Good Work and Identity: Gardner and Erikson

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Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and William Damon have joined forces to produce a superb, encouraging and extraordinary book: Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet. They clearly answer the following question: What does it mean to undertake good work? The research peace is very beautiful providing strategies for people to maintain moral and ethical standards within their professions and vocations at a time when social and market forces have unprecedented power, and work life is being radically transformed by technological innovation.

In the first chapter of the book, Good Work in Difficult Times the establish that in every historical era people have thought to carry out good work. It has always been true that some people perform their work with high expertise, but paradoxically not very responsible. People who do good work (high technical expertise and high social responsibility) are skilled in one or more professional realms.

The concept of good work in difficult times points to people's ability to know the right thing to do (in a world where everything seems relative), and remain active and productive in their professions regardless of time, age or generation.

An important clue as to whether one is undertaking good work is if it feels good! The lesson is that whenever human beings engage on difficult tasks, using all their skills, knowing what has to be done they will find the experience enjoyable. These highly enjoyable moments is what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls flow experiences, occurring more often on the job than in leisure time. In flow people feel totally involved, lost in a seemingly effortless execution.

People feel 100% when they are committed to the work at hand and lose track of everything else. Of course, feelings of flow do not automatically signal that people are performing good work (combining technical deployment with social awareness). Neverthess, as this research shows, the reward of flow bestowed on individuals who have become wholly engaged in activities that exhibit the highest sense of responsibility.

The organizational design challenge is how to create an environment that would allow people to realize their full professional aspirations.

It is true that if and institution already existed that embodied the person's value, then he/she will try to secure a position within it regardless of other constraints or considerations (location, distance, pay, etc.). The other option would be to stay within the organization that do not fit with your values and work hard to transform the already existing culture and environment. While making these decisions people should consider three basic factors: mission as defining features of the profession in which they are engage; standards as the establish the required best practices of the profession; identity as pointing to their personal integrity and values.

The mission should be what moves a person to a certain profession and guidance perspective in times of conflict. A psychological dimension of standards is establishing which models in the profession best realize the calling (and the legacy) and why. Identity as suggesting background, traits and values determine what lines in life people will not cross and why they will not cross them.

Gardner studied with Erik Erikson, the distinguished psychologist that identified and refined the notion of identity and built and approach around it. (Childhood and Society; Identity: Youth and Crisis; Dimensions of a New Identity; Life History and the Historical Moment).

Erik Erikson elaborated upon Freud's stages of development. Where Freud emphasized childhood and said that the personality is firmly shaped by the age of 5 or so, Erikson added that it continues to develop throughout the life span, moving through a series of eight crucial development stages.

1.	oral-sensory	Birth – 1 year	trust versus mistrust
2.	muscular-anal	1-3 years	autonomy versus doubt, shame
3.	locomotor-genital	3-5 years	initiative versus guilt
4.	latency	6-11 years	industry versus inferiority
5.	adolescence	12-18 years	identity versus role confusion
6.	young adulthood	19-35 years	intimacy versus isolation
7.	adulthood	35-50 years	generativity versus stagnation
8.	maturity	50 + years	ego integrity versus despair

Each of these stages from infancy to old age, constitutes a crisis that must be resolved at each stage there is a conflict, centering around an adaptive and maladaptive means of dealing with the problems of the period. Failure at anyone stage can lead to stress and anxiety and can retard development at a later stage.

Erikson recognized the impact of culture, society, and history on the shaping of the personality. His argument was that people were not shaped entirely by biological forces at work in childhood. While these forces are important, he pointed that they were far from being the whole explanation of the development of personality.

Erikson strong interest in the role of history as it affects youth (the impact of the times on youth and on their behavioral patterns and styles) resulted in a number of psycho-historical studies, on such figures as Adolf Hitler, Maxim Gorky, Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. His central thesis is the role of identity and identity confusion in the lives of human beings.

Each of the stages of life has its own identity crisis, and each offers opportunities for particular strengths to develop. Erikson calls these strength basic virtues. They are common over all generations and grow out of the positive, adaptive ways of handling each stage of growth. These virtues are evolutionary, developing over the course of life of an individual and over the history of humanity as a whole. Each virtue is vital, animating force in life. They are not innate but must be developed and then reaffirmed continuously throughout the person's life.

There are eight basic virtues corresponding to the stages of development. The four virtues that may appear in childhood are HOPE, WILL, PURPOSE, and COMPETENCE. FIDELITY arises in adolescence and LOVE, CARE and WISDOM in adulthood. The virtues are interdependent; none can develop until the previous one is securely confirmed.

A psychologist like Erikson who speaks of basic virtues as being attainable is certainly presenting a positive and hopeful image of human nature. His argument is that human beings are capable of consciously directing their own growth and behaviors, and are not passive products of their own childhood. While we have little control of the first four stages of development, we have an increasing ability, beginning in adolescence, to chart out our plan for life choosing ways of responding to crises and difficult moments, and capable of executing good work.

The psychological question is "what would it be like to live in a world if everyone were to behave in the way that I have".