



Hi Ho...Hi Ho...
It's off to work we go! This children's song from the Disney movie version of the Grimm's Brothers fairy tale Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, demonstrates that there are people who enjoy going to work everyday—even if their jobs involve tedious, labor-intensive tasks such as digging in a mine for diamonds. The personal values which drive each of the Seven Dwarfs toward a hard days work in the mines have become a recognized part of their character. The fairy tale does not go into much depth to explain whether this part of their character was acquired through apprenticeship, lessons from home or via instruction in school. But it is clear that their devotion to task and the manner in which they fulfill their daily responsibilities of work represent a definable work ethic.

I only have anecdotal evidence to prove my point, but I truly doubt that the majority of the people who are reading this article happily sang their way to work this morning. And that is unfortunate. We spend so much of our adult life working it would be in our collective best interests if we enjoyed what we do, even to the point of singing on our way to work. For many workers the motivating force which drives them to the office, the field or the factory each day is not the joy of work but a fulfillment of their respective culture's work ethic.

Adherence to a culturally de-



Defining Vietnam's 21st Century Work Ethic

"The first duty of a university is to teach wisdom not trade; character not technicalities".

Winston Churchill

finer work ethic is often reinforced by the stories, myths and values of a given society. The story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs was written in the early years of the 19th century and proved to be an important value lesson on the responsibilities of the worker while the First Industrial Revolution (Europe) was in full swing. The joyful industriousness of the Seven Dwarfs was also reflective of the understanding of work as originally developed by the Reformation theologian Dr. Martin Luther. Luther valued all work as being spiritually equal and championed the idea of dignity in all work, even manual labor such as digging in a mine. John Calvin a contemporary of Luther and a French theologian used Luther's concepts of work to form a new basis for the value of work. According to Calvin all men had to work as a service to God, whether they liked

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the idea or not. Workers were "to reinvest the profits of their labor into financing further ventures" and "Calvin considered it appropriate to seek an occupation which would provide the greatest earnings possible" (Hill, 1996).

Max Weber, in the early 20th century, "analyzed the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism" (Livermore, 2010). Weber, "often called the founder of sociology", noted that "capitalism is driven in part by a Protestant work ethic, which is prevalent in Western societies and emphasizes hard work, diligence, and frugality with the aim of accumulating wealth" (Livermore, 2010). It includes qualities like commitment, dependability, and willingness to learn (Glenn and Ladson, 2004). "The guiding thought" behind Weber's Protestant work ethic is: "A society won't survive without expecting



people to work hard for it" (Livermore, 2010).

The Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs fairy tale and the Protestant work ethic may be culturally unique to the West and may not resonate with Vietnamese workers. Applying Western models for a universal definition has been a common habit especially when discussing the various roles within business enterprise. The dominant trend in current research is to work with "theories and research methods based on Western subjects but applied directly to subjects in other cultures without consideration of their own views" (Li, 2001). It may not seem quite fair to begin the discussion on the Vietnamese work ethic and then suggest that existing research is woefully lacking. But that indeed is the case.

From a historical perspective, the Vietnamese concept of work has in part been influenced by several religious/philosophical doctrines. For instance Confucianism has promoted the notion that priority should be "given to moral virtues and literacy while material wealth, the economy and technology are (to be) scorned" (Huu, 2005). Buddhism in Vietnam, which was originally brought to Vietnam by Indian traders whose teaching role was subsequently replaced by Chinese monks, has had a covert influence in the modern workplace. Greed and economic accomplishment should not be work-oriented goals, whereas the concepts of fair play and individual happiness are more in

tune with a Buddhist inspired workplace. Determining how pervasive this idealized sense of work is would require too much speculation in lieu of additional research on the definable characteristics of a modern Vietnamese work ethic.

By all appearances there is a modern Vietnamese work ethic. What may not be so apparent to the outside observer is the manner in which the Vietnamese work ethic is codified. Upon reviewing contemporary media resources a contradictory vision of the Vietnamese work ethic has emerged. Specific characteristics are not always listed but international sources generally regard the Vietnamese work ethic within a positive frame, whereas Vietnamese sources are decidedly negative and list characteristics which are currently lacking in the collective ethic.

In 2001, The Center for the Study of Democracy at University of California, Irvine produced a document entitled "The Vietnamese Public in Transition the World Values Survey: Vietnam 2001". This document indicated that "the work ethic is very strong in Vietnam" and that work is a very important part of the life of the Vietnamese citizen (Dalton and Ong, 2001). International corporations also have a very positive view with respect to the modern Vietnamese work ethic. Amanda Tucker, general manager of Nike Vietnam stated that "[Our presence here] has a lot to do with the quality of the workforce. There are a lot of people in Vietnam that have

a wonderful work ethic. They are also bright and interested in learning" (CNN.Com, 2005). Representatives of Canon Vietnam reinforced that perspective. "Though Vietnam has less than 7 percent of China's population, it makes a persuasive argument for putting up a factory: the work ethic, social and political stability, lower labor costs and a government warming to electronics as an engine of growth" (Wilson, 2005). Neil Wallace, who several years ago worked on a project for The Institute of Chartered Accountants in Scotland, has visited Vietnam on numerous occasions for the purpose of raising the accountancy standards of the country. His visits have resulted in an enthusiastic endorsement of the Vietnamese worker. "The Vietnamese are very hardworking people. They'll work seven days a week and all hours" (Gourley, 2009).

As previously noted, the positive view of the Vietnamese work ethic appears to be limited to non-Vietnamese sources. Vietnamese commentators have taken a much more critical stance and are fearful that the lack of a functioning work ethic may disrupt the economic progress of the country. Nguyen Thi Hang, president of The Vocational Training Association of Vietnam, believes that Vietnam "is still short of good quality labourers which she attributes to a lack of work ethic: many go to work late, return home early or do not work an eight-hour minimum day; while many others take several hours for lunch, gather at tea / cof-



fee houses without permission” (VietNamNet Bridge, August 4, 2008). Vu Tuan Anh, an economist at the Viet Nam Institute of Economics, said that “there were three main issues blocking the country’s efforts to send local labourers abroad for work: lack of professional skills, foreign languages and (a) work ethic” (VietNamNet Bridge, August 4, 2008). Hoang Tuy, a university professor, wrote a paper entitled, Vietnamese Higher Education: Crisis and Response, he stated that “in a world changing at an extremely rapid pace, our (Vietnam) slow, lollygagging work ethic is unacceptable” (Tuy, 2008).

Each year the World Economic Forum produces a comprehensive document measuring the global competitiveness of all countries in the world. In the Vietnam profile section for the “2009-2010 Global Competitiveness Report”, there is a listing of the top fifteen most problematic factors for doing business in Vietnam. These fifteen factors were gathered from data acquired via a survey of Vietnamese respondents who were asked to select the five most problematic factors for doing business in their country/economy and to rank those five factors between 1 (most problematic) and 5 (least problematic). The factor termed, Poor Work Ethic in National Labor Force, was rated the seventh most problematic factor (6.8). The related problematic factor, Inadequately Educated Workforce, was the third most problematic factor (13.1). In the “2008-2009 Global Competitive-

ness Report”, Poor Work Ethic in National Labor Force, was rated the sixth most problematic factor (8.1). Inadequately Educated Workforce was the third most problematic factor (10.6). While there appears to be a slight improvement on the problematic ranking for the factor of Poor Work Ethic in National Labor Force, there seems to be a growing concern with the factor, Inadequately Educated Workforce.

The critical review of the Vietnamese work ethic by a variety of Vietnamese sources is quite surprising considering the positive response that is generated from international sources. There is a stereotypical yet highly positive view of the Asian work ethic (Womack, 2004), which is possibly being liberally applied to the Vietnamese worker. It is also feasible to presume that international organizations working in Vietnam have used sophisticated employee selection criteria/processes to identify and hire those candidates which appear to possess a positive work ethic. Those Vietnamese workers in turn are rewarded for their perceived work ethic and as a function of their assignment continuously seek to reinforce the positive perception of their commitment to quality work. The international organizations perhaps collectively view future employees based upon the positive performances of previous workers. “When you watch people from other cultures, you are likely to make generalizations of unique actions to an entire group”, in other words, “imposing the char-

acteristics of an individual onto his or her group” (Ang, Earley and Tan, 2006).

The attitudinal disconnect between the Vietnamese and the international positions in regards to the Vietnamese work ethic may require additional research and insight into the specific areas of divergence. Discovery and analysis may indicate that there are specific attributes which are held in common accord while other characteristics may be out of alignment. Perhaps the next step in the discovery of the Vietnamese work ethic is to identify the more salient attributes. Combining cultural influences alongside contemporary business ideals that are associated with a highly engaged and competent work force could uncover positive attributes which define the contemporary Vietnamese work ethic.

Even though Vietnam does not possess a unifying religious ideal, as previously experienced in the west, an argument could be made that Confucianism and Buddhism have subtly influenced the character of the Vietnamese worker. As a historical reference the blending of Confucianism and Buddhism have played a larger role in Vietnamese society during the previous 2,000 years than in the past 70 years. Yet “in Viet Nam, Confucianism remains a philosophy of social duty, order and hierarchic discipline” (Huu, 2005) which appears to be centered on the institution of education and the process of learning. The “image of the teacher as a model of knowledge and wis-



dom was more or less blurred by westernized education under French colonization. But the Teacher remained an established authority extolled in textbooks” (Huu, 2005). The pursuit of knowledge, the value of education and the development of the mind collectively represent an esteemed attribute of intelligence.

Intelligence as an attribute of the Vietnamese work ethic has been reinforced in research conducted since 1945 on the cultural identity of Vietnamese citizens. “Works of research which laid particular stress on the positive aspects established the following (selected) points about the Vietnamese character”: Intelligence, ardour to work, love of learning, profound influence of Confucianism and Buddhism, diligence (Huu, 2005).

The work ethic attributes, which are a subset of cultural identifiers, are somewhat easy to isolate and itemize. They represent commonly accepted and well known historical norms that are perpetuated throughout transitional periods of social and economic change. Even though those attributes originate from periods centuries removed from the current era they still find relevance in the contemporary workplace. Broadening the search for additional work ethic attributes will necessitate a review of 21st century attributes as determined

by domestic and international sources.

Each year thousands of Vietnamese workers temporarily migrate to countries such as Malaysia, Japan, Taiwan and the Middle East to serve as skilled and unskilled labor. The economic value to their respective



host countries will be directly related to their ability to fulfill the stated needs of their employment contract. In other words international employers have sought out Vietnamese workers for their identifiable workplace attributes. In Japan, Vietnamese workers “are highly appreciated by the Japanese people thanks to their hard work, character and intelligence” (VOV News, October 18, 2009). “Korean employers prefer to hire Vietnamese workers who are usually amicable and diligent” (Korea International Labour Foundation, October 27, 2009).

Intelligence and diligence (also termed industriousness by other sources) are culturally identified attributes which are purposefully used by international

employers to select the most desired candidates. Intelligence is a commonly used term to describe an assortment of traits and abilities. Howard Gardner, professor in Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, describes intelligences as “a set of abilities, talents, or mental skills” (Gardner, 2006). Richard Nisbett, a psychologist and professor at the University of Michigan defines intelligence from a Western and an Eastern perspective. From the Western point of view “intelligence includes abstract reasoning, problem-solving ability and capacity

to acquire knowledge” (Nisbett, 2009). “East Asian understanding of intelligence emphasizes the pragmatic, utilitarian aspects more than Western views do, which are more likely to value the search for knowledge for its own sake, whether or not it has any obvious immediate uses” (Nisbett, 2009).

A more engaged and thorough research process may uncover additional attributes which will lead to a comprehensive Vietnamese work ethic for the 21st century. But for the moment intelligence and diligence/industriousness will serve as the foundational attributes. Inculcating a positive work ethic, featuring the broadly defined attribute of intelligence with diligence/industriousness is a task which will



require participation by all levels of the educational process.

Last year Nguyen Van Ngang, Vice President of the Viet Nam General Confederation of Labour requested that The Ministry of Education and Training, and the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs add the teaching of the Vietnamese work ethic into the curriculum of the nation's vocational training schools (VietNamNet Bridge, August 4, 2008). Nguyen Thi Hang, the president of The Viet Nam Vocational Training Association indicated that his organization planned to establish a center "to survey and research the implementation of work ethic curricula at schools" (VietNamNet Bridge, August 4, 2008). At the university level Nguyen Duc Phan, vice rector of HCM City Industrial University, indicated that two years ago the university introduced a special curriculum which focused upon "behaviour communication" as a work ethic. "Teachers focused on the importance of occupational passion and skill in order to teach students the importance of good work ethics. However, the class was not very successful, he said. Students might understand communication skills but they struggle to put it into practice."

In recent years, public and private colleges and universities in Viet Nam have been tasked with the challenge of upgrading the curriculum and the quality of instruction of most academic majors. Modernizing the core elements of higher education throughout the country is a monumental albeit necessary project.

Graduating students who have spent years studying a discipline as well as their future employers have mutual expectations that they will enter the workforce with industry-related knowledge and state-of-the-art skill sets. One of those skill sets should be a work ethic that is culturally based and adapted to the demands of the 21st century workplace. As Winston Churchill noted in the opening quote universities have a primary responsibility to teach character—to prepare graduates to be responsible individuals in the community or in the workplace. But if teaching a contemporary work ethic remains the sole province of colleges and universities it will miss the vast majority of workers who do not pursue higher education.

The value of a contemporary work ethic should be measured in coordination with the level of satisfaction that will be experienced by both international and Vietnamese employers. The current gap in work ethic perception may be difficult to overcome in a short period of time, but to leave it untouched could tarnish the future reputation of the Vietnamese worker. Teaching the attributes associated with a positive work ethic should be the responsibility of all levels of education, beginning with the primary grades. In order to develop a consistent and comprehensive work ethic. ●

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