

Are You Doing Good Work?

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Whether we are executives or front-line workers, artists or scientists, physicians or lawyers, all of us would like to feel that we are carrying out good work. In our daily occupations, we want to carry out our work in expert fashion; and we would like as well to contribute to the common good. But carrying out good work is never easy. For example, those who are expert are often tempted to be selfish, to accumulate wealth, and to neglect the broader good; even those who strive to be constructive sometimes inadvertently injure others. It proves especially difficult to do good work when conditions are changing rapidly and unpredictably, and when the powers of the market are unrestrained.

Recently, my colleagues Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, William Damon and I have been studying "good work" in various professions, ranging from journalism and theater to science and business. We found that good work is most likely to come about when all of the stakeholders concerned with a profession agree about what they would like-- we call this desirable situation "alignment." In contrast, good work proves elusive when the various stakeholders disagree fundamentally about what they desire from a given profession. At such times, we witness "misalignment."

Our investigations began with the professions of genetics and journalism. We chose these areas deliberately because they feature the two most important kinds of information for human beings. Journalists create the information in our minds. They tell us what is happening in the world—all of us 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 that they provide will help us to make fateful decisions: should we allow genetic engineering on our bodies, on those of our relatives or offspring, even on microorganisms that can save or destroy thousands of lives?

In the 1990s, research in genetics was admirably aligned. All the major stakeholders wanted the same thing-- good health and long lives. In the case of genetics, the stakeholders included the individual scientists who desire to follow their curiosity, make fundamental discoveries about the nature of the universe, publish their results, and gain fame and, if they are lucky, fortune; those who own shares in biotech companies; those who manage those 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-- and particularly those involved in print journalism-- entered the field because they want to investigate important stories, do so in a fair way, reach a wide audience, be able to look their subjects in the eyes the next day, and be able as well to look at themselves with pride in the mirror. Yet these journalists feel thwarted at almost every turn. Increasingly, newspapers and television stations are owned by mammoth 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, worst of all, may uncover something embarrassing or even incriminating about the leading advertisers. Stories about foreign countries, about complex issues, even about upbeat personalities or events are similarly squeezed. The public seems to want chiefly gossip, sensationalism, and "dumbed down" news—as the saying goes, "if it bleeds, it leads".

Finally, the stockholders of publicly traded companies care chiefly for greater profits each quarter. Owners of Time Warner-AOL-EMI rarely experience a frisson of pleasure when they encounter a profound or subtle essay in the back pages of Time; instead, they receive their tingle from increased profits. As Harold Evans, editor of newspapers in the United States and England has remarked, "the problem many organizations face is not to stay in business but to stay in journalism." (Good Work, p 131) Fifty years ago, newspapers were criticized for being in family hands and thereby being parochial or biased; nowadays, in the United States, most of the better newspapers are ones still in family hands.

Our data speak clearly to the issue of alignment. Most of the 100 geneticists to whom we spoke are very pleased with the course of their profession; they speak of a "golden age"; they can't wait to get up in the morning and return to their labs. Nearly all praise working conditions; 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" is long since past. Most see the field as getting worse, and many would like to leave this poorly aligned profession if they could.

Yet, if this were simply a "good news, bad news" research report, it would be of limited interest.

We believe-- and indeed have evidence--that alignment is a temporary condition. Historically, physics was extremely well-aligned during the early part of the last century; yet after the detonation of atomic weapons over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, physics became poorly aligned for awhile. In America, during the 1940s and 1950s, the period of the Time-Life hegemony and the heyday of CBS news, journalism was similarly well-aligned. And very recently in the United States, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, journalism took on a new importance, at least for a while. There was more "hard" news, less fluff, and individuals gravitated toward those outlets with the most extensive and reliable coverage.

Moreover, alignment can prove a mixed blessing, while misalignment can be a source of strength. If a field seems very 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, genetics could be roiled by any of a number of conditions: a genetics experiment gone awry, secretly funded research that causes harm to individuals or even a community, the control of research directions by CEOs bent on maximizing profits rather than on stimulating the highest quality or most appropriate scientific research. ** Alignment could also become frayed should one or more stakeholders reject a major research technique-- for example, the cloning of organs or the use of embryonic stem cells. Finally, a genetic Chernobyl or Three Mile Island could disrupt alignment rapidly and leave the golden age of genetics a remote memory.

Analogously, the very fact that journalism has become poorly aligned can serve as a stimulus to

journalists bent on good work. Professional journalists can embrace high standards for themselves and isolate or even ostracize those who do not follow those standards--Internet gossipmongers like Matt Drudge, for example. They can create new entities-- individual weblogs or institutions like National Public Radio in the United States-- that exemplify quality journalism and find innovative ways to fund and replenish them.

Based on the results of our study, my colleague William Damon, in collaboration with esteemed journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, has devised a curriculum that is being introduced into print newsrooms around the United States. This curriculum features various strategies that can help journalists to carry out good work in turbulent times.

For example, the general public believes that journalists are biased, and journalists are stung by this accusation. A sample curriculum unit begins by introducing the distinction between complete objectivity (which can't be achieved and may be an ill-considered goal) and the minimization of bias (which is 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, having their own stories critiqued by individuals who might have a different view of an event, and the like. They are asked to simulate their response should a charge of bias be leveled with some justification against a news outlet. 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 additional journalistic outlets and adapted for other professional groups as

well.

For those who are professionals, the power of the market at the present time induces considerable ambivalence. On the one hand, many opportunities have been opened up by the market; and many practitioners have become personally enriched by the opportunity 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 poor people if physicians only sell their services to the highest bidder, if lawyers only defend the affluent, if good education is available only to those of means? The genuine professional attempts to serve those who are most in need of her services; and she will not cross certain ethical lines, even though she might legally 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. Many would argue that the only obligation of business is to make money and to do so in a legal way. As Rupert Murdoch of NewsCorp has 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." (Worldlink, Jan- Feb 2001, p. 96)

And yet it is clear that many business leaders believe that business, too, is a calling. They speak of their obligations to employees, to customers, to products and services of high quality; and they

attempt to realize these obligations in the ways that they run their organizations. Aaron Feuerstein did not have to pay Malden Mills' employees after his factories burned down; he felt that this was the right thing to do. Johnson and Johnson did not legally have to recall all containers of Tylenol when a few capsules were poisoned, but its CEO James Burke--citing the value of customer service that is part of the company's longtime mission statement--did not hesitate to do so.

Is it smart, is it prudent to pursue a policy of good work in business? Many believe that businesses should be built to last and not to sell; my colleague Mihaly 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 Smith and Wesson, proposed voluntarily to introduce new safety features on rifles; the result was a partial boycott by the National Rifle Association, a dip in sales, and a layoff of employees.

Clearly, the commitment to pursue good work is not in itself a guarantor of success. Yet, the examples of good workers 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 both excellent and ethical 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 a more promising move the next time. 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.