Keynote Topic

With passion and responsibility

Why it is not only possible to carry out good work in turbulent times, but more important than ever

Together with his fellow researchers, for more than a decade now the developmental psychologist, scholar, and public intellectual Howard Gardner has been studying the nature of good work. Only where the three dimensions of excellence, engagement, and ethics are all present, Gardner argues, does work take place that is "excellent in quality, socially responsible, and personally meaningful." This, then, is GoodWork® in the sense of the term the researchers coined.

by Howard Gardner

EVER SINCE ADAM AND EVE were expelled from the Garden of Eden, human beings have had to work "by the sweat of our brows." For most of human history, for the majority of people, work has meant hard physical labor. Today, though, for a smaller, more fortunate number, work can be a pleasure and a privilege, garnered with rewards. It gives our lives meaning and structure and helps us acquire status, prestige, and a comfortable livelihood. When work is considered "just a job," however, just a source of income with which to fulfill our material needs, we commit only to carrying out the letter of our job description – nothing more.

Increasingly, though, in the modern era life centers around work we want to do; work we like to do and which – for internal or external reasons – needs to be done well. Because doing good work *feels* good. We become totally involved in our work, lost in a seemingly effortless performance, and the results of our efforts please not only us but others, too. But what exactly is good work and what sets it apart from an average performance?

The GoodWork® Project

In the mid 1990s I spent a year at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) in Palo Alto, California. There I happened to meet my fellow researchers Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and William Damon. We had known each other and respected each other's work for many years, but we had never collaborated on a project. Our fields of interest overlapped, but were different, despite a common focus on what we began to call "humane creativity." Over time, however, we found that our envisioned projects were in many respects very similar and decided to join forces to investigate the precise nature of good work.

Initially we wanted to understand whether one could be creative and humane at the same time and, if so, how. It is often precisely the creative scientists and artists who are accused of going about their business in a selfish, ambitious way, unconcerned with the common good. So we launched what was at first the "Humane Creativity

PHOTO: CLAUDIA ROGGE, COURTESY: GALERIE VOSS

Project." Over time this evolved into the GoodWork® Project – an empirical study of nine separate professions, among them higher education, journalism, law, genetics, and business, spanning a period of ten years.

We soon agreed on the ingredients of good work. We called them the three Es: Excellence, Engagement and Ethics. Only where these three factors coexist in a balanced relationship, we believe, can truly good work be carried out.

The core question here, however, is how can individuals who *want* to do good work – work that is excellent technically, personally engaging, and carried out in an ethical and responsible way – succeed at a time when things are constantly changing very quickly; when our sense of time and space is being dramatically altered by technology; markets are very powerful, and there are few if any ideological or communitarian factors that can modulate, moderate, or mediate the markets?

An individual decision

When we first raised this question in the 1990s, we had no idea how prescient we were. Now with the dot.com meltdown of 2000 and the current worldwide financial meltdown, we see with great clarity the danger of letting the "market model" of human nature and commerce trump all other views totally. Today, despite our ten years of research, the vital questions of who is willing to work hard to become a good worker, and how best to achieve that goal, are still topics for discussion and controversy.

Nonetheless, there are encouraging findings. One of the most important is that it is possible to carry out good work, as defined above, even in turbulent times. Because in the final analysis, good work is an individual decision. You can do excellent work with great passion and high moral standards even if those around you do not. Similarly, however, even if all around you are good workers, that will not, in itself, prevent you from carrying out bad or compromised work.

Good work is easier to carry out when the profession concerned is well-aligned. That is to say when all of the principal stakeholders want pretty much the same thing from the profession. In genetics in the U.S., for example – one area that we studied – we found that the field was very well aligned; everyone wanted the same thing: good research leading to cures for previously mortal illnesses, and long and healthy lives. The geneticists we interviewed could hardly wait to get to work in the morning. In sharp contrast, journalism was a poorly aligned field. Reporters, editors, publishers, advertisers, owners, and readers were all pursuing different agendas. The journalists we spoke with were not happy – one-third of them wanted to leave the profession.

Ethics are an indispensable ingredient of good work. The ethical person says "I am an XXXX – what are my responsibilities as an XXXX?" It is easy to be responsible when that serves your self-interest. The acid test for responsibility is when you do the right thing, even though it goes against your self-interest. Resignation from a management role being inadequately filled or refusal of a bonus could signal such ethical behavior. Sadly, in the business community such things almost never happen.

A harmonious balance

When the fundamentals of good work – excellence, engagement, and ethics – are in harmony, I am convinced that we lead personally fulfilling and socially rewarding lives. In fact, however, this balance is never totally achieved; rather it is something that we should strive to achieve perennially. The challenge of good work is to keep all three of the Es alive; not just to be excellent technically; not just to be personally engaged; but to do both of these things, while also behaving in an ethical, responsible way. None of us is ethical all the time, and probably none of us is as ethical as we could be. But the ethical person reflects on his mis-steps, tries to learn from them, and does his best to correct his course next time. This holds true for good executives in particular.

To be a good worker as described above, perennially, is not easy, particularly at times when things change so quickly and, at times like the present, when many things that we once took for granted are no longer operative. I think it is important to know one's basic moral and personal values and to strive valiantly to maintain them, despite the odds and the pressures. But no one should trust his or her own judgment; we all need peers, friends, colleagues, and critics to keep us honest and keep us from fooling ourselves.

For executives in the business sector, in the opinion of many experts this means that they should not primarily be concerned with their own interests. The good executive identifies with the mission of the company and tries to develop associates and employees who help to realize that mission. The good executive practices what he preaches, without calling undue attention to himself. I think that humility is a very important quality in this context. At the same time, one needs a certain degree of

CLAUDIA ROGGE, FOAM CITY 1, 2009, 130 x 180, C-PRINT self-confidence and the capacity to act quickly and decisively in a crisis. Studies by organizational consultant Warren Bennis and associates indicate that such impressive executive capacities are often forged when one has confronted a crisis earlier in life and has survived and learned from it. Probably the atmosphere at one's first major job turns out to be decisive. If we are on the ethical fence in that first job, the messages we receive there may influence our behavior for the rest of our working lives.

Combining contrary pulls

One interesting issue in this context is: Can a company actually attain the goal of continuous profitable growth without a certain sense of greed and ruthlessness on the part of management? Benjamin Heineman, Jr. was for many years the general counsel for General Electric. There he supervised over 1,000 lawyers. In a recently published book, *High Performance with High Integrity,* Heineman shows in detail how one can indeed synthesize commercial success with a high sense of integrity. While he would be the first to admit that this is not easy to do, and that one is never totally successful, it is only if we aim to combine these apparent contrary pulls that there is any chance that we (and our institution or corporation) will be successful in the long run. The long run is the key, of course, and by that I mean what it takes for an enterprise to endure for many decades, rather than for many days.

There is no question that a lot of young executives in the past decade or two were trained – consciously or unintentionally – to be greedy and ruthless, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world. This was the unhealthy side to the uncritical political glorification of market forces. We can see the results dramatically in a movie about Enron called *The Smartest Guys in the Room.* When we showed this movie to college students, most of them saw nothing wrong with what the Enron traders did, even when they were manipulating the price of energy and laughing uproariously. This ethical callousness shows that we have a long way to go to provide a better character and a better code of ethics for aspiring executives.

Business schools have a key role to play in shaping up-and-coming generations of executives. Needless to say, business schools try to strengthen the moral and ethical muscle of their students, now more than ever. However, studies show that those who come to business school are more likely to bring with them a weaker moral code than those who enter other professions. Also, business school students are far more likely to be inspired by the top executives who are admired in the media than by their own professors.

That said, there are signs of change. In our research we have found evidence that young leaders – men as well as women – are now much more concerned about balance in their lives. Also, the current financial meltdown with its catastrophic consequences for the entire global economy will cause more and more people to rethink the way in which some companies have been led and governed in the past, and make them want to embrace a different approach to life and work in the future. If that happens, even this crisis will have done some good.

RESUMÉ
Howard Gardner

Howard Gardner, born in 1943, is Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, adjunct professor of psychology at Harvard University, and adjunct professor of neurology at the Boston University School of Medicine. Gardner is perhaps best known for his theory of multiple intelligences, which counters the idea that there is only a single human intelligence that can be assessed with standard instruments. He has written several books on the topic. Gardner also concerns himself with neuroethical issues. In the mid 1990s, together with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and William Damon, he initiated the GoodWork® Project, the findings of which have filled two books: *Good Work – When Excellence and Ethics Meet* and *Responsibility at Work.* Today, Gardner works primarily with school and college students, encouraging them to reflect on the ingredients and implementation of good work. To build awareness, Gardner and his colleagues have developed a GoodWork® Toolkit.

Claudia Rogge, Foam City I, 2009

The works of the Düsseldorf-based photographic artist Claudia Rogge (born in 1965) derive from her fascination with the relationship between the individual and the crowd. The first major retrospective of her work to date opens at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art in mid May 2009.