

INSIDE ORGANIZATIONS

**UNDERSTANDING THE
HUMAN DIMENSION**

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These lessons are apparent in the ways in which young Mormon missionaries deal with stress generated by having to conform to a rigorous schedule of preaching their gospel away from home in another country where they must speak a foreign tongue and work with people who consider them intruders. That they survive is owing in large measure to their participating in pranks and practical jokes, and using expressions and telling stories that redirect some of their feelings of frustration, relieve tension, and even create a sense of community.

In the final article in this section, Stern examines the role of "emblem" at Garrett Corporation, a concept he employs to help understand why the approximately 100 individuals he interviewed spoke highly of Cliff Garrett and seemed to identify with the organization that he founded in 1936. There are many stories, ceremonies, plaques, buttons, pins, and slogans that communicate respect for the individual, recognize contributions to the organization and individual achievements, and communicate receptivity and reciprocity. A situation characterized by equality, flexibility, and an array of awards is responsible for generating and maintaining feelings of pride and loyalty, motivating individuals to see their identities entwined with the identity of the organization. Many people at Garrett Corporation created a reality through expressive forms and symbolic behavior. It was "mythic" in the best sense of the word, as suggested by the last essay.

All five essays have as a central focus the matter of community defined in terms of participation, common interests and concerns, and unity of spirit. The authors indicate that a feeling of oneness resulting from and leading to cooperation in organizations (if it obtains at all) depends largely on symbolic behavior and aesthetic expression. Ritualizing, celebrating, narrating, and the like project hopes and desires, enable people to transcend immediate circumstances, and transform situations in the evolution toward the realization of human potential. But the process is not without its dilemmas or paradoxes.

14

ART AT WORK

In Pursuit of Aesthetic Solutions

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In his essay "Civilization and the Sense of Quality," the acerbic social critic Herbert Read writes the following:

Art redeems our actions from monotony and our minds from boredom. We have to make things and to do things in order to live, but the routine of menial tasks would dull the senses and deaden the mind unless there was the possibility of doing things with a progressive sense of quality. That sense of quality is the aesthetic sense, and in the end, the aesthetic sense is the vital sense, the sense without which we die [Read, 1964: 176-177].

In this article I will explore the aesthetic sense of some workers in Michigan factories who have drawn upon their skills to gain control over the work experience and their lives beyond work.

The early literature in organizational psychology contended that individuals at higher occupational levels placed greater value on "intrinsic" job factors such as self-expression (a chance to use one's skills or talent), interest value of work, and a being of satisfaction from the work itself. Those at the lower levels were assumed to value "extrinsic" job values such as pay, security, and satisfying coworkers (Centers and Bugental, 1966). It was thus thought that levels of occupation were closely related to Maslow's need hierarchy (Lowy, 1973), and therefore little could be done to enhance the lower levels of work to provide self-actualizing experiences for workers who had basic extrinsic primary needs to fulfilled. Later the job enlargement and job redesign movement to "humanize the workplace" (Strauss, 1974a; Fairfield, 1974) seemed to challenge these assumptions to a degree, but not quite to overthrow them. Although ethnography focusing on the art of work was lacking, other research on alienation at work did imply a different set of assumptions about job (dis-)satisfaction. According to Walton (1972),

the "roots of conflict" between the worker and the organization include the following:

- (1) Employees want challenge and personal growth (reaction to simplified jobs requiring narrow skills).
- (2) Employees want to be included in patterns of mutual influence and more egalitarian treatment.
- (3) Employee commitment to an organization is increasingly influenced by the intrinsic interest of the work itself, the human dignity afforded by the management, and the social responsibility reflected in the organization's product.
- (4) What employees want from careers is apt to be what they will no longer be willing to postpone their gratification for.
- (5) Employees want more attention paid to the emotional aspects of organizational life, such as individual self-esteem, openness between people, and expressions of warmth. Yet organizations emphasize rationality and seldom legitimize the emotional part of the organizational experience.
- (6) Employees are becoming less driven by competitive urges. They are less likely to identify competition as the "American way."

Ethnography of the pursuit of aesthetic solutions among workers in Michigan's foundries, factories, and small businesses reveals that individuals in the workplace cultivate behaviors providing opportunities for personal growth and enrichment. Through their artistic and expressive activities, workers certainly may develop a sense of self-esteem and a strong emotional bond to their work and peers. In addition, these "artists in the workplace" may be accorded special status and recognition. These individuals enhance the intrinsic rewards of their fellow workers' daily work experience through their interaction in the following ways: the actual way they work, their participation in the narrative traditions associated with work, and the creation of art that depicts the work experience or art in the workplace using materials from work. In sum, these workers serve as vital symbol-makers for their occupational group and may increase through their presence and actions the sense of community among workers.

ARTIST-WORKERS IN FACTORIES AND FOUNDRIES

Charles Julian was a "loose-work molder" who worked at a number of Detroit area foundries. He provides a fine example of the role of an

artist-worker who enhances the sense of self-esteem and community feeling among his fellow workers. Julian took pride in his mastery of the techniques of "loose-work molding" and was recognized among his group of workers as especially creative and committed to his work. In addition to being a dedicated employee who cast the required pieces, he also experimented with bronze castings of anything that caught his fancy—to amuse his fellow employees and family members. His grandson, who has followed him to foundry work, described his grandfather and his work in this way (quoted from interviews with Chuck Julian in 1982):

He was the foreman—almost everywhere he worked he was the foreman. To a certain extent the foundries allowed people to make that sort of thing [art in the workplace]. . . . Competition existed [among the workers] to see who could make the most complicated [work of art]. . . . My grandfather was constantly battling to prove he was the best. . . . There was a competition, a fellow cast a cup and saucer together, which requires about a five-part mold; you have to pull the center out, then the bottom, and sides come out at an angle [very difficult]. [Then] my grandfather cast a cup and saucer—with a spoon in it *and* two lumps of sugar on the spoon. . . . They were always trying to beat each other.

This account demonstrates a group of workers' attempt to find answers to the so-called "roots of conflict" between the worker and the organization by constructing activities that provide (1) "challenge and personal growth" in their work; (2) an expanded intrinsic interest in the process of the work itself; and (3) self-esteem and emotional connection to their fellow workers. The initiation of one worker's creative expression has played a substantial role in providing expanded meaning to work life through symbolic behavior.

The creative accomplishments of Julian have a direct connection with improving the quality of the foundry's product. David C. McClelland, in an article "That Urge to Achieve" identified a type of worker who habitually spends time thinking about doing things better—"the high need achievement man." Behavioral psychologists have described these individuals as

not just born that way, [they have] special training at home, moderately high achievement goals but [they are] men who are from warm, encouraging and non-authoritarian homes. . . . They set moderately high goals but potentially achievable goals. They behave like this though only if they can influence the outcome by performing the work themselves [1972: 79].

The artist-worker with achievement needs does fulfill some of his

needs informally among his occupational work group through creative expression. This usually results in a more effective work group with a strong personal investment in their daily work.

There are many examples of artist-workers in factory settings in Michigan. The practice of using the raw materials of work and the related technical processes has led to a wide array of creative efforts (sometimes referred to as "government work") by factory workers. Like the "loose-work molder" in the foundry, one artist-worker in a factory can ignite a work group to explore the same idea. One such example began with the creation of a belt buckle from the trunk lock ornament in a Fisher Body assembly plant. Before long, workers in this assembly area were welding belt clips on the back of the ornament and then taking them home to friends and relatives. Naturally, this presented a potential parts-supply shortage, but the practice grew out of creative exploration of the potential of the ornament form and the workers' desire to be identified with the company emblem. In fact, workers wore their belts with pride (outside the work setting), and some men even went so far as to put pictures of their wives or girlfriends inside the buckle, below the rotating keyhole cover. Management seemed to recognize the emerging pattern of loss of ornaments and countered by commissioning a cast Fisher Body emblem belt buckle as a gift for workers on Family Day. However, the response of the workers to the "company belt buckles" never approached the satisfaction they gained from the trunk-ornament belt buckles that they crafted themselves.

Another example of the presence of artist-workers in factory settings may be helpful here. In a number of paint rooms in Michigan auto plants (and no doubt similar production plants), workers fashion jewelry, keychains, and belt buckles from the excess drippings of car paints and finishes that collect on random pieces of metal. These are later refashioned into jewelry for wives, daughters, and female friends. Earrings, necklaces, and pendants are often made with the assistance of local jewelers, who apply the clasps, chains, or pins.

This activity has been common in many of the paint rooms of the auto plants that have been investigated. The participants represent a worker group that is often actively involved in expressing their personal connection to their work every time they create a new piece of jewelry. Julie Turner, a worker in an Oldsmobile paint room in Lansing, Michigan, described the practice of creating art from the dried excess painting dripping in this way (quoted from interviews in 1984):

The paint takes a long time to build up on the chassis of the assembly line—but it would build up so thick though, you could kick it off. Workers

made belt buckles (inlaid in wood), rings, pendants, necklaces, and even decorated fish tanks with pieces of dried paint drippings. There were no prohibitions about making things from paint as far as I could tell. The dried paint was just considered scrap.

When asked why workers made these items, Turner responded,

It was really exciting to do it. You could carve it, sand it, break it—then varnish it. There were just so many ways you could create with it. The workers wore their jewelry and belt buckles to work. It gave them something to talk about, and the paint-room workers were proud of the things they made from scrap.

This artistic activity provides valuable insights into workers' lives and individual artists' desire to improve continually upon their mastery of the artistic expressions.

CONCLUSIONS

While this article has focused on the artist-workers in factory situations, the manager or supervisor also can approach his or her work as an aesthetic performance. The human concerns of these individuals are indeed very similar to those of the artist-workers studied here, as they too seek to master techniques and shape an intrinsically rewarding work life. In an essay entitled, "Making Art Work," Michael J. Bell describes this potential for virtually everyone who works:

To say that work has the potential to become art or that art requires work for its making is to say nothing extraordinary about either work or art. . . . We recognize art by the conscious intentions of its creators to make what they do into aesthetic performances, by the technical skill with which they accomplish these intentions, and by the aesthetic pleasure this process gives to those who do it and for whom it is done [Bell, 1984: 211].

Perhaps the most difficult hurdle is to accept the premise that art and work life can be constructively linked. Along with this belief comes the awareness that virtually everyone has a creative potential and already pursues aesthetic solutions in the spirit that Herbert Read suggests—even though many of those engaged in this art do not conceive of themselves as "artists" or "worker artists." Again, Michael J. Bell provides further insight:

Art is anything—process or event—that calls attention to its own artifice, that displays the skillful construction which makes that artifice possible, and

is interpreted by its creator and audience within a recognizable aesthetic. Clearly, work has the potential to display all these features [Bell, 1984: 211].

I would suggest that the artist-worker and his or her role in the occupational work group should be studied as a way of understanding the relationship between job performance and job satisfaction. These workers seem to be individuals with substantial need for achievement who have mastered the technical skills associated with their particular job assignment; they are actively participating in work that brings them a strong sense of self-esteem; they nourish their personal affiliation with their company or organization and the performance of their work; and they maintain a strong emotional bond to the work group.

Fieldwork with workers such as those considered in this article supports the premise that workers frequently use their mastery of occupational technique to alter their individual consciousness. Alienation as a condition of employment in industrial settings, while apparent, need not be thought of as an absolute barrier to individual expression. Herbert Read's cautions regarding the effects of boredom and monotony as resulting in "the dulling of the senses and the deadening of the mind" are appropriate, but not necessarily accurate. In reality, people—whether at home or at work—act out of human needs and desires, including the individual desire to gain greater control over the place of work and one's life. The aesthetic sense can be thought of as a formalized solution to the boredom, repetition, and limitation of many tasks of work. By researching the occupational experiences of artists and their fellow workers, we will come to better understand the use of aesthetic solutions to human needs.