

Added angst and admiration: How COVID-19 impacts 'dirty' work

9-11 minutes

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Chances are, the last thing you want to think about when you sit down to a nice juicy steak is the poor soul who had to kill the animal or the person who cut the meat off the bones. When we think about such unsavory details, we're glad someone else is doing such jobs, not us. That's a hallmark of "dirty work," jobs that are stigmatized because they're dangerous or somehow distasteful to those who don't do them. What's more, the COVID-19 pandemic has made some dirty jobs even dirtier than before.

Professor of Management and Entrepreneurship [Blake Ashforth](#), who's a Regents Professor and the Horace Steele Arizona Heritage Chair, has spent years studying dirty jobs and the people performing them. He'd like to see society develop more appreciation for these folks who are doing all the stuff the rest of you don't want to do, and he thinks COVID-19 may move the needle in that direction for at least some in dirty-work roles.

Please, say it taint so

Just what exactly is dirty work? It's work that's viewed by most of society as disgusting, demeaning, contemptible, or somehow tainted, Ashforth explains. He also distinguishes between dirty work that is physically, socially, or morally stigmatized. The physical stigma may result from working with something that makes people a little squeamish – as sewer workers or morticians do – or doing dangerous work, which is what puts soldiers and firefighters into the dirty worker category.

Social taint may come from working with people who are themselves stigmatized. As examples, Ashforth points to prison guards who work with prisoners or social workers who work with people in need. Social stigmas also dog people in subservient roles, like chauffeurs, maids, and butlers, or people who man the customer complaint desk at a business.

Moral taint surrounds those who perform activities that society may find questionable. Exotic

dancers, for instance, fall into this category. So do those whose actions might be problematic, such as intrusive bill collectors, telemarketers, paparazzi who harass others, or defense attorneys who help criminals in court.

If physical taint is a blemish on one's body and social taint is a blemish on one's relationships, then moral taint is a blemish on one's character.

The team also note that workers can be tainted in multiple ways. For instance, prostitution has both a physical and moral taint.

Regardless of the type of taint workers endure, that stigma has impact. Lack of social validation can affect workers' self-esteem and leave them feeling degraded. "One of the things we've found in our research is that everybody who does this work knows fully well that society looks down upon them. They feel it, and it bothers them," Ashforth says.

Despite degradation, dirty workers often are also appreciated. "I wouldn't want to be a funeral director, but I certainly understand why we need them, and I'm very glad when something happens in my family that there's someone there who can do this very important task for me," he adds. "Society can admire you for doing something even as it's disgusted by it."

Healthy changes

One of the groups of dirty workers who wind up in that halo of admiration is health care workers, and Ashforth thinks their societal standing may rise due to the pandemic. "In the wake of 9-11, firefighters and other first responders were seen to be heroes because they put their lives on the line to take care of a national tragedy. That hasn't subsided even though it's almost 20 years since the World Trade Center was attacked," Ashforth says.

I think health care workers, especially those dealing directly with the COVID-19 emergency, may take on some of that same patina because they're risking their lives to try and help us keep our lives.

He also thinks this will give health care workers a long-term boost in prestige and mitigate some of taint in health-related professions.

Other workers also are facing danger and may not fare as well. "It depends largely on the way you're being treated by the public and in your organization," Ashforth says. He points to transit workers who were told to show up and shut up versus those who were given plenty of extra training, counseling, and personal protective equipment. For those who got no extra kudos or

aid, Ashforth says, “It’s hard to feel proud of what you’re doing when you’re told to man up and get on with your job.” Among those who got plenty of support, he says it’s easier for them to feel proud because they’re doing a tough job and being recognized for it.

Like transit workers — who now have added taint because they’re exposed to many possible infection sources — others have joined the ranks of dirty workers or seen their jobs become even sicker than before. Among them are the food processing and retail workers who show up to work at outbreak sites, as well as hairdressers or nail techs who must get too close for comfort to perform their magic. Ashforth thinks any public recognition of the courage these folks are showing by working through the risk of COVID-19 infection will be short-lived.

Food processing workers have historically been treated shabbily, he laments, adding, “That’s probably why our burgers and chickens are so cheap. We don’t pay those workers very much and we don’t treat them very well.” As for the salon crew, Ashforth thinks the taint will fade as the danger fades. “Once COVID-19 blows over, people will file back into salons to get their hair and nails done without a second thought.”

Cleaning up the messy

The dirt may fall away for some workers, but others will continue to toil through taint. Ashforth’s research has found dirty workers have plenty of coping mechanisms. Many band together and have a strong sense of professional community. Dirty workers also find ways to reframe the taint. For example, criminal defense attorneys don’t see themselves as helping bad people get away with wrongdoing. They see themselves as ensuring fair trials, a cornerstone of the judicial system. Likewise, exotic dancers may see themselves as doing a service for frustrated men, bill collectors see themselves as helping folks get out from under debt, and those who brave the cold and perils of arctic seas on fishing boats tell themselves it’s a job for real men, not sissies.

Managers of dirty workers have ways of lightening the blow to self-esteem, too. One approach Ashforth recommends is what he calls a “realistic stigma preview, a sense of the pros and cons of the job people are just getting into.” Among the organizations he did see providing this eye-opener was an animal control office that make likely candidates witness a euthanasia to ensure they can handle it.

Another approach Ashforth recommends is finding ways to give people a time and place to decompress and talk about the less-than-perfect parts of the job. “It could be as little as having a beer after work on Friday and offering an open mic session,” he says, adding that when this is done, “people realize they’re not alone.” He also says it helps dirty workers realize the taint is

with the job, not something personal, plus they can learn from each other. “They can share best practices and find out what other people do” to handle negative public perceptions, he explains.

Some managers offer formal training on dealing with the public. As a case in point, Ashforth points to animal researchers and abortion-clinic workers who might be told to defer public questions to a manager or public relations professional. Or, some managers simply train employees on what to say to the public about their jobs.

Yet another trick is divesting employees of stereotypes about their roles. “We spoke to a manager of bill collectors who took pains to debunk employee stereotypes of what people in debt looked like,” Ashforth recalls. “He’d start out saying, ‘I want you to draw me a picture of the kind of person who would get a call from this agency.’ Of course, people came up with all the stereotypes of deadbeats. Then the manager would talk about what the clients actually looked like and how radically different they were from this perception.”

A last word Ashforth has for managers of dirty workers is this: Managers should support employees themselves by offering social validation that the public may withhold. It’s a manager’s job to continually reinforce why the stigmatized work their people do matters, he maintains.

When you have a specific client treating you like dirt, it’s hard not to take it personally. But people are reacting to the occupation, not the employee as a person. It’s a manager’s job to make that crystal clear.

Ashforth would like everyone to recognize the inherent value in dirty work and the people who do it. “These people are doing the necessary work of society, but we look down our noses at them. It’s unfair,” he says. “We should be prizing these workers because they’re doing stuff most of don’t want to do. The dignity of this work needs to be shouted from the rooftops.”