice or offer applause. You choose to outthink, outwork, outlast. You choose truth. You choose courage!