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Noses, the Grindstone, and a Guy Named Kurt.

By Anthony D. Paustian, Ph.D.

“If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and Earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.”

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

As a child, I was taught to strive for the American Dream, which was something you could “earn” through hard work and persistence. It wasn’t something simply received because you were an American (hence the word “Dream”), and the only aspect of the American Dream a citizen was actually entitled to was the opportunity to work hard for it. People who migrated to this country understood the hard work necessary for achievement and believed it was worth the sacrifices. The opportunity to work hard for something of one’s own inspired the high levels of motivation needed to succeed.

Yet, when I compare things today to past attitudes about hard work, achievement, and citizenship, something seems amiss. Today it feels as if a growing number of people simply just feel entitled to the Dream or some portion of it without having to put in the required work. Many conversations and discussions with employers, educators, and fellow workers over the years have led me to think that somehow things have changed. Combined with the flourish of news and media-related stories about the growing levels of entitlement and programs which support that concept, it’s easy to believe there is a declining individual work ethic that touches all types of people and all levels of employment.

I grew up in a typical middle-class home where my parents often said things like, “Whatever you do, put your all into it,” or “If you borrow something from someone, always return it in better condition than you received it.” Their actions reflected these views; they walked the talk and taught by example. These mini-lessons on work ethic

throughout my childhood became the mortar that formed the foundation of who I am today. Keeping my “nose to the grindstone” became the mantra of my personal life. As a teenager, I had numerous hobbies, interests, and lofty dreams, combined with a strong desire for success. Yet my interests and plans required money I didn't have and somehow needed to earn. So I did whatever I had to do, such as mowing lawns, detasseling corn, picking tomatoes, babysitting, bagging groceries, painting, washing cars, selling nails (picked up from the ground at construction sites—with permission—after they were dropped), and even selling fireworks. (My friend and I would purchase fireworks in Missouri, where they were legal, and bring them back to Iowa, where they weren't so legal. We would then sell them at a considerable profit. Although we ultimately did get in a little trouble with the police, one has to admire our teenage entrepreneurial spirit.) This same “work ethic” also carried over into my schoolwork, which resulted in very good grades made possible by meeting and exceeding the amount of assigned work.

Today, when I think about work ethic, I have to ask what it means now and how it fits into people's lives. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, work ethic is defined as “a set of values based on the moral virtues of hard work and diligence.”¹ However, the term “moral virtues” seems to imply a sense of universal understanding as to the meanings of both hard work and diligence. People can be very busy, working very hard for a long period of time, yet really do nothing of value to improve their lives or help them obtain the “American Dream” as they perceive it. However, according to the stated definition, they still might be viewed as having a strong work ethic despite the outcomes. But do they really?

A Slightly Different View.

I have an alternate definition; one that I believe captures the essence of work ethic. To me, work ethic can be defined as simply “doing whatever you need to do in order to get whatever you want.” When people persistently, and consistently, do all of the things they have to in order to reach a desired level of personal success, they will exhibit the degree of work ethic required to get there. For example, if someone is content making \$20,000 per year by steadily working a full-time job that pays \$10 per hour, then they would be exhibiting the required level of work ethic to achieve this desired level of success.

Although others may not agree that this person exhibits a strong work ethic, success is a very relative term, and its definition often depends upon the views of the person evaluating it. Many variables go into one's personal view of success that might run contrary to how society at large may view it. The key is to realize that as long as you do whatever you need to do in order to get whatever you want (achieve your desired level of success) you are exhibiting the necessary degree of work ethic regardless of what others may think. However, when people desire something more, something they

currently don't have, or their expectations of success increase, they must work harder to achieve this higher level of "want," and thus, exhibit a stronger work ethic.

In his book, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, John Maxwell discusses the "Law of Process" whereby "*Champions don't become champions in the ring—they are merely recognized there.*"² In other words, when watching Michael Phelps win eight Olympic gold medals swimming in Beijing or Serena Williams winning her 4th Wimbledon title, all we see are the results, not the countless hours spent getting there through practice and training. These champions made a decision many years earlier that they "wanted" to become champions, and then did what they "needed to do" in order to achieve that level of success.

The Story of Kurt.

After a nice stint as an All-State high school quarterback in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Kurt Warner was disappointed to learn that no Division I-A (FBS) college was willing to offer him a scholarship to play football. Shifting his focus, he accepted a partial scholarship to a smaller Division I-AA (FCS) school located about an hour's drive away from home. Believing he would get to play early and often, he went to the University of Northern Iowa where he would be relatively close to home and his family and friends could watch him play. He was wrong. After three long seasons riding the bench as a back-up quarterback, Warner finally won the starting position during his senior year. After a rocky start to the season, he ultimately earned Gateway Conference Offensive Player of the Year honors.

Warner believed that his level of play that year would be good enough to earn a spot in the NFL draft, but once again, he was wrong and went undrafted. However, in 1994 he was given a chance to earn a spot as a free agent on the roster of the Green Bay Packers, but he was competing against a young Brett Favre, veteran Mark Brunell and former Heisman Trophy winner Ty Detmer. He was cut from the team before the start of the season.

Shortly thereafter, Warner returned to Cedar Falls, to work in a Hy-Vee Grocery Store for \$5.50 per hour stocking shelves, and serve as a graduate assistant coach for his former UNI football team. With no NFL team willing to give him a tryout, Warner signed with the Iowa Barnstormers in 1995, part of the Arena Football League. He experienced great success in arena football and was named to the AFL's First-Team All-Arena in both 1996 and 1997 after leading the Barnstormers to the Arena Bowl (the league championship game) both seasons.

Because of his hard work and success with the Barnstormers, he signed in 1998 with the NFL St. Louis Rams and then subsequently was sent off to play for the NFL Europe Amsterdam Admirals, where he led the league in both touchdowns and passing yards.

Following his season in Europe, he returned to the Rams and served as their third-string quarterback after beating out Will Furrer for the position.

At the beginning of the 1999 season, Warner became the second-string quarterback behind newly signed Trent Green. However, when Green tore his ACL in a preseason game, Warner finally was given his opportunity to take over the starting role. With the support of his coach, Dick Vermeil, and fellow teammates, Warner went on to have one of the best seasons in history for an NFL quarterback, throwing for over 4,300 yards, with 41 touchdown passes and a pass completion rate of over 65%. The Rams would go on to win Super Bowl XXXIV, and Warner would be named 1999 NFL Most Valuable Player as well as Super Bowl MVP, one of only seven players, including such NFL greats as Bart Starr, Joe Namath, Terry Bradshaw and Joe Montana, to receive both honors in the same year.^{3,4}

Kurt Warner's journey to becoming a successful NFL quarterback demanded hard work and, especially, perseverance. He always knew what he wanted, but getting there wasn't easy. Unlike most NFL quarterbacks, who usually go through a simpler, more traditional process of career progression, Warner's path was significantly longer and much more difficult; he had to humble himself and repeatedly accept "lesser" roles in football just to stay connected to the sport.

Despite all of his personal setbacks (that also included financial and family problems), he maintained a strong belief in his potential and did whatever he needed to do in order to achieve his larger goal of playing in the NFL. In his book, ***All Things Possible***, Warner explained it this way:

*I believe that the Lord has a plan for each of us that's better than anything we can imagine—even if that plan isn't obvious to us at every stage. He prepared me for this over a long period of time—in lower-profile locker rooms and the grocery store and in Europe, through all of the personal tragedies and in spite of the people who doubted me along the way...I realize now that I would not have been prepared for my big chance had it happened before it did.*⁵

My Experience.

Over the years, I've had the opportunity to teach a large number of college students in a variety of business-related topics. Most recently, my efforts have been with fourth-year students in a capstone strategy class that's designed to tie all of their prior business courses together with an applied focus.

One of the topics that I stress is the necessity of being willing to do whatever they need to do in the short-term to ultimately achieve what they want in the long-term. Today's world has become extremely competitive; unfortunately, a college degree doesn't necessarily guarantee the job a person thinks she deserves just because she has one. As

a result, a student may have to do something she really doesn't "want" to do in the early stages of her career, in order to position herself for that which she truly *does* want.

Most of my students somehow feel this doesn't apply to them, and ultimately, they will have to figure it out on their own. However, every now and then, one of them will listen and take this advice to heart. In a recent email, Melissa, one of my former students, shared her job-seeking experience with me after she graduated:

Watching my friends graduate at a time when it's so hard to get a job, it saddens me to see the reactive state with which so many people have become comfortable. When they don't find their dream job within a couple of days searching, they attribute their difficulty to the economy and the horrors of the job market. It stuns me the lack of effort they put forth. I graduated with excellent grades and a degree in information systems. After graduating in May, I applied for jobs daily for months until I received my first interview at the end of August. I nailed the interview and landed my sweet gig...in reception.

Never in a million years did I anticipate that all my hard work in school with a "legitimate" major would get me is a job that I could have just as easily received with a high school diploma. But I wanted a job, so I took it. With slightly bruised pride, I worked very hard to prove both my potential and desire to do bigger and better things. Ten months later, I was promoted into an entry level-job in my field of study...I was proactive, and finally felt as though I had direction in life.

The most astonishing thing to me is how all of my friends still complain almost a year later about being unemployed after graduation. Yet, these are the very same people who turned down the opportunity to submit their resumes for my old reception position after my promotion because it was somehow beneath them.

Declining Drive.

As nearly any teacher can attest, over the last couple of decades, students have changed. As a professor, beginning with my very first class, I have always given students the opportunity to write an extra-credit research paper should they decide to do so. The paper requirements and constraints are detailed in the course syllabus from the first day of class, and the paper is due the last day of class, thus giving students approximately four months to prepare it. The paper is worth up to an additional 10% of the final point total, so their final course grade could potentially improve by a full letter grade.

When I first began doing this, I would receive about 28 papers out of a class of 30 students, some from students who were already getting an "A" for the class. Today, in a class of 30 students, I typically receive six or seven, or about one-fourth of what I received twenty years ago (and the majority of these are turned in by students already

earning an “A”). This change represents about a 75% decline over two generations of students who are apparently unwilling to do “whatever they need to do” in order to guarantee a higher final course grade.

For the last couple of years, I’ve also been performing a “non-scientific study” with my fourth-year students in the strategy classes discussed earlier. During discussions of creative and innovative thinking, I have students break into groups of two and give each group a bag containing a number of miscellaneous items, including some Lego® blocks, a penny, a nut, bolt and washer, a marble, wire nut, and a wooden spool. The task for each group is to divide all of the items into two distinct groups (i.e., things made of metal / things not made of metal). *They are to do this as many times as they can within 20 minutes.* I also pass out a solution sheet for each two-person group that not only restates the instructions for the exercise—in boldface—but also includes a number of lines so they can record their solutions. What I don’t tell them is that the number of solution lines per sheet gradually increases from 20 to 80 as the sheets are distributed across the room.

An interesting phenomenon occurs. Students complete the exercise and come up with as many solutions as possible **up to** the number of lines they are provided. In only one single instance (out of hundreds total) has a group gone beyond the number of provided lines. Although there have been many fully completed sheets ranging from 20 to 80 solutions, typically once a group fills the respective number of lines, brainstorming stops and the discussion shifts to just talking about random things while group members play around with the items. Although the instructions are clear and it is stressed that each group needs to come up with **as many solutions as possible**, nearly all groups only work up to the self-imposed, “perceived” limits of the exercise. Some groups arrive at 20 solutions, others 40, and still others 80, yet for the most part, they seem equally content with the amount of effort they invest in the exercise (ironically, the list of solutions I have compiled over the years includes over a thousand possibilities).

These classroom examples provide anecdotal evidence as to how some students approach work today. I have also observed similar behavior patterns with many workers at all levels (e.g., not very willing to stay longer if the job isn’t finished, only do that which they are asked to do, and/or don’t take much initiative outside of assigned tasks). These experiences, combined with similar stories shared by colleagues, lead me to believe there is a cultural pattern of a declining work ethic in comparison to what people *say* they want and desire.

It Keeps Going and Going and Going.

The concept of work ethic also implies a certain level of persistence. Sometimes getting what you want may require a bunch of extra time and effort doing what you need to do in order to get there, and persistent people know how to steer clear of vacuums (see my piece entitled, “*Attack of the Killer Kirby*”⁶ for additional discussion on personal

discipline). History is replete with examples of successful people who displayed extraordinarily high levels of perseverance and persistence to achieve their goals and dreams.

For example, James Dyson spent fifteen years and developed over 5100 prototypes to finally complete the design for his revolutionary vacuum cleaner (one that truly sucks compared to others in the market—pardon the pun). When no other manufacturer would take it on as part of their existing product line, Dyson launched Dyson Limited to manufacture and distribute it. Today, Dyson’s vacuum generates the highest total sales revenue of any vacuum in the country.⁷

Chester Carlson’s idea for electrophotography was shot down more than twenty times by companies such as IBM and Kodak. Through his perseverance, however, he was able to finally enter into an agreement with a small photo-paper company called Haloid (later to be known as Xerox). Twenty-one years after initially inventing electrophotography (now known as xerography), the first convenient office copier using the technology was unveiled.⁸ Imagine an office today without a photocopier or laser printer!

Dr. Seuss (a.k.a. Theodor Seuss Geisel) peddled his first children’s book, *Mulberry Street*, to twenty-seven different publishers only to be rejected twenty-seven times. It wasn’t until he literally bumped into an old college friend who happened to work at Vanguard Press, a division of Houghton Mifflin, that he was able to get his illustrations and manuscript in front of some key decision makers. Vanguard ultimately published the book which was well-received and ultimately jump-started a career that resulted in 44 children’s books, nearly 30 of which have been adapted for television or video.⁹

Books, movies and television shows are loaded with examples of people like Dyson, Carlson, and Geisel (Dr. Seuss). Why do we like these stories so much? Could it be that the people in these stories exhibit such a high degree of work ethic that one can only dream of reaching that level? Or could it be that most people believe that this kind of work ethic and persistence only exist in books or movies so the entire concept is fiction?

What If?

I remember the day my son purchased his first car, an old Chevy Cavalier with a ton of miles and a salvage title. Shortly after the purchase, he was in my driveway washing and waxing it. He even scrubbed the interior, washed the carpet and added a nice perfume scent. When I mentioned that I didn’t ever recall him washing and waxing my car during all of the time he had driven it, he replied, “That car wasn’t mine.”

In reality, I believe most people share this same perspective. There’s an old saying: “No one ever waxes a rental car.” When there is little or no personal investment, it’s really hard to place a lot of value on something. Sometimes we can see it in children and how they take care of their “free” stuff while growing up, college students who haven’t made

a personal financial investment into their education (or can't feel the pain of their student loans while still in school), and employees who are allowed to simply "exist" within a company and not pull their weight.

Unlike years past, we have a growing number of people who are receiving many of their "wants" without really having to make a personal investment into acquiring them. This process of entitlement or guaranteed benefit leaves out the most important aspect of acquiring wants: the hard work associated with getting there. The process of creating personal value and self-esteem is why a strong work ethic is so important for the long-term growth of people. The resulting feelings of accomplishment, a goal achieved and personal success are what have driven this country and our entrepreneurial spirit since the beginning.

The role of leaders today at all levels—from teachers to office managers to production supervisors to the President of the United States—should be to facilitate an environment of self-growth, to support the efforts of people, and to provide help and inspirational guidance along the way. The more success people have "doing whatever they need to do in order to get whatever they want," the more they are driven to repeat the process another time while also helping others get what they want. Their sense of self-esteem and value will drive their personal growth and encourage them to reach higher levels of success. Their passion for work will become contagious and spread to others around them.

Someone once said, "There are no menial jobs, only menial attitudes." In his book ***Brain Droppings***, comedian George Carlin observed, "*Most people work just hard enough not to get fired and get paid just enough money not to quit.*"¹⁰ Imagine: What if people suddenly realized there is honor in all work? What if they saw the value of hard work as a way to give? What if everyone in your company or organization had a stronger work ethic? What if they all worked just a little bit harder, and their noses moved a little closer to the grindstone? What if?

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