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Breaking the ice with a gutted rooster: reflections on a messy day one

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Abstract

Based on an experience in an MBA Human Resource Management classroom, this paper traces the process of my reflection on an icebreaker discussion of “best” and “worst” student jobs. I indicate how I developed second thoughts about the way in which I handled the discussion, concerned that making light of messy jobs might encourage the class of future managers to do the same. The journey includes the input of a fellow colleague who helped spur me to articulate more clearly – for myself and for my students – that which I am willing to profess as a management professor. In noting how I came up short in relation to my human relations training and my own personal values, I hope the paper prompts discussion of private and public reflection, helping sharpen the connections between espoused and expressed values in the classroom and beyond.

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Day one

It was the first day of MBA 685, Human Resource Management.¹ Students wondered about me, new to them and the university. I wondered about them. Who were they, and what did the semester hold? I hoped to engage the students. Frankly, I also hoped they liked me. It was time to break the ice.

“Welcome. Let’s get started. I’d like each of you to tell us your name and what year you’re in. For those of you on this side of the room, tell us what is the best job you’ve ever had. For those of you on the other side, please tell us about the worst job you’ve ever had.” As they spoke, I listed the jobs on the board. I focused on the “worst” jobs, such as packing the contents of an endless conveyor of snack containers, drilling hundreds of holes to test drill bits, and translating the work of a urologist to and from Russian. One student described the most striking job of the class session: gutting roosters. We chuckled and grinned as that job and others came up in conversation. As some of the most unpleasant jobs were described, I laughed and referred to them multiple times in the ensuing several minutes. We then processed the list, evoking common elements that made for good (and bad) jobs, and building an initial group model of what makes for good or at least “best job” work. Building on the class’ experience, I went on to present the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). The model proposes that skill variety, task identity, and task significance make

jobs meaningful. Appropriate autonomy helps employees experience responsibility for work outcomes. Feedback helps workers see the real results of their work.

This icebreaker served to build some bridges among students. Overall it seemed to be a good start for the semester, since it was interactive, contained some laughter, and led into material that was relevant to the course.

After class, in a jovial mood, I mentioned to a faculty colleague, Tom, "If you're ever having a bad day, just think; you could be gutting roosters." He didn't say much, but seemed somehow disturbed by my comment. I went about my day. Later at home, I found myself reflecting on the gutted rooster story and how I handled it. Had I made too light of a real job done by a student? After all, the student had indicated that it was a "worst job." But I remained uneasy. I discussed this with my wife and expressed my belief that gutting roosters could be honorable work if done well. Within a day or so I encountered my colleague Tom once again as he was getting into an elevator. With no preface, he turned to me and said, "You know, gutting roosters can be honorable work." Surprised, I said, "I agree," uncomfortable with my initial after-class comments to him.

All of this occurred around the time that the Academy of Management conference theme proclaimed, "We don't deserve the title *professor* until we know what we are willing to profess." And what, by my own comments and classroom conduct, was I professing?

It is with some trepidation that I seek to narrate and analyze this account, since in doing so it could take on more the air of a confessional tale, with its risks of self-indulgence and self-aggrandizement (Van Maanen, 1988; Marshall, 2004), rather than providing useful questions and perspectives for others. So, as I work through this, I will first seek to better understand the dissonance between what I said in class and what lay deeper inside, initially unexpressed to the class. I will then return to the classroom story, sharing my attempt to address this dissonance through personal reflection and public communication with the class. After this, I will look back to consider how my classroom practice may have been reflective, but not reflexive, and how in raising my voice in response to being "struck" I may have silenced rather than surfaced the voices of the class (Cunliffe, 2004). As such, more questions than answers emerge from this messy situation.

Dissonance with my roots

I received my graduate training in Organizational Behavior at Boston University in the mid-1990s, where the human relations roots of our field were alive and well. Faculty studied developmental workplace relationships, psychological presence, and personal identity. The Tavistock tradition's call to self-examination and appreciation of power systems was close at hand. My earlier grad school years also included a time of personal struggle and spiritual awakening, helping shape the view that work can be more than a paycheck; it can be a holy activity, with value in how it is performed as well as in what is accomplished. From a renewed appreciation of a Christian tradition, I was led to consider what it meant to work "heartily as unto the Lord" and to show Christ's light and love in the workplace. If Jesus was a carpenter, Priscilla made tents, and Peter fished, it seemed that shining the light didn't require a shiny job.

Now I teach at a Catholic university. In this tradition there is a strong concern for worker dignity: "The basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done, but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person. The sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension, not in the objective one" (*Laborem Exercens: On Human Work*, 1981). So it seems that such concern should be manifest in my courses. Many times in the past several years, I have recalled the "gutted rooster" incident. Initially it caused me to rethink how I discuss jobs in the classroom. Subsequent reflection has led me to wonder more about the initial incident, my follow-up in the second class session, and then about how I can learn more about my own practice and effects on others from the set of experiences. Yet my first attempts to make a better connection between my espoused and expressed values, which I will now present, were not perhaps as effective as they might have been. While the opening class icebreaker led to a discussion of the motivating potential of jobs, my reflections on it had little to do directly with work motivation. Rather, I was concerned about ways in which I made light of certain jobs, and, perhaps indirectly, the nature of those performing the jobs. I began to wonder if my desire to be "on stage" dominated the way I handled day one, and inadvertently, day two (which I will shortly describe). Was I fundamentally more interested in being charismatic to manage my own discomfort



than in using it to engage students in the excitement of learning (Raelin, 2006)?

Confession and profession

As I reflected on that first session, I felt that somehow I owed the class an apology, or at least a commentary on the first session, even though no student openly complained during or after day one. I decided to write out my thoughts, and a week later, in the second class, read it to my students. In that essay I recounted the story of meeting a colleague after class, the story of my conversation with my wife, and my own reflection that perhaps I had been too quick with a snappy reply as student “worst” jobs were presented. I shared some of the many tasks and jobs I had done for pay in earlier years: dragging brush, cleaning toilets, punching holes in metal plates, walking a beat as a night watchman, and driving a fork lift. I shared with them the second encounter with the colleague who told me, “Gutting roosters can be honorable work,” and how that conversation led to some greater clarity; I relayed my hope that I wasn’t fostering managerial bias against jobs that might be neither interesting, highly motivating, or particularly clean. I said:

The person doing it well, with a smile on his or her face (as much as possible), shows grace and character. So, if it is gutting roosters, or castrating hogs, or drilling holes, or working the line at a food plant, it is our job to make those jobs as much as they can be. But above all, we should live with grace and treat all, ourselves and others – doing any sort of job – with the utmost respect. That, as a professor, is what I want to profess.

After my presentation, there was little response. It now seems a bit strange, but at the time that didn’t matter to me. To write out, stand, and deliver the essay required overcoming some embarrassment over my own classroom actions, and there was a sense of relief that I had not let my own discontent slip by unaddressed. By placing that public marker of my own perceived mis-steps in class, the incident has made me more careful about classroom discussion of jobs. But now it seems there is more to learn from day one, day two, and days beyond. With the passage of time, and encouragement from some who read my reflections in earlier accounts of this incident, I will describe the ways in which I now understand it, and the new questions that have emerged.

Below, I address the relationships among motivating work, dirty work, and worker dignity. My initial analyses seemed to treat the issues as

more closely interwoven than they now seem to be. Second, I explore my use of reflection, and how it was received in the classroom. Finally, I suggest questions that might help uncover more effective ways of living through and encouraging student (and faculty) learning from messy classroom sessions.

Jobs – unmotivating, undignified, or just messy?

The incident happened in a class session that included discussion of Hackman and Oldham’s Job Characteristics Model. However, my reactions to the classroom discussion weren’t related clearly to the motivating potential of jobs. When I talked about the classroom experience with my colleague Tom, I invited him to compare a bad day teaching with the prospect of gutting roosters. Without thinking carefully, I had perhaps communicated that a job that seems inherently messy must also be a bad job. While that signal may have been amiss, it now seems more of a mis-step when I failed to more fully explore the nature of the job, and the experience of it, with the student who did the gutting. While I may have asked a simple question about what made it a “worst job” experience, I certainly didn’t invite his or the class’ thoughtful exploration of his experience. He and others might consider a job to be bad because of the aesthetics: messy work is often challenging. At the same time, such a job might receive a high Motivating Potential Score on Hackman and Oldham’s Job Characteristics Survey (JCS). For instance, perhaps such a job could have high task significance in helping provide food for others. It might also rank high on other JCS factors such as feedback or autonomy. As I disparaged the job, I had not intentionally put down the worker who presented it. But with a few words, my colleague Tom pointed out an important distinction. Yes, the job would be messy, but did that necessarily have anything to do with the dignity of the work or the worker?

I now wonder, why did I conflate work aesthetics and worker value? Is it based in a North American view in which professionals and craftspeople are held in high esteem, with supposed attributes such as autonomy, status, respect, and freedom from managerial control, with such models implicitly considered to be “the best kinds of work” (Ciulla, 2000: 69)? Perhaps my disparaging tones in day one uncover a bias I had adopted, confusing the messiness of a job with the work of the individual performing it.



Classroom response – reflective or reflexive?

My first attempt to process the classroom data was reflective, going back to revisit the situations with hopes to draw some learning from them. However, that attempt was not reflexive. Reflexive practice entails examination of both the impacts of our actions and assumptions underlying them (Cunliffe, 2004). The learning in this episode initially came from a moment when I was “struck.” Critical reflexivity involves responding to such moments (Cunliffe, 2004). But the work has been tricky while confronting my tendency to rationalize and defend rather than learn more deeply from experience. It also seems to raise a challenge, as I have discovered a willingness to first “confess,” then “profess” to the classroom. In looking back, it seems to have been a flow from experience to reflection, confession, profession, and a sense of self-satisfaction that I had turned my own bad work to good. But that simple account is a bit too neat: not only is gutting roosters messy; so is the work of seeking to understand my own presence in the classroom. Perhaps that is why this text may seem messier and a little less certain of finality in my analysis and closure on the teaching incident.

Projecting beyond the classroom

As I consider the exchanges with students in the classroom, it may be worth paying attention to how I help students explore the dignity of work and workers, since the content and style of that exploration may influence the way in which they encounter work and workers of many types and in diverse situations. In that regard I will briefly consider some glimpses of stories from three workers, recorded by Studs Terkel in the book *Working* and by Barbara Ehrenreich in *Nickel and Dimed*. The stories briefly open the window to the world outside the classroom, where lessons from formal education might be put to the test. Each illustrates a point at which management students might intersect with messy jobs – as the worker, a boss, a customer, or as a person in social discourse with others who have occupations different from their own. In each case, I wonder how, in at least a small measure, the way work has been discussed in the MBA classroom might shape their reactions.

Working in the fields is not in itself a degrading job. But the growers don't recognize us as persons. That's the worst thing, the way they treat you. Like we have no brains. (Robert Acuna, a farm worker, in Terkel, 1974: 38)

The farm worker calls to be treated more justly, with a measure of simple respect as an individual. How will my students respond to him if they are in positions of authority? Will they be clear in distinguishing between the nature of certain jobs and the character of those who do them?

Nancy Rogers, a bank teller, recalls her experience in social settings, when her job sometimes becomes the subject of brief conversation: “When I tell people at a party I work for a bank, most of them get interested. They say, ‘What do you do?’ I say ‘I’m a teller.’ They say, ‘Oh, hmm, okay’ and walk away” (Terkel, 1974: 350). When my students enter such conversations, how might they respond?

Maids, as an occupational group, are not visible, and when we are seen we are often sorry for it ... I had ventured to ask why so many of the owners [homeowners] seem hostile or contemptuous toward us. “They think we’re stupid,” was Holly’s answer. (Ehrenreich, 2000: 99)

I wonder how students leaving my classes might respond to the maid. Would there be any touch point with the way work and workers were explored in their MBA experience?

Questions for the future

Now that I have considered the initial classroom experience and how, perhaps, it might have some influence on students’ future work experiences, I am left with questions to address in my future classroom practice. While my day two reactions were helpful to me, and perhaps to some students, how could I have responded in a way that would have prompted more student learning? How could I have developed the skill to share my sentiments about day one *and* explore the students’ reflections on it? I thought I knew what my day one had been, but did I ever really learn about, or encourage them to learn about, their own day ones? Hadn't I assumed that they experienced something very much like I did? Related to that, why didn't they respond to my day two confession regarding day one? What did their initial silence mean? Were they engaged, put off by my presentation, or something else? Why didn't I find out about rather than move away from the initial silence in the room? How could I have led them in exploring the differences between motivation, work aesthetics, and worker dignity? Finally, how can I make after-class reflection a more purposeful thing, with more fruitful translation into classroom practice?

As I look across this account and the title of the paper, including the phrase “messy day one,” it



seems that my efforts to learn from the experience have led to a somewhat messy text (Marcus, 1998). As an actor in the initial class session, in exchanges with my colleague Tom, back in the classroom for day two, and even now, my perspective and learning have changed, leading to my current understanding of what happened and where I might go from here. In developing this paper, an initial raw telling of the account has been reconsidered as others have helped me step into new perspectives, often asking me to ask new questions of the situation and myself. This text is also messy in that it does not present a final conclusive account. As I draw this to a close, it seems that I am seeking to freeze this

text for now, inviting others to interact with it, perhaps constructing ways in which they might better navigate their own day ones, and twos and threes.

Perhaps what I need most is a handful of critically reflective and caring colleagues, such as Tom, who will hear my stories of classroom highs and lows. I need to listen when they, like Tom, gently call 'em like they see 'em.

Notes

¹This paper is a substantial revision of a paper initially presented at the 17th Annual Christian Business Faculty Association Conference in Bourbonnais, IL in October 2001.

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