A Job Well Done

Whether we are executives or front-line workers, artists or scientists, physicians or lawyers, all of us want to do good work. In our daily occupations, we want to undertake our work in an expert fashion and contribute to the common good. Unfortunately, that is easier said than done. Experts, those who have carved out for themselves a unique niche in the marketplace, are often tempted to be selfish, to accumulate wealth and to neglect the broader good. Even those who strive to find constructive solutions to problems do not always succeed: a manager who assembles a team of workers from diverse backgrounds may inadvertently create a dysfunctional unit.

Doing good work proves especially difficult when conditions are changing rapidly and unpredictably, and when the powers of the market are unrestrained. Thoughtful practices that were successful in earlier times may prove ineffective in today's warp-speed environment. Moreover, in the absence of religious or ideological principles, the market may create a winner-take-all environment that stifles competition, creativity and/or compassion.

Recently, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, William Damon and I (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001) have been studying good work in professions ranging from journalism to science. We undertook this collaborative

work because each of us had been exploring the relationship between high-level performance (intelligence, creativity, leadership) on the one hand and a sense of responsibility on the other. We were particularly interested in whether the confluence between expertise and ethics that characterizes good work can emerge in turbulent times. We found that good work is most likely to come about when all the stakeholders concerned with a profession agree on professional objectives. We call this desirable situation "alignment." In contrast, good work proves elusive when the various stakeholders disagree fundamentally about professional goals. At these times, we witness "misalignment."

From DNA to CNN

Our investigations began with the professions of genetics and journalism in the U.S. We deliberately began with those fields as, in our view, they deal with the two forms of information that are most important for our lives, today and in the foreseeable future. Society relies enormously on good work from geneticists and journalists. Journalists create the information in our minds. They tell us what is happening in the world. We are informed or misinformed by news accounts in print and broadcast. Geneticists detail the information in our bodies: what we are, what will happen to us, what our offspring will be like. And in the near future, the information they provide will help us make fateful decisions: should we allow genetic engineering of our bodies, of those of our relatives

or offspring, even of microorganisms that can save or destroy thousands of lives?

In the 1990s, research in genetics was admirably aligned. All the major stakeholders strove toward common aims — good health and long lives. They included the scientists who wanted to research, make fundamental discoveries, publish results, and gain fame and perhaps fortune. They also included those who own shares in biotech companies, those who manage the companies, and the population as a whole.

In contrast, during the same period, the field of journalism turned out to be massively misaligned. Most journalists, particularly those involved in the print medium, entered the field because they had wanted to investigate important stories fairly and objectively, and reach a wide audience. Yet many of these journalists now feel thwarted at almost every turn. They are dismayed by the increasing ownership of newspapers and television stations by conglomerates that neither know nor care about the traditional values of the fourth estate. Investigative reporting is discouraged because it is expensive, may yield nothing or, perhaps worst of all, may uncover something embarrassing or incriminating about leading advertisers. Stories about foreign countries or complex issues are similarly squeezed out. There is a perception that the public chiefly wants gossip, sensationalism and "dumbed down" news. As the saying goes, "if it bleeds, it leads." In addition, the stockholders of publicly traded companies are perceived

to care chiefly about greater profits with each subsequent quarter. Owners of AOL-Time Warner are more likely to be pleased by better corporate returns rather than a profound essay in the back pages of *Time* magazine. As Harold Evans, renowned editor of newspapers and magazines in the U.S. and the U.K., including 14 years at *The Sunday Times*, has remarked: "The problem many organisations face is not to stay in business, but to stay in journalism."

However, most of the 100 geneticists to whom we spoke are pleased with the course of their profession. They speak of a golden age. Nearly all praise working conditions and hardly any consider leaving this well-aligned profession. In striking contrast, few of the 100 journalists to whom we spoke are proud of their profession. For them, the golden age has long since passed. Most see the field as one in which it is increasingly difficult to work. Many would leave this poorly aligned profession if they could.

It is not necessarily all doom and gloom for journalists, however. We believe, and indeed have evidence, that alignment is a temporary condition. Historically, physics was an extremely well-aligned profession throughout most of the first half of the last century. Yet this alignment ceased abruptly after the detonation of atomic weapons over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. J. Robert Oppenheimer, head of the Manhattan Project, was dismayed that the planning of atomic research and development passed decisively from scientists to politicians who focused on its military potential.

At the same time, the period of the Time-Life hegemony and the heyday of CBS news, journalism was well-aligned. The majority of educated citizens got their news from these outlets, trusted them and shared their consensus about which world events were significant and why. More recently, after the attacks of September 11 [in New York in 2001], American journalism has taken on a new importance, at least temporarily. There is more hard news and less fluff. Viewers and readers have gravitated toward outlets with the most extensive and reliable coverage.

Alignment can nevertheless prove a mixed blessing, while misalignment can be a source of strength. If a field is perceived to be well-aligned, practitioners may ignore potential danger signs. The geneticists whom we interviewed rarely showed appreciation of factors that could cause problems at work. Yet, their entire profession could be roiled by any number of conditions: a genetics experiment gone awry, secretly funded research that causes harm to individuals or a community, or the control of research when directed by CEOs bent on maximizing profits rather than on stimulating the highest-quality research. Alignment could also become frayed should one or more stakeholders reject a major research technique such as the cloning of organs or the use of embryonic stem cells. Finally, the genetic equivalent of Chernobyl or Three Mile Island could rapidly disrupt alignment and leave the golden age of genetics a remote memory. Calamities of this magnitude could produce revulsion against any

experimentation that involved manipulation of genetic materials and turn genetics researchers into social pariahs.

Similarly, journalism's currently poor alignment can serve as a stimulus to journalists bent on good work. Professionals can embrace high standards for themselves and ostracize those who do not follow those standards. They can create new entities — individual weblogs or institutions such as the National Public Radio in the U.S. — that exemplify high-quality journalism. They can also establish news services that focus on individuals and institutions that serve their communities, or publications that monitor the quality of news coverage. And they can secure support for such innovative entities from individual subscriptions, private foundations or individual philanthropists.

Based on the results of our study, Damon, in collaboration with esteemed journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, devised a curriculum that is being introduced into print newsrooms around the U.S. This curriculum features various strategies that can help journalists carry out good work in turbulent times. One issue being addressed is the belief among much of the general public that journalists are biased, a stinging accusation for those in the profession.

A sample curriculum unit begins by exploring the distinction between complete objectivity (something that can't be achieved and may be an ill-considered goal) and

the minimization of bias (a reasonable goal). Journalists are then asked to review various stories in terms of bias. They are introduced to strategies that can reduce bias: covering groups and topics that have been hitherto ignored or under-reported, examining their own personal preferences and having their own stories critiqued by individuals who might have a different viewpoint. They are asked to simulate their response to a charge of bias. Finally, they are asked to review critically some of their own stories.

So far, this curriculum, which covers a dozen different topics, has been greeted with enthusiasm. We hope that it can be used in many journalistic outlets and adapted for other professional groups.

Make Hippocrates Proud

For professionals, the current power of the market induces considerable ambivalence. On the one hand, many opportunities have been opened up, and many practitioners have become personally enriched by the chance to nourish or fashion market demands. Yet professionals should also exhibit a sense of loyalty to the values of their profession, to their respective Hippocratic oaths. To the extent that one pursues only the bottom line, one is likely to minimize these professional norms and values. What happens to those with limited financial resources if physicians provide their services only to the highest bidder, or if lawyers defend only the affluent, or if good education is available only to those of means?

The genuine professional attempts to serve those who are in need of her services, and she will not cross certain ethical lines, although it may be legal to do so. We ask professionals if they can pass the mirror test: "Are you proud of whom you see in the mirror each morning? And could your profession collectively pass the mirror test?"

In discussions of good work, the status of business is controversial. There is an argument that the only obligation of business is to make money legally. As Rupert Murdoch of Newscorp remarked with reference to a recent deal, "The motivation on both sides was clearly shareholder wealth and nothing more. It's dishonest to pretend otherwise." (The Biggest Blindspot, 2001).

Yet it is clear that many business leaders believe that business, too, is a calling. They speak of their obligations to employees, to customers, and to products and services of high quality. They attempt to realize these obligations in the ways they run their organizations. CEO Aaron Feuerstein did not have to pay 3,000 employees with full benefits for three months after his Maiden Mills manufacturing plant burned down. He felt, however, that it was the right thing to do. Johnson & Johnson was not legally obligated to recall in 1982 all containers of Tylenol when a few capsules were poisoned. But then-CEO James Burke, citing the value of customer service that is part of the company's long-time mission statement, did not hesitate to do so.

Is it smart? Is it prudent to pursue a policy of good work in business? Businesses should be built to last and not to sell. Csikszentmihalyi speaks admiringly of the "100-year manager." Yet life is not always fair. Some of those who cut corners succeed in doing so for significant periods of time, and business leaders who are idealistic sometimes fail. Ed Schultz, CEO of firearms manufacturer Smith & Wesson, proposed to introduce new safety features on rifles. The result was a partial boycott of the company by the National Rifle Association, a dip in sales and subsequent job losses.

Clearly, the commitment to pursue good work is not in itself a guarantor of success. But the examples set by good work in various professions continue to inspire others, particularly the young. Moreover, good workers are often surprisingly successful in the long run. Most encouragingly, those with a passionate commitment to carry out good work are energized by doing so. The challenge of carrying out work that is ethical and of good quality is far more bracing than the pursuit of only one of these goals. Knowledge that one could pass the "mirror test" is reinforcing. The good worker can be buoyed even by a setback because it often suggests greater progress in the long term.

Jean Monnet, the French economist who inspired the European Union, once declared: "I regard every defeat as an opportunity." This could be the slogan of every engaged and energized good worker.

References

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