

Businesses see ethics gap in young recruits

by Ron Ausmus
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Corporate recruiters are demanding – and they country’s business schools are supplying – MBA graduates that are better grounded in ethics and corporate social responsibility. The University of Denver’s Daniels School of Business has been a pioneer in this area for nearly two decades. The University of Colorado’s Leeds School of Business has become a notable leader in socially responsible business education, and most of our other schools emphasize ethics as part of their business core.

This positive news aside, there’s mounting evidence of a serious ethics learning deficit at a more fundamental level of the education process. Many young people entering the work force from high school and college are seriously lacking in some vital character-related basics.

I learned this recently, working with a work force development task force for a metro-area economic development group. We engaged human resources managers from major employers in serious discussions about employee preparation needs for the coming decade. They represented some of the fastest-growing industry clusters of our economy: life sciences, telecommunications, air transportation, software and broadcasting. Our prime focus was technical and academic preparation, but we also engaged them regarding other vital preparation factors.

Heading the “other critical success factors” list was the subject of basic work ethic and personal accountability deficits among current job entrants across this spectrum of industries. Many new employees lack such fundamentals as honesty and [accountability, a decent work ethic and attitude, respect, resilience, and candid communication](#). [This was true even with](#) those entering the work force with graduate degrees.

Work as an essential rite of passage

With all the institutional ethics talk and awareness over the past decade, why aren’t the right messages getting through with these bright, well-schooled young adults? I would suggest that this type of learning deficit can’t be remedied at the institutional level with new college programs and in corporate training departments. These character-related basics begin in the family and are extended and reinforced by good teaching and modeling in the broader community as children grow into young adults. What has gone wrong in this vital area?

I believe a closer look at work as the essential rite of passage into adulthood is most informative. A generation ago, most middle-class teenagers embraced their first jobs as part of this vital transition that provided both new freedoms and responsibilities. Part-time and summer work was the opening to prove one’s capabilities with key adults other than parents and teachers. Honesty, dependability and eagerness to work were givens, as 16- and 17-year-olds stretched to prove their worth in unglamorous jobs for relatively low pay. That experience yielded vital learning about delayed gratification, teamwork and creativity in solving problems and making mundane tasks bearable. A good spin-off was some maturity in money management as kids learned to reconcile wants and needs with limited earnings. For many, that first job became a significant motivator for career planning and a more serious focus on academic studies – vital life-learning indeed.

Kids shielded from life’s lessons

Lots of kids today are still privileged to absorb the maturing influence of work at this age, but those lessons are increasingly being aborted by well-intentioned parents bent on giving their young “the very best of everything.” In place of instilling or allowing the disciplines afforded by measured work experiences, parents bestow on their

kids the maximum in enrichment activities, travel and peer social interaction all throughout high school, college and beyond. Those are all good things in balance, but the excesses are perpetrating a growing entitlement norm in which kids expect ever-increasing cash outlays without responsibility even for household chores. This delivers a clear message: The drudgery experiences of any kind of labor are to be avoided for as long as possible, so the attendant character-molding disciplines get shelved and seriously postponed.

Many of these are the same “helicopter parents” we read about who are the scourge of college officials dealing with their progeny. The cell phone is the ubiquitous umbilical cord that keeps mom or dad nearby to mediate any unpleasantness. So something’s amiss with the course load or schedule? “Dean, here’s my mom. Work it out with her!” Many students now take six years to complete their first unfocused college program. If no exciting, high-status jobs await them upon graduation, they can always enroll in another program or go hike the Himalayas.

Parents back entitlement mentality

We hear of parents who are still underwriting the work-free self-actualization pursuits of their young on into their mid- and late 20s. Many live at home – or expect to move back after graduation. There’s now talk of the “quarter-life crisis,” as these coddled post-adolescents finally go out and face the real world. HR personnel tell of parents showing up for job interviews with their 20-somethings, or worse – to berate them if their son or daughter didn’t get that bonus or promotion they were expecting after the first year on the job. We’re now admitting that the onset of adulthood is about age 26 – not 16, 18, or 21.

What’s the impact of having such a large share of our most gifted young people go lacking in the strength of character, commitment and coping skills for even the mundane challenges of a first job? Ethics and social responsibility are more than business school casework. Those continual parental interventions reinforce an unmistakable entitlement mentality: My child’s self-interest trumps every other consideration here! How will these young people respond as they face those junctures where major self-interest collides with the interest of others – say, investors, stakeholders and any sense of the larger good? Some other folks with incredibly high self-esteem faced those critical junctures – and they’re currently serving time for massive fraud schemes that bilked millions of employees and investors out of their life’s savings.

Kids eager to prove themselves

This issue has no easy solution. It’s a topic that parent groups in schools, churches and clubs need to be fully engaged in. We have lots of solid families at every socioeconomic level that instill the work-oriented character basics with their kids. Those families need affirmation – and more families to join them and reduce some of the massive social pressures to conform.

Over-involved parents simply need to practice backing off. Learning and earning in environments that permit some controlled struggle are what the journey from childhood to adulthood is all about. I’ve found that kids of all ages are eager to prove themselves when handed some autonomy and responsibility. How else will they learn that sustained effort and accountability are not just the domain of successful, striving parents but rather the graduated steps to becoming independent, responsible individuals? Start by making a list of things that need to get done around the house, and let them contract for that new stereo system or skateboard – or limo for the prom. The price is not money – it’s time, foresight and a special kind of caring. Don’t cheat kids out of valuable work and earning experiences just because you’re affluent enough to buy them off with an endless supply of the current “right stuff.”

Parents need the collective wits, wisdom and support that they can provide each other, in seeing the teachable moments and enforcing the necessary consequences to anchor those life lessons. Such “tough nurturance” requires maturity and concerted long-term effort in the face of social pressures. But we can do it; our parents did

it for us. The wisest and wealthiest among us know that some of the most precious character gifts our kids can obtain can't be bought. They have to be earned.

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