

Cambridge University Press
0521771315 - Dignity at Work
Randy Hodson
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Part I

Dignity and Its Challenges

1

Four Faces of Working with Dignity

She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willing with her hands.
 She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff.
 She perceiveth that her merchandise is good; . . . with the fruit of her
 hands she planteth a vineyard.
 Strength and honor are her clothing; and she shall rejoice.

Proverbs 31

Life demands dignity, and meaningful work is essential for dignity. Dignity is the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others. Dignity is realized in the political sphere by striving toward democracy and justice. In the economic sphere, it is realized in the demand for a living wage and equal opportunity. In the workplace, dignity is realized through countless small acts of resistance against abuse and an equally strong drive to take pride in one's daily work. Even where abuse is commonplace and chaos and mismanagement make pride in accomplishment difficult, workers still find ways to create meaning in work and to work with dignity. Alternative avenues to achieving dignity sometimes involve focusing attention on peripheral tasks. Alternatively, dignity can be achieved through camaraderie and solidarity with coworkers.

Working with dignity requires purposive, considered, and creative efforts on the part of workers as they confront workplaces that deny their dignity and infringe on their well-being. Concepts appropriate to studying such creative efforts are less developed in the social sciences than are concepts for studying large-scale, impersonal structures. Yet people are highly active and creative, and the drive to realize human dignity and agency is a powerful force in every aspect of social life. A main goal of this book is to contribute to the development of social science concepts that foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the struggle to work with dignity.

Human dignity is necessary for a fully realized life. But what is dignity? Dignity is a word more commonly used in social and political discourse

4 *Dignity and Its Challenges*

than in social science writings. People hope for a death with dignity. Unfairness and discrimination undermine one's dignity. There can be dignity in suffering.

Two different meanings underlie the idea of dignity (Meyer and Parent 1992:11). The first is that people have a certain inherent dignity as a consequence of being human. The second is that people earn dignity through their actions (Castel 1996). The inherent human dignity of a dying person, for example, may be reduced if their physical life is prolonged unnecessarily. Alternatively, they may be allowed to die with dignity. The inherent human dignity of a worker can be violated by mismanagement or by managerial abuse. Alternatively, dignity can be attained through noble action or through enduring great suffering. Examples include valiant soldiers, moral leaders, victims of injustice, and enduring workers of all kinds.

To defend one's dignity means to resist infringements on dignity and to insist on being treated with respect (Freeman and Rogers 1999). Thus, the dying person may refuse life support or the worker may one day curse the abusive boss and walk off the job. Resistance to abuse is an act by which one takes back one's dignity (Vredenburg and Brender 1998). Taking specific actions that are worthy of respect is also an act of dignity. The employee who works effectively in spite of obstacles achieves dignity through work. Working with dignity thus entails *both* defending one's inherent human rights and taking actions that are worthy of respect by oneself and others.

Workers from all walks of life struggle to achieve dignity and to gain some measure of meaning and self-realization at work. The achievement of dignity at work thus depends on creative and purposive activity on the part of workers. Dignity can be achieved through taking pride in productive accomplishments, even if the accomplishments may be modest by someone else's standards. Dignity is also realized through resistance against denials of one's dignity, such as those arising from abusive bosses or bad management practices. In defending dignity and achieving self-realization, workers establish themselves as active agents with some control over their work lives. Without some minimum of control, without dignity, work becomes unbearable (de Man 1929; Marcuse 1991).

Working with dignity is an essential building block for a life well lived. The attainment of dignity at work is one of the most important challenges people face in their lives. Ensuring the dignity of employees is equally important for organizations as they attempt to make effective use of their human and social resources.

In this book four strategies that workers use to maintain and defend their dignity are analyzed: resistance, citizenship, the creation of inde-

pendent meaning systems, and the development of social relations at work. We also discuss four principal challenges to working with dignity: mismanagement and abuse, overwork, limits on autonomy, and contradictions of employee involvement. These four strategies and challenges are at the heart of the analysis presented in this book.

The Quest for Dignity

The stories of workers in four different settings reflect the challenges of working with dignity and the joys that can sometimes be found when these challenges are met. Each of these stories illustrates a different aspect of the search for dignity at work. Each story is told by an ethnographer who spent six months to a year or more deeply immersed in the setting. Such accounts offer a rare opportunity to observe the face of dignity at work. The empirical base for this book rests on a systematic analysis of such workplace ethnographies. We begin with four cases that illustrate the core challenges to dignity at work.

In the first setting, employees at National Wire (a pseudonym) confront abusive conditions and a chaotic workplace resulting from chronic mismanagement (Juravich 1985). At Electrical Components Limited, the assembly work is hard and unrelenting, giving rise to chronic overwork and exhaustion (Cavendish 1982). At Pacific Hospital, the doctors and interns must defend their competence and establish their autonomy in relation to those higher in the hospital hierarchy (Bosk 1979). At American Security Bank, branch managers and their staffs struggle to increase productivity to avoid downsizing and layoffs (Smith 1990). Each of these stories reflects the challenges to working with dignity and the strategies through which dignity is attained and defended.

Mismanagement and Abuse

At National Wire production equipment is outdated and in ill repair. Worse, management makes no attempt to remedy the situation. Instead, repairs are completed on a piecemeal, emergency only basis:

The lack of spare parts coupled with the general disrepair of the machines . . . made it impossible to keep the SELMs running for any length of time. As two weeks turned into a month this situation became maddening. . . .

The machinery had three major problems. First, most of it was outdated for the kind of operation we were running, and it had been badly maintained over the years. Second,

6 *Dignity and Its Challenges*

management refused to stock either enough spare parts or the tools necessary to repair the machines.

Third, management refused to hire or keep trained personnel to maintain the machines. Instead, they hired a series of young inexperienced mechanics (some better, some worse) who, if they were lucky, managed to keep the deteriorating equipment patched together. (Juravich 1985:37, 39, 40)

A young and inexperienced maintenance worker in this factory finds that the adjusting screws on assembly machines are often stripped, turning simple jobs into hours-long projects. Worn shafts, loose bearings, and other points of wear are also apparent. After taking the back plate off a machine to fill the oil reservoir, the worker is shocked to see that the oil is full of stripped plastic ends of wire insulation, which are being circulated throughout the whole mechanism. The accumulated spare parts for this piece of equipment, which is the principal machine producing the main components for the entire production floor, fit into a cardboard container not much bigger than a shoe box hidden at the back of a cluttered workbench.

Employees in this setting are treated with the same disrespect shown the machines. Up to half the employees on the floor are laid off whenever orders drop, frequently two to three times a year. Because turnover is high anyway, many of the laid-off workers have not been working long enough to collect unemployment benefits. When the supervisor schedules a meeting to announce the most recent round of layoffs, most of the workers, who are used to this sort of treatment, do not protest, but some of the younger workers do not take it so lightly. One young worker throws a handful of leads into her machine and curses the supervisor. "I was just starting to get my bills paid, and this no good [expletive] lays me off with a one-day notice" (Juravich 1985:109).

In addition to the chaos resulting from worn-out machinery and the uncertainty of layoffs, employees face more direct verbal abuse. One such verbal attack humiliates and enrages a young worker and provokes an angry response:

[Bobby] was originally called to make a small adjustment on the depth of the machine's applicator. It was a simple adjustment accomplished by loosening a single screw. In a normally equipped shop it would have been a five-minute job, but Bobby could not find the proper screwdriver. We searched all the toolboxes, but the screwdrivers were either too large or had been ground at the ends. Bobby asked Carroll [the

Four Faces of Dignity

7

supervisor] if he could buy a screwdriver at the hardware store down the street. Carroll refused and told him to grind one of the ones we had. Bobby tried, but ended up stripping the screwhead so badly that nothing could get it out. Then Carroll came to the floor and in typical fashion chewed Bobby out in front of everybody. After Carroll left, Bobby brought the applicator over to the bench and . . . used a ten-pound copper mallet to smash a machine part that cost hundreds of dollars to replace. (Juravich 1985:135–136)

Eventually upper management makes a half-hearted attempt to improve the quality of production on the floor. They send a technician to check production standards and machine tolerances and make recommendations. The workers mock her behind her back and impersonate her walking around with her clipboard and micrometer. At lunch the workers refuse to sit with her in the cafeteria. She eventually quits and submits a blistering letter of resignation in which she condemns the workers for being uncooperative and criticizes the floor supervisors in even harsher terms.

Even in this chaotic and abusive environment, however, workers frequently apply their best efforts to the work at hand and use intelligence and initiative to facilitate production in spite of all the obstacles (Juravich 1985:51). For example, an aging stamping machine is used to place electrical terminals on both ends of sixteen-inch wire pieces that will eventually be assembled into wiring harnesses. The workers are instructed to put terminals on each wire, one end at a time, and then repeat this process ad infinitum. A middle-aged female worker, Betty, has a different method. She picks up a handful of wires and bounces them in her hand. This aligns the wires in the same direction following their natural bend. Then, still holding them as a bunch, she is able to quickly put a terminal on one end of each wire. She reverses the process and has a handful of leads correctly applied by an otherwise slow and temperamental machine. In the process she achieves meaning at work by mastering an uncertain and irregular process by being creative and productive in spite of obstacles.

Such self-motivated routines allow workers to impose a sense of order, control, and meaning on their daily lives at work. The jobs on the floor alternate between utter chaos and grinding monotony. But somehow, by imposing order and control, the workers made a life out of their situation. Such problems of abuse, chaos, and mismanagement are not unique to blue-collar production workers in factory settings. White-collar and professional workers also frequently encounter situations with these same characteristics.

8 *Dignity and Its Challenges*

Overwork

At a different workplace in a different country, the challenges are different, even though the products are similar. At Electrical Components Limited a mostly female work force assembles small electrical components. In this setting the constant, grinding pace of work sets the tone.

The physical challenges of the work and the stress are considerable. Freedom of movement is virtually nonexistent. There is no opportunity to take a short break or walk around, even a few steps. These stresses are increased by planned interdependence on the assembly line – each worker needs to complete her task quickly and correctly so that work does not stack up for others (Cavendish 1982:39).

The speed of the line is constantly being pushed to the limit. As the speed increases, the rejection rate goes up too, but the company is willing to live with this. “[T]ime-study must have calculated that it was cheaper for the firm to have more rejects and two women to mend them, than have a slower line, . . . especially as the exhausting effect of the fast line wouldn’t enter their arithmetic” (Cavendish 1982:111).

In this setting, breakdowns on the line are a blessing. When the line stops the women are switched to packing or other lighter duties. After packing all day, many have aching arms and legs, but at least they have been able to move around a little and haven’t had to face eight hours of automated pressure to keep up a steady pace (Cavendish 1982:39).

Work on the main line is rigidly controlled by the time clock. The close attention among the women to the details of “clocking in” and “clocking out” gives testimony to how unpleasant the work is. There is only one clock for a group of about fifty women and a lengthy queue forms at quitting time to clock out. The supervisors won’t allow the women to leave the production line until quitting time, exactly 4:15, or their pay will be docked. But because of the queue at the clock, the last worker won’t be able to clock out and leave until about 4:25 (Cavendish 1982:88).

Over time, a contest develops in which the women inch forward toward the clock and the supervisors try to keep them working on the line until the last minute. The contest itself takes on ulterior motives and meanings – it becomes more than just an attempt to get out of the plant a few minutes early. It also becomes a way to exert personal control over one’s life in a situation where little or none is allowed. At one point the supervisors post a supervisor at the clock to keep the women from getting anywhere near it. The women respond by escalating their efforts:

We knew pregnant women were allowed to stand at the front of the queue, so Maureen, who really was seven months

Four Faces of Dignity

9

pregnant, barged in between him and the clock, and the rest of us followed saying we were all pregnant. The packer at the end of our line who was rather fat, lifted up her skirt to show him her stomach and we all laughed at him. (Cavendish 1982:89–90)

Such concerted actions to create personal space and resist the denial of dignity can create a sense of solidarity and camaraderie at work. But just as often, workers are divided by workplace relations and find that their competing goals place them in opposition to one another. For example, at Electrical Components Limited one senior worker is oblivious to the concerns of the other workers on the line and upholds rules (or breaks them) in a self-serving fashion in order to reduce her work load. This worker also works a second evening job as a janitor at a nearby shopping mall and never chips in with the other workers by contributing cakes or treats. The younger women consider her a tightwad and “mad for work” (Cavendish 1982:26). Her inconsiderate actions constitute as great a threat to the quality and meaning of the other women’s daily lives at work as the moving assembly line, the supervisors, or the time clock.

In such grueling situations of chronic pressure and overwork, workers sometimes try to survive, not just through solidarity and mutual support, but also by shifting work to each other. Two strong-willed workers sit opposite each other, one to check the electrical circuits of the product and one to check the mechanical parts. Faulty devices are to be pulled off the line and fixed. If a faulty device comes down the line with a gauge that wouldn’t register, the mechanics checker bangs it down hard on the table until the gauge moves. She then places it in the box for the electrical checker, having avoided fixing the underlying mechanical problem, which might now show up as a faulty circuit. The electrical checker reciprocates by insisting that her circuit tester shows adequate voltage even when the mechanical checker’s doesn’t. The two workers chat all day about their lives, children, and possessions, but basically they despise each other (Cavendish 1982:36–37). Coworker support, for the purpose of resisting management demands, improving output, or simply making life at work more bearable, is completely absent in this particular situation. Overwork has reduced work life to a dog-eat-dog ethos.

Bad supervisory practices also follow from the drive to maximize production at all costs, as even floor managers try to avoid their share of work:

[W]hen we ran out of something we’d have to shout to Eamonn three or four times before he brought something more, and it meant yelling really loud because he was usually

10 *Dignity and Its Challenges*

sitting at the top of the line rather than wandering around. If you ran out of modules or transistors, your trays would pile up in front of you while he went to fetch more; he wouldn't stop the line to help you get 'down the wall', so you'd have to work extra hard. . . . He didn't lift up the boxes either, but left them on the ground, so you had to jump up every few minutes to change an empty box for a full one or refill a small box. This was very inconvenient. (Cavendish 1982:82)

At Electrical Components Limited, chronic pressure and overwork significantly undercut both good supervisory behavior and supportive coworker relations.

Challenges to Autonomy

Surgeons and medical residents at an elite medical school associated with a major university face different challenges to working with dignity. At Pacific Hospital the core challenge for the surgical staff and the medical residents is to master the formal and informal knowledge and skills of surgery and to defend autonomy over the work practices necessary to acquire, perfect, and maintain these skills.

The skills needed to perform surgery are formidable. These skills are based on both long training and years of practice. Surgery is at best an imperfectly applied science, which leaves much room for skilled or less-skilled applications. Incorrectly tied surgical knots can leave space for infection, and probes and scopes can slip and cause significant peripheral damage (Bosk 1979:37).

Because of the uncertainties of medicine and the variability of disease and the human body, substantial hands-on experience is required to master even basic techniques. Mastery of these techniques is at the core of medical training in Pacific Hospital. Two medical students are responsible for performing a myelogram (a procedure involving the removal of spinal fluid and the injection of dye in the spinal column) on a patient. The procedure does not go well, and they are forced to call in a senior physician:

After examining Eckhardt's back [the resident physician] told the students, who were profusely apologizing for their failure, not to worry; that the problem was in Mr. Eckhardt's anatomy and not in their skills. He then proceeded with some difficulty to complete the procedure, instructing the students all the while.

The skill of housestaff with such procedures helps establish their authority to students. The ease with which they place

intravenous needles in the veins of the most troublesome patients is a very common way to impress students; it serves especially to humble senior students who are planning surgical careers and who are often competitive with first-year housestaff. (Bosk 1979:44)

Competence is achieved only through mastering new skills, starting with the most basic. An intern is having trouble closing an incision. Finally he turns to the chief observing resident and says, "I can't do it." The resident informs him that that answer is not acceptable:

'What do you mean, you can't? Don't ever say you can't. Of course you can.' 'No, I just can't seem to get it right.' Carl had been forced to put in and remove stitches a number of times, unable to draw the skin closed with the proper tension. Mark replied, 'Really, there's nothing to it'; and, taking Carl's hand in his own, he said, 'The trick is to keep the needle at this angle and put the stitch through like this,' all the while leading Carl through the task. 'Now, go on.' Mark then let Carl struggle through the rest of the closure on his own. (Bosk 1979:45)

Having mastered some initial surgical skills, young residents are eager to practice and perfect them and chafe at any limitations or interference. A common complaint of first-year interns is that they are not allowed to do enough cases and are required to just attend and watch. The longer the interns and residents practice medicine the more they come to resent such limitations (Bosk 1979:42–43).

Along with autonomy, however, comes responsibility. Early on, surgeons learn that they are the responsible party. The chief resident is responsible for the patients on the surgery wing regardless of who is on watch at the moment. During an orientation meeting for new interns, the chief resident explains that he wants to be informed at all times:

'If anything comes up, I want to know about it. I don't care what time it is; I want you to call. If there is a problem at four in the morning call at four in the morning. Most likely, I'll listen to what you tell me and fall right back to sleep. I may even forget that you called. But call. I don't like to walk in here in the morning and find myself surprised by what's going on in my service. I'm ultimately responsible for what goes on here, so call me.' He repeated this message a number of times in a number of ways. (Bosk 1979:51–52)

Misjudgments or poorly learned skills can have extreme consequences, possibly even the death of a patient. But some errors, and even some