

Chapter 9

Prevalent Work Ethics in Career and Technical Education

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ABSTRACT

Career and technical education (CTE), has been defined as a series of classes and practical experiences that prepares students for future employment. A critical component of these components is the teaching of work ethics necessary for success in today's world of work. I believe it is important that the CTE teacher have a solid background of the genesis of the work ethic. This chapter is an exploration of the background of work ethic as developed by educators and philosophers. I have summarized the chapter by a presentation of a list of salient work ethic descriptors taken from my Occupational Work Ethic Inventory©.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The history of the work ethic is most often introduced as beginning with the industrial revolution. The oft mentioned “Protestant work ethic” is tied to “toiling for God’s will” as mentioned in the Bible and with religious leaders such as Martin Luther, dating to the 1500’s (Brickman, 1983; Tilgher, 1965). It is my belief though, that working hard is an innate trait that exists in all of us. And like the natural instincts that are attributed to animals, we all want to work hard, to contribute,

to be part of the whole, a member of the team, in a word—accepted.

Acceptance is a need that is part of our culture, both societal and occupational. I often tell my students that we are the sons and daughters of the sons and daughters of the survivors—that is, those that were accepted. And it is here that the first rule of genetics kicks in, to wit—“if your parents did not have any children—chances are you won’t either”. Of course, I say this tongue in cheek but profoundly, it is true. We had to be accepted or we did not promulgate.

So if we accept that what I say is true then—where did this concept of work ethic begin? The

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obvious answer is that it began with survival. We toiled to survive and for the joy of relationships, family, and—acceptance by our peers. Work by definition was a daily part of our lives and one could say *was* our life. We didn't think twice about it

It was only when the first writers and philosophers had the time and the luxury to think about work that work became separate from life. It must be noted that the reason they had the time was that much of their work was done by others—usually slaves. These great men could literally sit back all day and just think about work. Now that's a luxury.

But for the rest of us, the so-called “working class”, we worked to survive. Some suggest that the Protestant work ethic was invented to assure that a percentage of one's wages would be given to support the church. This took work beyond survival and gave it a higher purpose. “Serving God's will” became the reason to work (Tilgher, 1965).

The industrial revolution created an even greater dependence on the Protestant work ethic for worker acceptance since work was taken off of the farm and out of the household and into the factories in the city. The concept of hard work followed the young men and women reared on the simple farm values of hard work and diligence to duty, to the sterile, alien concept of working in a factory. Millions of workers migrated to the city and relied on their religion to carry them through the “drudgery of work” (Rodgers, 1979).

But what about the workers and cultures not part of the initial industrial revolution? This group includes what we today call third world countries such as the giants of India and China, and also the many smaller countries of Africa and South America. These countries are only now discovering the industrial revolution in their cultures. This is certainly a struggle for the governments of these developing nations but evidence of the rural work ethic is seen where these citizens immigrate to developed countries like the USA and form the basis of workers with a good work ethic.

In the USA many of these immigrants have come from Mexico and the Central American countries.

Between the world wars, an American educator, Bennett (1926) commented on the history of industrial (career and technical) education when he claimed that a stage of civilization was from savagery to barbarism. Earlier historians claimed that instruction became conscious but not necessarily organized (Davidson, 1901). Others pointed out that there has been no documented theory or system in the teaching of arts and crafts, even through the period of the ancient Egyptians (Maspero, 1985).

But, how can this be? How did workers in the world become so technologically literate? In the classic “how did we get here from there” question, an exploration of what ifs, and how dids might help us with some insight into not only our roots but our relevance and importance in the history and development of the world. Following is a treatise of these issues supported with historical reflections that offer to explain the logical development, success, and tragedies that have preceded the development of work ethics in career and technical education.

9.2 BACKGROUND

The work ethic in the United States is a construct of work that has a long history of evolution, with roots in religious concepts from Biblical times, Calvinist and Protestant asceticism, and the Industrial Revolution (Hill, 1996; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2004; Tilgher, 1965). Major theoretical changes in religious views of work and the impact of those changes on societal perspectives across decades have affected the attitudes people hold toward work and its value. In addition, the American work ethic continues to evolve as a result of current events and their socio-cultural impact. The goal of this chapter is to delineate paradigm shifts, especially recent

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