

Responsibility at Work: How Leading Professionals Act (Or Don't Act) Responsibly, edited by Howard Gardner. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/John Wiley & Sons, 2007, 348 pp., \$27.95 hardbound.

Making Professionals More Responsible

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Business executives issuing deceptive financial reports to conceal corporate misconduct. Lawyers exploiting legal loopholes on behalf of their clients. Athletes taking forbidden drugs to enhance their performance. Journalists slanting their reporting to advance their own views. Leaders of charities enriching themselves in the name of helping the needy. Doctors and nurses cutting corners in patient care. Teachers carrying on improper relationships with students. Clergy taking advantage of vulnerable members of their congregations.

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To many, these and other reports of bad behavior suggest not just a dismaying decline in individual ethics, but also a worrisome erosion of standards in a variety of important institutions. Indeed, in recent years, outside of the military and religion, the public has shown increasingly less confidence in many once-respected groups in American life. No longer are politicians and used car dealers in a class by themselves as objects of popular suspicion. They are now joined in that dubious distinction by lawyers, TV news reporters, union leaders, “Wall Street,” schoolteachers, and, following criticism of their performance in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, some of the nation’s most venerable charities, such as the American Red Cross.

This skepticism about the trustworthiness of such groups provides the backdrop for a research project, begun over a decade ago by eminent Harvard psychologist and educator Howard Gardner and several colleagues. But rather than examining why various professionals behave badly (or, at least, are thought to), they set out to determine what leads to “good work” in a number of fields, including journalism, higher education, philanthropy, and business. Twelve hundred interviews

later, they have produced a summary of their key findings in *Responsibility at Work*.

While several of them stand out, what is most notable about the conclusions of this research is how unsurprising the factors producing “good work” are. Moreover, *Responsibility at Work* curiously has little to say about what schools, including colleges and universities, can do, even though the ultimate aim of this project—and currently, its principal focus—is to develop curricula that can teach young people how to be “responsible” professionals.

Based on their interviews with people ranging from newcomers to “trustees” (i.e., senior professionals whose accomplishments not only were well-regarded by their peers, but also had a lasting impact on their fields), Gardner and his colleagues have concluded that ethical behavior requires workers to possess a clear set of values that draw on the traditions of the “domains” in which they are operating and to apply these consistently to their activities, even in the face of incentives or social pressures to do otherwise. A good worker, writes Gardner, “recognizes issues of moral complexity, wrestles with them, seeks advice and guidance, reflects on what went right, and seeks to right the course in the future when similar circumstances

arise” (13). In short, professionals who act responsibly aim high, care deeply, and take their jobs seriously.

Some of the most interesting portions of *Responsibility at Work* recount how those participating in the project balanced their ideals with the realities of their lives. In order to attain their professional standards, a member of the research team reports, good inner-city teachers looked for ways to keep the challenges they face in school from interfering with their time at home. Likewise, exemplary physicians sought means of balancing the competing demands of helping as many people as possible with their commitment to high standards of treatment. Younger “leaders-in-formation,” another of Gardner’s associates finds, struggled with emerging sets of “conflicting responsibilities” to their jobs, families, and communities, while those who were closer to the ends of their careers wrestled with the problems of remaining true to their principles as their obligations matured and became more complex.

Although many of those doing “good work” belonged to religious groups, their spiritual beliefs apparently had little to do with their sense of professional responsibilities, the interviews revealed. Nor did differences in gender matter; women were not more likely to be responsible in their careers

than men. On the other hand, the field in which a person worked could be a help or a hindrance. In some, such as law or medicine, standards of conduct were generally clear and widely acknowledged, even though their application could be problematic. In others, such as genetics, they were in flux. In a few, such as journalism and philanthropy, benchmarks for good behavior hardly existed at all, the researchers claim.

Gardner and his associates recommend providing young people with more opportunities—at school or in the workplace—to practice and reflect on the dilemmas of doing “good work,” an updated version of John Dewey’s “experiential” curriculum. Yet, surprisingly, they hardly examine the impact of education today in developing responsible professionals. Though many of those interviewed probably have degrees from them, *Responsibility at Work* pays no attention to what professional schools do to inculcate ethical standards among their graduates. And despite the glowing portraits she paints of three small liberal arts schools with strong social missions and traditions, the larger conclusion Jeanne Nakamura offers from her examination of ten campuses is that college and university educators “talked remarkably little about the development of students’ sense of

responsibility for others.” Nor was this goal “salient” among students, who preferred to focus on “their own personal and academic growth” (289).

That this finding is based on such a small number of observations is just one of several methodological problems that make assessing the findings of *Responsibility at Work* difficult. Neither the book nor the project’s website is clear about why the twelve hundred people involved were selected as exemplars of “good work,” other than on the basis of their reputation to the project’s staff and advisors. Only a handful, such as former *Washington Post* publisher Katherine Graham and one-time foundation president, Cabinet official, and Common Cause founder, John W. Gardner, are even named. Although the researchers roll out rudimentary statistical tests to support their conclusions, the data on which they rely are essentially subjective, consisting of interpretations of interviews that, Gardner says, “typically lasted an hour and a half or more” (6). This invariably leaves nagging questions about what was included or omitted, how correctly the responses were understood, and whether alternative explanations might serve better.

Even so, the major problem with *Responsibility at Work* lies with its

notion of “responsibility.” To Gardner and his colleagues, “good work” is “work that is excellent in quality, socially responsible, and meaningful to its practitioners” (<http://www.good-workproject.org/about/overview.htm>). But their criteria for applying this definition inevitably reflect their own biases (or those of other “good workers”) about what is desirable. Thus, the accomplishments of physicist Robert Oppenheimer are questioned because of his willingness to help develop nuclear weapons (74). Former *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller is deemed irresponsible for reporting that Iraq possessed advanced weapons (at a time when that was widely believed) and going to prison to protect White House sources who had revealed the identity of Central Intelligence Agency operative Valerie Plame (chapter 12). Yet, from a different perspective, both of these people could be seen as embodying high professional standards, not least of all because what they did was not necessarily easy or what they would have chosen to do.

In other words, *Responsibility at Work* fails to acknowledge that the very notion of “good work” is often a contested one. To be sure, some kinds of behavior, such as dishonesty or taking advantage of minors, are

almost universally despised. In many other cases, however, room exists for differing views. What should be expected of professionals is that they consider those differences seriously, rather than simply accept prevailing fashions. And what they most need from education is instruction in disciplines that have long grappled with the problems of doing good, such as literature, history, and philosophy, and which really do foster personal and intellectual growth. Instead, Gardner and his colleagues offer “The Good Work Toolkit”—a program of internships, case studies for discussion, workshops, and similar activities aimed at students, educators, and communities—that is likely to be little more than a set of made-up and trendy opportunities to practice doing and thinking about what being “responsible” means.

That the public holds many professions in low esteem today can hardly be doubted. But the answer almost surely does not lie in inventing new concepts of “good work” that pretend to be neutral and objective, but rather in encouraging practitioners to revisit the moral and intellectual foundations upon which their activities are based. Judging from their comments, many of those interviewed for this project seem eager for such opportunities.