

Good Work Project Report Series, Number 4

Good Work in Business

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Project Zero
Harvard University

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The Good Work Project

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Since 1995, three teams of investigators, under the direction of Howard Gardner, of Harvard University, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of Claremont Graduate University, and William Damon of Stanford University, have been researching the ways in which leading professionals in a variety of domains carry out good work. “Good work” is used in a dual sense: 1) work that is deemed to be of high quality and 2) work that is socially responsible. Through intensive, face-to-face interviews, the researchers have investigated several domains, including journalism, genetics, business, jazz music, theater, philanthropy, and higher education. Pilot studies have been conducted of medicine and the rapidly emerging domain of “cyberlaw”, with plans to explore these areas more fully in the future.

In addition to this central line of study, several other related lines of investigation have been launched:

1. The Origins of Good Work project is an examination of teenagers who excel in extracurricular activities.
2. The Dedicated Young Professionals Study focuses on those who have just begun (or will soon begin) promising professional careers.
3. Good Work in Interdisciplinary Contexts. Pilot studies of new arts/science media and of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Media Lab have been completed. Plans are underway to study interdisciplinary work at the pre-collegiate, college, and research institution level.
4. The Role of Contemplative Practices investigates the ways in which contemplation/meditation influence how professionals carry out work.
5. Encouraging Good Work in Journalism. This project, carried out in conjunction with the Committee of Concerned Journalists, is currently developing a "traveling curriculum" for use in newsrooms around the country.
6. Good Work as Transmitted through Lineages examines how the principle of doing good work is passed down through continuous generations of teachers to students or from mentors to less experienced professionals.
7. Good Work in Other Societies is a project spearheaded by colleagues at Denmark’s Royal Danish School of Education that investigates good work in Denmark and Latvia. In the future, additional international components will be added.

The Project expects to issue a variety of books, reports, and related documentation. The present series, launched in early 2001, includes reports on several of the lines of research mentioned above. For further information on the Good Work Project, contact Professor Howard Gardner’s office at 617-496-4929, via email at hgasst@harvard.edu, or through regular mail at 201 Larsen Hall, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA, 02138.

Papers On Good Work
February 2001

1. The Project on Good Work: A Description (April, 2000), Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi, and William Damon.
2. The Ethical Responsibilities of Professionals (July, 1998), Howard Gardner
3. The Empirical Basis of Good Work: Methodological Considerations (June, 1997), Howard Gardner, Anne Gregory, Mihalyi Csikzentmihalyi, William Damon, and Mimi Michaelson.
4. Good Work in Business (August, 2000), Kim Barberich and Howard Gardner.
5. Good Work Among Dedicated Young Professionals (July, 2000), Becca Solomon, Greg Feldman, and Marcy LeLacheur.
6. Contemplation and Implications for Good Work in Teaching (August, 1998), Laurinda Morway, Jeff Solomon, Mimi Michaelson, and Howard Gardner.
7. Good Work in a Complex World: A Cross Cultural Comparison (November, 1998), Hans Henrik Knoop and Howard Gardner.
8. Opportunities and Obstacles for Good Work in Medicine (August, 2000), Jeff Solomon, Jennifer DiBara, Sara Simeone, and Dan Dillon.
9. New Media Art: A New Frontier or Continued Tradition? (January, 2001), Kaley Middlebrooks.
10. The Origins of Good Work (April, 2000), Wendy Fischman and Grace Lam.
11. Good Work among Albert Schweitzer Fellows (April, 1999), Wendy Fischman, Becca Solomon, and Deborah Shutte.
12. High Abilities and Excellence: A Cultural Perspective (2000), Jin Li
13. Interdisciplinary Research and Education: Preliminary Perspectives from the MIT Media Laboratory (January, 2001), Dan Dillon.
14. Good Work in Cyberlaw (August, 2000), Evan Zullo.
15. Getting Kids, Parents, and Coaches on the Same Page (2000), Becca Solomon and Howard Gardner.

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I. Being a Good Professional

It has never been easy to be a professional in both senses of the word “good”: technically expert and morally responsible. This difficulty is augmented in a world that is rapidly changing due to technology, globalization, and powerful market forces. Radically altered senses of time and space have placed added strain on the ability to be a good professional--indeed, even to know one's responsibilities.

While the notion of an expert professional is relatively straightforward, the idea of the "responsible professional" requires comment. In our view the responsible professional is a person who relies on moral and ethical principles to guide her, feels a sense of obligation to company and community, and contributes to society. Though it is clearly challenging to carry out work that fulfills these technical and ethical criteria, the ability to execute such work is crucial in our time.

The first two professional realms that we examined in our Good Work study were journalism and genetics. We selected these realms because of their undeniable importance in the world today. Journalists have a great deal to say about what is in our minds, about the “memes”—the units of meaning—that impact us and that we pass on to others. Geneticists have a great deal to say about our bodies (our "genes"), our health and longevity prospects, as well as the welfare of our children.

While we selected these two realms because of the intriguing meme/gene contrast, the two domains turned out to differ on an important and perhaps under-appreciated dimension. Geneticists find themselves in a realm that is well-aligned: the various parties that are interested in their work are all in substantial agreement about what should be done. More specifically, the individual practitioners, the senior "trustees" of the field, the various institutions in which genetics research are carried out, and the shareholders and stakeholders all desire breakthroughs in understanding that will yield healthier and more long-lived individuals.

In striking contrast, journalism emerges as a realm that is massively misaligned. Journalists are guided by one set of principles, the core of their chosen calling; the major institutions in which they work (e.g. multinational corporations that own newspapers and broadcast media) have another set of goals and objectives; shareholders are motivated chiefly by a desire for greater profits; and the general readership, either on its own or through manipulation, has a great appetite for scandal and gossip, and, at least at present, very little concern about the larger political, social, and economics events of our time. Not surprisingly, many journalists are depressed and frustrated by their profession: while geneticists cannot wait to get up in the morning, journalists look back nostalgically to a Golden Age in the past.

But we also discovered that alignment can occlude problems. If forces are too well aligned, possible dilemmas or problematic issues may be disregarded or viewed as insignificant. In biotechnology companies we discern an increasing blurring of lines between science and commerce. When the financial wellbeing of a company is at stake, conflicts may arise regarding who makes the final decision; the shareholders, the managers, or the scientists? If research scientists are vested in the company that they work for and their findings might, increase the value of the company's stock they may be tempted to speed up the discovery process regardless of possible dangers to patients or research subjects. Any or all of these factors could undermine the alignment, giving rise to research scientists as frustrated as the journalists of today.

II. The View from Business

Recently we have undertaken a parallel study of business. For this branch of the project we interviewed two groups of people: 1) Individuals nominated by academics and peers in the business domain, for their entrepreneurial achievements and social responsibility; and 2) Individuals selected on the basis of their accomplished reputation in business but not known one way or another for their social responsibility. Most of the individuals we interviewed impressed us as good workers in the sense described above: proficient and ethical. Some have created new companies while others have implemented successful changes

to already existing organizations. In the aggregate, they see their work as a welcome challenge, they take risks, they sustain their commitment in times of discouragement, and they are more often than not humble about their success. Many have made sacrifices while attempting to maintain an ethical and moral integrity—to be a good professional. We believe that this population harbors lessons that could be of use to individuals who are entering business as well as business workers who may have lost their moral compass.

Like genetics, business appears to be in alignment at the start of the new century. The American economy is strong, unemployment is down, and profits are at record "highs" for both those working in the domain and for shareholders who own stock in prospering companies. In fact, with the amazing success of so many technology companies at times it seems as though not being in business is a misfortune. However, even in such good times, good work is hard to carry out. There are still obstacles that need to be faced. Profit making and meeting the bottom line are often easier to accomplish by ignoring one's principles. Given the fast pace of many young companies there is a strong desire to create a business quickly, sell it and make a bundle rather than building a solid organization to commit to and watch grow. In addition, the forces that traditionally countered untrammelled market forces in the past, like religion, ideology, and government, no longer operate with the same potency. We might say that, today, there is no external check system because the market itself serves

as the checking point. This is why it is so important that every individual, regardless of her given profession, learn to develop an internal check system—a series of lines that will not be crossed—with an eye towards society and the larger world.

III. Lessons from Business

While coming from different businesses, diverse backgrounds and varied lifestyles, our interview subjects share many of the same guiding principles. These principles, elaborated on below, include responsibility to self and others, honesty, accountability, faith in one's self, and thoughtful contribution to society. Subjects rely on these principles as they go about their business and have succeeded in integrating these principles into several parts of their lives. As such, they differ from widely-held views of business people today. While many business personnel apparently believe that one must trade success for moral or ethical responsibility, the men and women we interviewed believe in just the opposite. By the same token, many leaders in business apparently deem their primary responsibility to the financial health of their company, and readily rationalize behavior in accordance with this belief. The professionals with whom we spoke have disdain for peers who suspend their principles in order to fatten the bottom line.

1. Responsibility

At the heart of being a good professional is a deep-seated sense of responsibility. Responsibility in our participants' lives is parsed as an obligation to one's self, others, the company, the business profession and society. While it is unrealistic to expect that all responsibilities can be monitored and honored at all times, the good professional considers one or more of these responsibilities when making decisions and rendering judgments. Such monitoring allows the good professional to measure her actions with a clear and critical eye.

While all our subjects understand the need for profit, they also believe that business should support and develop the people that contribute to it. They feel a deep-rooted responsibility toward everyone they work with; this includes employees, partners, and customers. Michael Murray, former vice-president of human resources at Microsoft, wanted to create a work place where all employees could feel a sense of accomplishment and pride based on their work and at the same time be able to participate in a life outside work that was meaningful and purposeful. Murray firmly believes that the "soft stuff", as he puts it—structuring a successful team, rewarding good work, being a good leader—are just as essential for the health of an organization as making a profit. Yet, even at a company as respected and successful as Microsoft, Murray felt that gaining currency within the company for "human elements" was a challenge. The only way that he felt he could emphasize the importance of these key human

issues was to engage senior management in a lively dialogue so they could begin to understand the significance of them in regard to the livelihood of the corporation.

At ServiceMaster, a company that provides outsourcing services; lawn care, landscaping, heating and air conditioning, to customers worldwide, the “development of people” is an important component of the mission statement. One manifestation of this priority is that business decisions are always discussed in light of their effect on individuals who work in the company. When we interviewed the chairman and CEO of ServiceMaster, William Pollard, he referred to a meeting that he had just held with a manager responsible for the enterprise in a major foreign country. The manager was up against a difficult situation and needed to make some decisions. The meeting focussed on possible options for this manager’s business unit. Half the time was spent conferring on how these options would affect the business, while the other half of the time was spent discussing how the options would affect people working in that business unit. Pollard underscores the difference between looking at a person as an object of the work and considering the person as a subject of the work. Examining what a change or decision can do to develop and empower an "individual-as-subject" is more important than judging what an "individual-as-object" can do for the company. This consideration promotes hard work and teamwork and is essential for building a strong community within a company.

2. Honesty and Accountability

The professionals we interviewed deliver the truth when needed and stand accountable for their mistakes or problems. In turn, they expect the same from others. Honesty and accountability are essential for building a lasting and reputable enterprise. While often requiring more work, these values force one to consider the repercussions of providing poor service, faulty products, or making frankly unethical or immoral decisions.

For many in our sample, honesty and accountability simply come down to doing what is considered the right thing to do. Michael Hackworth, president and CEO of Aspirian Inc. and chairman of Cirrus Logic, both technology companies, lives by a simple ethic imparted to him by his mother. He will not do something that would embarrass him if it were printed in the morning paper. Hackworth admits that being honest and accountable in every business situation can be challenging especially when one is running a public company. When conditions are good in the company and the stock is up everything is fine ("aligned" in our terms); but when conditions deteriorate and the stock drops, both executives of the company and shareholders go through hard times.

A business judgment that arises here is how one deals with the financial markets during a critical time. There is a tendency on the part of many executives to keep quiet and attempt to fix the problem before the stock drops or

drops further. Hackworth believes, however, that as soon as one knows about impending problems that could affect stock prices, one has an obligation to disclose them. To be sure, the idea of standing in front of your shareholders and admitting error certainly sounds daunting. Yet Hackworth believes that presenting the truth and fixing the problem, even if the stock drops temporarily, builds credibility. As Hackworth put it, the shareholders may not like what you say or even like you when you admit error, but after the problem is presented and repaired they will know that they can count on you (B8, p.19). “You have to have a standard that says I’m not going to violate that criteria and I will take the short-term hit, and I will solve the problem then, it’s tough, but that’s what you have to do”.

Hackworth relates that several years ago he served on the board of a company whose founder boosted shareholder expectations by inflating the company’s sales forecast substantially based on possible sales to new distributors. When Hackworth questioned the founder’s actions and stated that he could not count sales until the distributor sold the product, the executive stated that, as far as he was concerned, it was usual and common practice. Hackworth decided that he could either head up an audit committee at this company or step down from the board. Because the company was running a business akin to Hackworth’s and knowing that they would eventually be competitors Hackworth felt that auditing them would be unethical. He stepped

down from the board and was not surprised to read three years later that the company had filed for bankruptcy and the executive was under indictment.

3. Faith in Business

Even when a domain seems well-aligned, there are times when one feels discouraged and pressured. Yet, it is often during these times that committed business personnel realize a faith in the profession, the people with whom they work, and their own selves. Often though not always, this faith is connected to religious principles or ethical precepts that were learned during one's early years.

McDonald Williams is the chairman of Trammel Crow, a commercial real estate company, and he recalled vividly a difficult period—"a moment of truth"—he experienced twenty years earlier. At the time the country had come into a recession and Williams had a young family, a mortgage and responsibilities. Nervous that he had made the wrong decision working for Trammel Crow, he considered returning to law where he knew he could make a decent living. In an attempt to come to terms with his struggle Williams had an "epiphany"—he suddenly remembered why he entered into business. He valued the people he worked with and although he felt that external business environments had changed, he knew he could make a difference in his company. Williams believed in himself, the employees in the company, and the company's

mission. He stayed on, was soon promoted to CEO and within several years, the company had turned around dramatically.

Fifteen years later, Williams faced another challenging time. The company hit financial hardships again. This time as CEO Williams was embarrassed and knew that he had let many down. Numerous people he had worked with for years and whom had profited during the good times left the company not wanting to take any responsibility for its current problems. Williams stayed on as CEO because he knew that he had an obligation to get the company out of the red. The earlier "epiphany" provided him with the faith to keep on working, to mend the problems, and to put the company back on its feet. Williams feels that his faith was, "more relevant to my business in tough times than anything else because then your values really were square in your face". In challenging times, Williams discovered, it is imperative to look beyond the moment to a longer time frame, to see yourself as more than your personal career or your net worth. After the hardship Williams remained as CEO of Trammel Crown and watched the company experience new profit and growth. A few years ago he stepped aside so that he could work on the renewal of low income housing in the Dallas.

4. Contributions to the Wider Good

For many good professionals, a primary goal in their lives is making a contribution to society. While this goal may reflect their acquisition of wealth,

the individuals with whom we spoke stressed giving back to society and making a difference. In their view, this philanthropy requires more than just writing a check. It also entails donating time and expertise to non-profit organizations. Our professionals want to use their talent, business expertise and monetary resources productively and thoughtfully.

Deciding where to donate one's time and money can be complex. When Orit Gadiesh, the chairman of Bain & Co., an international management consulting firm, makes a donation for her company she wants it to be meaningful. The issue for her is giving money with the ability to also give time so that there is real involvement. This can mean providing a team of employees for a project or getting the whole office to do something together. Either way, Gadiesh says, "I don't think your mind and your heart are really into something unless you're willing to give that".

With his partners, Richard Jacobsen, manager of a real estate development management company, started the California Family Foundation, an institution that deals with educational, housing and employment issues. The Foundation started because Jacobsen and his partners saw a lot of need in their local community, and decided that if they focused their energies and resources they might be able to do something that would be helpful. In addition, Jacobsen and his partners felt that it would be both challenging and satisfying to take their expertise and resources and put it to work in their community. Today the

Foundation is over twenty years old and runs a local private school that has a hundred and sixty students and teaches kindergarten through eighth grade. Jacobsen stands behind his belief that all individuals need to give more and still questions, “how do we, for those that are equipped, by temperament or whatever else, to be able to function successfully in the market, how do we help those that are not?”.

Anita Roddick, founder and co-chairman of the board of The Body Shop, incorporates her concept of "giving back" into everything she does. In reflecting about how her goals have changed over the years she says that they, “have been reduced and polished to [caring about] what person’s life you can affect”. Her primary goal is, “nothing more than creating a sense of humanity in what [she] does and within the business world”. Roddick has accomplished humanitarianism work all over the world which range from living with families in Appalachia, West Virginia, to working in refugee camps in Albania. Her moral conscience is also visible in how she runs her company. During the Gulf War Roddick had billboards erected denouncing the war, and had petitions in all her shops demanding its end. Although she was told by senior management that the anti War sentiment in conjunction with the company name needed to stop, in true nature Roddick closed down operations for a day and allowed employees the opportunity to debate and discuss the War as well as the company’s stance on it.

In fact, Roddick views her company which she founded in 1976, “as an extension of [herself], and not set up for anything other than to challenge wrongs”. She feels money should be given away strategically—not just handed out but put into foundations. She sees her job as being a moral leader within her organization and doing things that the young people in her company will look up to and be proud of. Despite her great efforts to incorporate giving back into her own life she wonders, “how do you keep [young employees] away from a value system of endless increasing wealth to one where humanity, community, is part of the value system?”.

IV. Two Caveats and a Conclusion

We believe that the stories of respected leaders like this can inspire and teach others to be good professionals across the various domains of society. It is important, however, to keep two caveats in mind.

First of all, our study relies heavily on the testimony of creators and leaders in different domains. One can reasonably expect that these individuals will describe themselves in a favorable way; and more than once we have discovered, to our regret, that the actions of our subjects did not match their words. We nonetheless feel that the advice can be important, even when it has not always

been followed by its dispenser. Thus we describe our study as an examination of good work, rather than as an effort to decide who is, in actuality, a good (or a not-so-good) worker.

Second, even—and perhaps even especially—the most impressive professionals have not led perfect lives. We would go further and suggest that being a good professional is a process learned through mistakes and error, properly reflected upon. In many cases it is only through obstacles and difficult decisions that one learns to develop goals and strategies based on ethical and moral principles. And one learns the most from those individuals who have survived their missteps and are willing to talk about them publicly.

Ultimately, we hope to study the nature of good work in a large number of professional domains, and in several societies. At a time when market forces are the most powerful and least opposed in history, it is crucial to think about lines other than the bottom line—the lines that one does not cross even when one could legally do so. We anticipate that guiding principles like responsibility, honesty, accountability, faith and contributing to society can help many individuals to navigate murky waters during times that are exciting but filled with uncertainty.

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