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From Work Ethic to *Worth* Ethic

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The work ethic—producing goods and services through long hours of hard work—is no longer serving America well. The reason is that the work environment found in most American companies discourages people from working from the heart—from caring about the job they do and the people with whom they work. As a result, the work environment—the way we manage and define our jobs—discourages what we used to call "labors of love."

In my experience as an organizational psychologist and consultant, wherever I find employees who work from the heart, I also find managers who dedicate themselves to building up the self-worth of the employees. These managers tell the truth, share power, praise good performance and in other ways take practical action to show they care about their employees. These managers replace political maneuvering with genuine support for risk, innovation and growth. Their employees, free to put forth their best efforts, thrive in this environment and are able to create worthy products and services.

Unfortunately, few managers see the connection between productivity and building self-worth. They may say people are their most important asset and they may ask for employee input. They may even train managers to become leaders and to write vision statements in the hope that they can inspire employee commitment.

But these same managers are usually unwilling to change their fundamental attitudes toward employees and admit that things like integrity, willingness to share power and ability to praise others have anything to do with how well people work.

Like a family gussied up for the family-reunion photo, these managers come together with their co-workers, adorned with big smiles and their best clothes. The group portrait shows an ideal state. Inside, though, they are the same people, dressed in new shoes—and those shoes pinch.

Employees desperately need a stand-in for the extended family of old, someone to affirm their self-worth. The demographics of the work force have changed so much that

many people have no one at home to count on. They look to work to fill that vacuum.

Think about how a healthy family supports its members, makes them feel valuable and affirms their worth. Family members also tell each other they can count on one another.

In contrast, managers keep employees in the dark about future plans. They say one thing and do something else and excuse their underhanded methods as necessary to getting the job done. No wonder employees reciprocate by using work time for conducting personal business. Right now, the deliberate and persistent waste of paid time costs American business \$170 billion annually—12 percent of the payroll of businesses.

In my consulting practice, I find many middle managers struggling to wrench some vestige of power from their boss-

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es. Meanwhile, these same middle managers require their workers to check and check again before they make a move.

The cost for failing to share power is high. I was told of one company that saved \$30 million by creating teams that could make decisions on their own.

Healthy families develop rituals to celebrate when things go well. They work hard to make each person feel important. Companies could do this too. Research shows that praise, whether deserved or not, improves performance. Moreover, there's almost no cost involved in giving a sincere compliment or handing out an achievement award.

But most managers are blocked from making real productivity leaps because they have been raised with the idea

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that it is unnecessary—and even a little strange—to get close to people at work. Somehow, to most managers, to care about employees like a family seems both impractical and unbusinesslike.

Managers I work with begin changing to what I call the worth ethic by thinking about their careers and how they learned to be uncaring. Often, they learned to be unfeeling when they heard their early managers criticize more than they complimented. They became uncaring when they saw manipulation and politics, rather than hard work, lead to promotions. Over time, these managers began to emulate their powerful and uncaring bosses.

But once these managers were able to understand the roots of their own uncaring attitudes, they began to break old patterns and to rebuild their own feelings of self-worth. They learned to care—first about themselves and then about others. And after they learned to care, they became emotionally ready to treat their fellow workers like family, no matter what their level was within the company. And when people work from the heart, productivity gains result.

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Kate, a widely recognized executive coach, speaker and author, founded Worth Ethic Corporation in 1988. Her BS in engineering and PhD in psychology give her a unique approach when working with analytical, data-oriented executives, who want to expand their emotional intelligence and create company cultures where people perform at their peak. Kate has worked with over 1,000 senior executives in a wide range of industries. She has coached executives globally on all major continents.

Previously, she was vice president of human resources for a high-tech Silicon Valley company. Her books include *The Worth Ethic*, *Earn What You're Worth*, *The Corporate Mystic* (now in its 11th printing).



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