

The Dignity Crisis

Over the past year, I've posted two blogs on the topic of pride and dignity in work. Since I have always based my work on the teachings of Dr. W. Edwards Deming, my interest in the topic was triggered by Point 12 in Deming's 14 Points for Management. It reads, in part, "Remove barriers that rob people of pride of workmanship." He emphasized that when one has a job, he experiences joy and pride. Too many American management practices, however, rob people of that pride and extinguish the intrinsic joy one experiences from a job well done. This further robs the worker of personal dignity.

I also wrote about contributions to this subject by Pope Francis and the late Pope St. John Paul II. Both men noted the need to provide welfare for people who lose their jobs; but they were quick to add that keeping people on welfare or government assistance for too long adversely affects their personal dignity. Francis once said that the two biggest social evils that need to be addressed today are the loneliness of the old and the unemployment of the young. "We are running the risk of having a generation that does not work. From work comes a person's dignity."

Not long ago the *New York Times* reported some good news about the unemployment situation in the United States. In an article titled, "President Obama is Handing a Strong Economy to His Successor," reporter Patricia Cohen trumpeted that 178,000 private sector jobs had been added in November 2016 and that the unemployment rate had dropped from 4.9 percent to 4.6 percent. Ms. Cohen did not report, however, how the unemployment rate is calculated. Who is counted as unemployed? Who is counted as employed? Who is not counted at all in the monthly unemployment statistics?

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), people who have no job and are not looking for one are not counted in the labor force. They're considered neither employed nor unemployed. There is also a category of people who are labeled by the BLS as "discouraged workers." It includes people who believe there is no job available for them and they are also excluded from the labor force data. When one considers the fuzzy math included in government unemployment statistics, it brings to mind Benjamin Disraeli's lament about lies, damned lies, and statistics.

Another data set ignored in optimistic reports of the "strong" economy is the dramatic increase in the number of people dependent on food stamps. The most recent data available show that more than 43.4 million people are on the food stamp rolls – a 40 percent increase over the last eight years. And the number of long-term unemployed grew by more than 700,000 over the same period. Neither statistic was included in the rosy *New York Times* article referenced above.

The journal *National Affairs* published some sobering statistics about American men of prime working age from a longer-term perspective.

Between 1969 and 2016, both comparable peak years in the business cycle, there has been a long-term decline in work by prime-age men, from 94.5% to 85%, and by young black men, from 76.3% to 53.2%.

If 15% of prime working-age men aren't working, what are they doing? An editorial in the *National Catholic Register* observed, "The dismal numbers of sidelined workers tell a story of extinguished hopes in working-class communities, where broken families, drug and alcohol addiction, and rising rates of suicide are now commonplace."

Dismal numbers, sidelined workers, extinguished hopes, discouraged workers. Regardless of one's politics, it's time to cut through the misleading unemployment statistics and recognize that our nation faces a dignity crisis. The scope of this problem requires a collaborative response from government, business and education.

Dr. Deming lamented many years ago that "the schools of business have done their work. They're not teaching transformation. They're teaching use of visible figures only; creative accounting; anything to maximize the price of the company's stock..." The use of misleading and incomplete visible figures is also evident in partisan claims about unemployment, employment, strong economy, weak economy, and on and on and on. It's about time for American leaders to wake up!

Notes

_____, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "How the Government Measures Unemployment," www.bls.gov/cps/cps_htgm.htm.

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B. Jackson, "Obama's Numbers (January 2016 Update)," FactCheck.org, January 12, 2016.

_____, *Management's Five Deadly Diseases: A Conversation with Dr. W. Edwards Deming*, Encyclopaedia Britannica Corporation, Lake Orion, MI (1984), videocassette.

N. Pflaum, "Trump: 43 million Americans on food stamps," *PolitiFact.com*, July 21, 2016.

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