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For years an epidemic has been spreading right before our eyes; a virus allowed to fester in fertile ground. We see it, we read about it in report after report, we discuss and analyze it at countless meetings, at conferences and on hundreds of fact finding committees.

It is a results-deficit epidemic; a poverty pandemic that has exponentially increased to its current levels facing little resistance as efforts to quarantine it have been fragmented; lackluster at best. It is of catastrophic proportions as human creativity, innovativeness, potential and possibility are dying on the vine, resulting in a loss not just for the individual but for the community as a whole.

This epidemic plays out in newspaper headlines, on the nightly news, in Facebook newsfeeds and Twitter tweets, and repeatedly on CNN reports.

It is an epidemic caused by sustained poverty -- with crime, educational underachievement, violence, environmental accidents, unemployment, class and racial incidents, economic instability, and so much more left in its wake.

In the fight against poverty, I often wonder are we truly in it to win it, or are we just playing the game?

Over a year ago, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon cautioned that any progress made in the fight against poverty globally risked being reversed by a failure to put people at the center of development policies, pointing out that investing in people is the smartest way to eradicate poverty, change lives and communities.

The Twin Cities is currently experiencing a building boom with billions of dollars worth of projects on the table in progress. The new Vikings stadium, transportation and highway heavy projects, numerous housing projects will change the landscape with a host of others anticipated, all in the name of progress. The Metropolitan Council in its November 2012 report cites that the regional transit project alone will create 30,000 jobs and have a $5.4 billion dollar impact. This is a tremendous amount of money being poured into projects, but the question becomes how do people at the bottom of the pyramid factor into this progress equation? Will African Americans and other people of color have opportunities to fully participate in these projects? What is the plan to genuinely invest in people, the critical Human Capital elevation that provides substantial individual benefit and community impact, the kind of SROI that fosters sustainable solutions to the results and poverty pandemic?

These projects offer the potential to put people at the center of planning. There is potential to deliver results that last beyond the short-term. Fully including and employing people of color in these projects is one solution to the current state of underfunded employment and training programs.

Just imagine in this season of giving, that if just ten percent of the 8 billion dollars worth of projects reported by MSP were invested in non-profit organizations that serve people of color, envision the kinds of results focused programs that could be offered with consistency free of worry about where the next grant dollars will come from, programs that create quality of life gains that can elevate people from the drudges of poverty. This investment of just ten percent in

development opportunities for non-profits of color could transform the Twin Cities landscape and intently address the disparities that are reaching epidemic proportions in our community. Without question, a significant infusion of resources for human development and employability program would certainly change the game equipping us to win.

Achieving high performance in today's 21st century organization requires significant investment in human capital. Acquiring the right talent, retaining high performing people, identifying and developing underperformers are critical factors to creating sustainable growth, driving profit, and realizing organizational goals in both the public and private sectors. Failing to fully focus on equipping Human Capital with the skills and competencies required to effectively contribute to an organization's outcomes is much like leaving a key ingredient out of a recipe. Half-hearted and hardly funded efforts to maximize Human Capital perpetuate the skill gaps crisis and poverty pandemic.

A new study produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit released just this week says American babies will have a dimmer future than those born in Hong Kong, Ireland and even Canada. Switzerland is the best place to be born in the world in 2013, and the U.S. is just 16th, not even making the top ten. In a land described as filled with opportunity, this is a painful article to read. In the United States, for example, six million people have fallen into poverty since 2008, and one in seven people now lives below the poverty line.

These numbers are shocking and provide further evidence why investments in people are smart investments. These investments benefit our community, our region and our nation. When I consider the massive amounts of projects in the pipeline, the question remains, who wins? The projects no matter how large the value do not comprehensively support opportunities for people of color.

At the Minneapolis Urban League, we are in the human development business with a mission to equipping seekers so that they can win! If our organization and others working to empower the poor can obtain the opportunity to secure a fair share of the pie, we could pull help people pull themselves up by the bootstraps and create programs that truly transform our community so we all win.