Work Ethic and the Skills Gap

by Matthew T. Hora on December 7, 2016

In the course of traveling through Wisconsin conducting interviews with business owners and HR directors for our new book, *Beyond the Skills Gap*, I was struck by how often I heard about problems with employees' work ethic. Described as being "dependable," "punctual," "hardworking," and "committed to the company," it was considered the most important competency by the seventy-two biotechnology and manufacturing employers in our study, even more important than technical knowledge and ability. As one CEO said, "If they don't have the work ethic, I don't have anything to work with." These findings are consistent with other research, such as a recent National Association of Colleges and Employers survey, in which 97.5% of respondents rated work ethic as an essential aspect of career readiness.

But what exactly is work ethic? Modern scholars view it as a generalized and multidimensional psychological construct related to work-oriented values. These values include distinct factors such as hard work, self-reliance, morality, and delayed gratification, which suggests that when we talk about a person's work ethic, we're actually talking about a host of their personal traits, beliefs, and aptitudes. This begs the question, can work ethic be taught in a formal educational setting?

The employers in our study were skeptical that such personal, deeply held values could be taught in the classroom, particularly at the college level. One HR director said, "It's too late to learn at the university, because a work ethic is instilled way back from parenting to who they are as a person." A manager at a manufacturing company concurred: "There's some soft skills people have that are just inherent to them, so it's going to be very difficult to train somebody on work ethic—that's just something that's ingrained in them."

Hearing that work ethic is a disposition acquired through enculturation was fascinating to me. It was made even more interesting during a conversation with a representative of Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce. I was asking about a series of focus groups they had recently held with executives around the state about the widely reported problem with finding applicants with adequate skills for a job opening (i.e., the skills gap), and the issue of work ethic invariably came up:

"One of the folks said, 'You know, what we measure when we're trying to hire somebody is YOTF.' And I said, "What is YOTF?" And the guy said, "Years off the farm." If you think of kids who grew up on a farm in terms of work ethic—you're getting up at six o'clock in the morning, working every night, never getting a day off—they get that, and they get the problem-solving part because if something breaks down on the back forty, you've got to figure out how to fix it."

As someone who grew up as a 4-H kid in rural southern California, this resonated. However, inculcating a strong work ethic in young people doesn't require a farming background. It comes from the values parents or caregivers teach, the role models for work they provide, the cultural and religious milieu in which young people are socialized, and the opportunities for work young people have available to them. The higher education sector also has a role to play. Despite the skepticism of the employers in our study about how work ethic could not be taught, some educators are striving to integrate into their curriculum and instruction a focus on work ethic and self-regulated learning.

As we visited several of Wisconsin's community colleges and universities, we heard a variety of strategies for cultivating a sense of self-reliance, timeliness, and dependability in their academic work. Some of these strategies involve setting high expectations for turning in assignments on time and attendance, with exceptions granted only in extreme circumstances. For example, one instructor emphasized the importance of craftsmanship and pride in one's work by embedding these principles in his learning goals and grading system that involved keeping tools organized and workspaces clean.

Another approach is to focus less on dependability and attention to detail, and more on students' abilities to monitor their own learning progress (or lack thereof). In her book *Creating Self-Regulated Learners* (Stylus Publishing, 2013) Linda Nilson outlines a variety of strategies that teach students how to become more reflective and proactive learners. For instance, prior to a major assignment or exam, students can write reflective pieces in a journal about their study habits and learning goals. After receiving their grades, students then revisit their approach and assess whether or not they were effective. This deceptively simple exercise teaches students that they are ultimately responsible for their own learning, and also trains them to continually reflect on their performance and seek continual improvement.

We shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that a strong work ethic or self-regulation skills are all that young people need to thrive in school, attend and persist in college, and get that first job. Too many children are growing up in poverty, hindered by structural racism, or otherwise face life circumstances that make "working hard" simply not enough. But having these aptitudes can only help students persist and ultimately graduate from high school, technical college, or a four-year university, and then enter the labor market with a stance toward work that many employers seek.

There are many promising strategies available for teaching young people about the world of work within our colleges and universities, such as internships and apprenticeships, problem-based learning, and the techniques outlined above. But a person's work ethic is a deeply cultural and personal issue, shaped by many factors outside the control of college instructors.

Recognizing these facts is an important first step in developing a more nuanced and collective approach to thinking about the future of higher education than is offered by the skills gap narrative, which lays the blame for a struggling economy solely at the feet of a failed higher education system. The issues facing the labor market and our society are far more complex, and in the case of work ethic, will require a collaborative and collective response that involves teachers, employers, parents, and the students themselves.

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