Work and the Workplace

Benjamin Franklin said that there are only three permanent things in life: death, taxes, and change. While I would never seek to modify the teachings of so great a thinker, I feel we must add one other critical element: work. The very fabric of our life revolves around work. Our entire identity encompasses the type of work we are doing—or not doing, for that matter. The type of food we eat, the neighborhood we live in, the clothes we wear, and how we socialize—all somehow are related to our work.

Clearly work has a defining influence. Many people spend anywhere from eight to sixteen hours a day working. This means that one- to two-thirds of their days, and therefore their lives, is spent in activities which define their existence. In Egypt it is said that bread is life. I would posit that work is life. We must be cognizant of what this means to us. We need to understand its influence upon our life. We need to apply the necessary skills, competencies, knowledge, and values in such a way that we are positively influencing this process we call work. Certainly, the social work profession has these competencies. I am glad that Sheila Akbas and Paul Kurzman have written a book which provides a framework for understanding this very important area.

For decades, social workers have all but ignored the second word which defines their very reason for being: work. Certainly the noble roots of the profession put more focus on the disenfranchised and those having mental health issues. This work should never cease. However, as we strive to ensure that every person who is willing and able to work has the ability and opportunity to do so, we should clearly understand more about what work is and how to make it a viable effort for the individual, as well as the organization. We put a lot of focus in our society on getting people...
employed, but we don’t put enough focus on insuring that people can meet their individual and family needs while accomplishing the requirements of the organization.

In my experience, productive workers are those who can meet their individual needs and help the organization meet its goals also. Unfortunately, most organizations do not put enough emphasis on how to help individuals meet their needs. There is not enough of an understanding in some cases, or desire in other cases, to do this. What is required is a professional framework to guide and promote this thinking. Certainly social workers can meet this challenge.

I have been working in various aspects of international human resources for the past twenty-two years. I have worked in senior human resource positions for several companies in Central Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, Western Europe, and the United States. I also have worked for nonprofit organizations in senior positions. There is one common denominator that ties together all of these organizations. People are the most important resource when it comes to achieving the ends of the organization. The company can have money, land, machinery, and products, but it will not be successful unless the right people are helping the organization achieve its objectives.

Organizations typically will rely on line managers to motivate their people. Organizations spend thousands of training dollars to ensure that managers are equipped with the wherewithal to motivate their workers. However, the manager can not do this alone. This is where the human resources department comes into play. Human resource professionals perform functions that take into account that employees have problems and issues that can not be handled by the manager alone. They administer benefits that take into account the needs of the employees and their families. Human resource staff counsel employees and advise them on how they can function harmoniously with their supervisors, coworkers, and supervisees. Human resource people develop work-life programs that take into account the fact that more working mothers need flexibility to deal with family priorities. Policies need to be established that are sensitive and caring, based on employee needs. There is more demographic variety in the workplace, so efforts to attract, retain, and develop diverse populations, while balancing the needs of all employees, is a critical dynamic. Training needs to be implemented continually in order to enable managers to execute their tasks and manage their people with caring, effectiveness, and respect.

I have spent a lot of time ensuring that these functions are well implemented in my work. In fact, my current position as vice president of
Global Workplace Initiatives at Colgate Palmolive focuses on enabling my company to do all of these things well on a global basis. My previous work at Procter and Gamble, Digital Equipment Corporation, and the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority was also informed by occupational social work theory and principles. Although I possess a master’s degree in business administration, I would say that my master’s in social work has done even more to equip me to be highly effective in these areas. My effectiveness with organizational development is enhanced by an understanding of systems theory and “people dynamics.” This is why social workers can bring rich insight to the various human resource functions. The most effective human resource people are those who are sensitive to the needs of the individual and the organization. Unfortunately, many people feel that all too many human resource professionals only care about optimizing productivity and profits. No organization really benefits from such suboptimal thinking and behavior. Research is replete with examples that demonstrate that companies that care for and value their people are the most productive. Social workers have a distinctive ability to care, coupled with a skill set that enables them to help individuals become personally effective. This is an indispensable capability as far as the workplace and organizations are concerned. This is the value added that can ensure that organizations are more effective in meeting both their productivity goals and the needs of their employees. A few concrete examples will illustrate the point.

In chapter 4, the authors take a broad look at the role of health systems as opposed to the traditional view of health. When I was working in southern Africa, there was a need to address the health crisis caused by the AIDS epidemic. When you went to the office one week and returned the next, invariably you would see new workers in certain departments because of so many deaths occurring among the rank and file. Besides the terrible impact on family members, this put a strain on our recruiting efforts. It also meant that it was difficult to maintain continuity with work assignments. We developed a comprehensive health education and awareness program, in addition to giving extensive counseling. The corporation had to take on this role because the governments were either unable or unwilling to take up the mantle. Incorporating the family, community institutions, and relevant nongovernmental organizations into this program was critical to the success of the effort, action that is similar to advice given the reader of Work and the Workplace: A Resource for Innovative Policy and Practice.

This same awareness of the broader role that must be played with health systems was evident in Eastern Europe. When I worked in Roma-
nia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland in the early days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I was involved in starting up subsidiary operations for my company, along with finance, marketing, and manufacturing executives. In addition to establishing the traditional work processes, I saw a need to review the existing health provisions provided by government to workers. While the health systems were good at treatment, they did not provide comprehensive preventative measures. Setting up annual physical examinations to review health broadly, including dental care and vision, became an important part of ensuring the overall well-being of employees. We also offered a healthcare day when the whole family could participate in health education and diagnostic care, if they desired it. This kind of extension of the social service role is recommended throughout Work and the Workplace.

This brings us to another area: quality of work life. The authors note that there are more women entering the world of work and suggest the “distinctive presenting problems” that occur when people come to work with “nonwork-related concerns” that may impede their productivity. Working mothers are a distinct group that have specialized issues because of their dual status. I have found it advisable to develop policies and programs to improve their quality of work life. An example is a policy to extend the amount of leave that a person can take to deal with personal or family issues beyond that required by the Family and Medical Leave Act. This additional leave, which can be used to supplement leave for childbirth or other personal issues, also applies to fathers who may wish to stay home to expand their parenting role. The company was willing to adopt this policy recommendation when offered evidence of its cost/benefit effectiveness, another verification of the value of the authors’ recommendations.

Emergency care is an issue that applies to all workers. This need occurs not only for parents of young children, but also with regard to elder care. Given that many of us now are facing issues of dealing with elderly parents, a need to establish an elder-care information and referral service that would provide employees with information on where to refer a parent who needed temporary or long-term care became apparent. Also needed was the provision of a healthcare worker to offer temporary care for a relative in-house until either the parent was well or could be transferred to a residential facility. The decision was made to offer these services free of cost. Dealing with these quality of work life issues is an extremely important part of helping employees with the “total systems aspects of their lives.” In chapter 5, the authors go into some depth regarding the role that occupational social work plays in this process using an appropriately ecological systems approach.
This systems approach is particularly useful when looking at the area of overall organizational effectiveness. Chapter 8 illustrates this well. My previous work at Procter and Gamble and Digital Equipment was informed by a model of appreciating and including key stakeholders in a process of self-determination regarding their workplace systems in manufacturing plant start-ups. Using systems theory and a sociotechnical approach to work, we involved key stakeholders in the design of their work systems and in other design decisions regarding work tasks, reward systems, communication processes, and the ergonomics of manufacturing, among other considerations. Committees of workers and managers representing a cross-section of the organization met before machinery, equipment, and concrete were installed. Worker participation efforts of this type are critical to ensuring that the needs of the organization and the needs of the individual both are optimally satisfied. Naturally, these participation efforts should be maintained after the work system is developed to ensure ongoing effectiveness. In fact, the committees that were established were a source of ongoing problem solving and input. Facilitating such action is within the reach of a social worker in a work setting.

Another good example of using a biopsychosocial assessment and systems approach to work involves the use of employee assistance programs. Without doubt, the EAP has proven to be a remarkably useful organizational mechanism. While at Colgate Palmolive, and previously at the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority and at Digital Equipment Corporation, I was in a position to install EAPs that could partner with me to deal effectively with many concerns of employees. Most recently I took the use of the EAP to another level. During 9/11, I ensured that the EAP was part of our crisis intervention and emergency preparedness. Post-traumatic symptoms needed attention so workers could focus appropriately on their current reality. We put in place a free twenty-four-hour hotline that employees or family members could access. We ran groups for employees to provide comfort and support. We established Web sites that individuals and their families could access for information, education, and resources. Confidential counseling was made available for family members when requested. Since 9/11, the workplace has not been the same. Blackouts, plane crashes, terrorist events, and the Iraq war tend to resurrect similar feelings and fear. Our EAP systems have proven very effective in dealing with these ongoing crises. The authors point out in chapter 6 how crucial the EAP is to the workplace.

That is why this book is so important. Work and the Workplace establishes a framework and methodology for applying social work expertise in world of work settings. Over the years that I have known Shelley and
Paul they have provided opportunities for social workers to increase their professional capabilities, while enhancing the effectiveness of their organizations. I found this book to be a very practical guide for continuing this important work. It is a comprehensive text which covers professionals in almost every setting, whether profit, nonprofit, management, union, or university. Lest they are accused of not offering practical suggestions: Pay attention to the case studies that pose real-life problems and provide viable solutions. This book is groundbreaking in all of these aspects. As a reader, you are in for a treat.

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