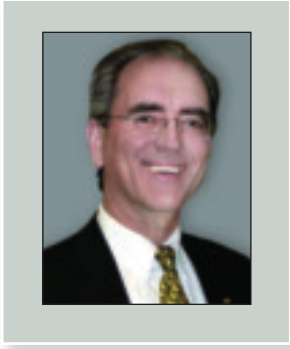


▶ MANAGING EDITOR'S DESK



Nelson Fabian, MS

I am about to do something I said long ago that I would never do. Like old codgers before me, I'm now going to be the one to give a lecture of sorts to the younger members of our profession. I'm compelled to do this because I'm distraught that some dangerous and debilitating myths about work have somehow managed to take root in the collective mindset of the youngest professionals among us, i.e., Generation Y.

This development greatly concerns me because as baby boomers continue to exit the workforce, the success of environmental health becomes more tied to the capabilities and attitudes of the younger generations who are moving into the positions being vacated by the boomers. It is already worrisome that for the first time in American history, the cohort leaving the workforce is better educated than the cohort entering it (a circumstance often pointed out by writer and author David Brooks, among others). If the younger generation also comes into their work with an "attitude," that makes for two strikes. Since environmental health is becoming more complicated, we just can't afford to have an ill equipped and/or poorly motivated younger workforce taking the reins.

So I begin my lecture by noting that as I have worked with younger professionals all over the country, I have learned that many of them have fully adopted the view that a stark difference exists between "work life" and "personal life." Even more telling is their belief that work life is "work" while personal life is "fun." Accordingly, the name of the game is to do just enough to get by in the working world so that one can get home quickly to a fun-filled personal life.

The Aspect of Work That Gen Y Doesn't Know!

... We risk setting an entire generation up for uninspiring careers, and most likely, uninspiring performances."

Drawing from my vantage point and my many years of work-life experience, I have numerous concerns about the way both Gen Y and the endless line of pundits who write about generational differences have framed this life-balance issue. The mere act of framing life—a holistic experience to be sure—as a schizoid, bipolar tension between the professional and personal invariably leads to the illusion that we all somehow live two separate lives. Worse, such a mental construction invites needless and harmful stress into our lives, as it sets us out on a dead-end mission to find balance between the "work" and the "personal" lives we lead. We most often experience this stress when feeling guilty about spending too much or too little time in either our work or personal lives. The idea that we in fact only live one life somehow escapes our attention, and so we soldier on while the stressful internal war between our work life and our personal life continues.

I was recently reminded of the fantasy of this silly, and I would argue, destructive way of seeing the world in the strangest of places.

I had the honor (along with our president, Keith Krinn) of representing NEHA at the recent IFEH (International Federation of Environmental Health) Congress in Vancouver. At that meeting, I had the additional honor of spending some time with one of my favorite mentors and longtime friend, Diane Evans, who is a former president of NEHA and IFEH. She was there as the recipient of IFEH's prestigious Foskett Award, which recognizes one person every two years for international leadership in environmental health.

I asked Diane what she was going to say when the award was presented to her. I should have known that she was prepared to dispense wisdom with class, as that is just the way Diane is—a true class act.

As I listened, it was apparent that on the surface, Diane would be talking about the merits of participating in professional societies like NEHA and IFEH. Underneath the surface, however, and perhaps without even realizing it, Diane would be launching a stealth attack on the most powerful underpinning of all to the mythology that work equals work and that fun can only be found in one's personal life.

To be more specific—

Diane began her speech innocently enough. She talked about how many of us are coaxed into joining and participating in professional societies because ... it is the right thing to do. She also gave examples of how adding involvement in professional societies to one's work life could lead to good outcomes and even a higher degree of professional performance. (As I was listening to Diane, I thought that this standard fare was nice but it wasn't particularly inspiring.)

continued on page 52

Managing Editor's Desk*continued from page 58*

In short order, however, and with the passion of an evangelist, Diane quickly turned tables and proceeded to zero in on the inspirational heart of her speech. With numerous passages in capital letters on her speaking notes, she picked up the pace and spoke with an emphasis that was meant to be heard by all. She exclaimed that one should also seek to get involved because ... it makes you feel good!

She talked about how feeling good was a basic human need and how working leads to a bounty of good feelings that stem from being involved in projects that have value to both the organization and the profession. She said that work often leads to travel, which opens eyes and leaves one with a good feeling for having seen and experienced different places and perspectives. But most of all, she recounted how numerous work life interactions had led her to new friends, acquaintances, and people who had materially enriched her life. And that, she stressed, is arguably one of the best feelings of all.

In all the literature that I feast on that has to do with the different generational views on work, I can't remember ever reading anything like what Diane spoke about so directly, and yet it is so magnificently true. The literature and pop culture would have one believe that work is work. As Gen Y is fond of pointing out, those good feelings and fun can only really be found within the realm of one's personal (and nonworking) life. As Diane pointed out so well, however, that just isn't true. From her heart and soul came a deeply based awareness that her career and life's work had very authentically led her to many good feelings that were undeniable and priceless.

The experience I had with Diane came coincidentally on the heels of having finished yet another great Malcolm Gladwell book, *Outliers*. A vast portion of *Outliers* is devoted to some fairly profound observations on the nature and meaning of work and its relationship to true happiness and fulfillment.

In his sweeping observations and analyses, Gladwell repeatedly found links between hard work and happiness (and success) almost everywhere he looked. He paid particular tribute to Asian cultures and the cultural ethic of hard work found in that part of the world. He noted with little surprise that the economies of these countries are on the ascendancy and that prosperity there is likewise increasing. (Incidentally, when I was reading his book this past summer, the news broke that China had passed Japan as the world's second largest economy.) The strong work ethic seen in many Asian countries is driving this growth and development.

By contrast, writers here lament the decline of our work ethic and connect this development with our current down economy. Projections for the future that predict China's economy surpassing America's are alarming. If work here has become such an unattractive pursuit, one can't help but wonder how long America's economic leadership will continue. But that and its many implications are the subject of a different discussion.

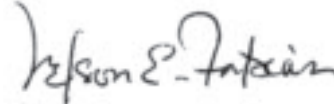
Gladwell forcefully argues that as long as hard work is meaningful (meaning that it is complex, appropriately autonomous, and features a relationship between reward and effort, which Diane alluded to as well), it's worth more to most people than money. (I would argue that most environmental health work meets all of these criteria.) He also attributes real happiness, meaningful fulfillment and success, to this kind of work, which is to say that the equation that reads work = work is both incorrect and even damaging to the human spirit.

The basic point of Gladwell's book is that it isn't true that there are exceptional people in the world who merit being called outliers. On the contrary, it happens that certain people find themselves in literally the right spot at the right time. They then take advantage of their opportunities by working harder than anyone else with the result being unparalleled success. His stories on everyone from the Beatles to Bill Gates are riveting.

The gist of Gladwell's research and Diane's profound speech is simple, even if it goes against the grain of how younger people view the workplace. Of course it cannot be denied, nor should it be, that wondrous joy can be found in the love within relationships and families and that adventures are opened up through precious friendships, personal interests, and even hobbies. But let us not close ourselves off to the wondrous joys, happiness, fulfillment, and good feelings that can also be found through meaningful work.

It seems clear to me that as we in the baby boomer generation leave the workforce, it is incumbent on us to inspire our younger colleagues to take notice of everything that meaningful work can offer. If we cannot overcome our younger colleagues' pernicious belief that work is just something that grudgingly gets done in order to live a fruitful personal life, we risk setting an entire generation up for uninspiring careers, and most likely, uninspiring performances. We cannot allow that to be our legacy. Our professional field of practice and cause deserves and needs the kinds of inspired performances that only an inspired workforce can give.

And thus I end my lecture to Gen Y by focusing instead on my own baby boomer generation! 🐞



Did you
know?



Bed bugs can lay between one and five eggs per day with an incubation period of 10 days in warm weather (slightly longer when cool). These newly hatched bed bugs will require five significant blood feedings to reach adult size. They will molt in between feedings by shedding their exoskeleton. Once mature, they will begin the process of laying new eggs.

Source: www.bed-bug.org