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The Value of Virtue: An Organizational Approach to the Challenges of Workplace Disabilities

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In their focal article, Santuzzi, Waltz, Finkelstein, and Rupp (2014) present a troubling dilemma for workers with invisible disabilities: keep the disability hidden and risk being thought a subpar worker or report

the disability, seek accommodation, and be “outed” as disabled and risk the stigmatization associated with disability—the “likely negative social and work-related consequences” described in the article. The latter consideration recognizes that despite legislation seeking to open opportunities for those with disabilities, there remains the stigma that if one has a disability, he or she is a less productive member of the team, a perceptual stigma seemingly reinforced by the need for special accommodations in order to be a productive member of the workforce. We affirm the recommendation in the article for serious reconsideration of legislation and workplace policies as means of better assisting workers with invisible disabilities. However, we believe that without significant cultural change that shapes the deeper values and virtues of the workplace, changes in legislation and workplace policies will result in little progress toward alleviating the stigma associated with disability or in creating a positive environment for all workers.

Disability rights activists recognize that legislation and the implementation of workplace policies that require accommodation for persons with disabilities are important first steps, but of themselves these policies are insufficient to accomplish the necessary changes in workplace culture. Research into earlier, similar civil rights legislation noted that racial integration was premised on the “contact hypothesis.” The hypothesis holds that increased interracial contact would lead to transformed attitudes about those of other races. It was discovered that contact alone was insufficient to change entrenched stigmas related to African Americans. Instead, the contact must be sustained and of such positive quality as to overcome preexisting negative perceptions (Makas, 1993). When the contact produces negative emotions or fears, stigmas are reinforced and so become more difficult to change. Regarding interactions between those with disabilities and nondisabled persons, research has found that negatively perceived contact is more common than positive. The 1991 National Organization on

Disability Survey of Public Attitudes Toward People with Disabilities conducted by Louis Harris and Associates, Inc. reveals that 58% of nondisabled Americans reported that they are “often” or “occasionally” either “awkward or embarrassed” when encountering people with disabilities. In addition, almost half reported that they experienced “fear,” while three-quarters of respondents felt “pity” (Louis Harris and Associates, 1991). In at least half of the encounters able-bodied Americans have with people with disabilities, the contact has a negative component that only serves to reinforce negative perceptions of disability.

What this suggests is that legislation and policies that provide opportunities for those with disabilities to function in the workplace do not alone overcome the stigma associated with disabilities. Merely increasing the numbers of workers with disabilities without considering the nature of workplace encounters creates the possibility of perpetuating negative stigmas because of repeated negative contacts. Without creating opportunities for positive encounters, existing stigmas related to disability are reinforced. The challenge to creating positive encounters is that, in the case of those with disabilities (invisible or visible), the need for accommodation is often persistent. The accommodations that make working possible reinforce the stigmas against individuals with disabilities. They are able to do their jobs, but they require special devices, preferred parking, alternative hours, and various other accommodations not generally afforded other members of the workplace community. This need for accommodation only heightens the perceived difference between those with disabilities and able-bodied workers (Cushing, 2010). That many, including disability rights activists, perceive disability as a form of cultural difference means that accommodations further differentiate a group already perceived to be different. This in turn serves to heighten fears and negative images of disabled workers.

Much of the emphasis in the disability rights movement in America during the

1970s and 1980s aimed at political support for the rights of those with disabilities to have access to the workplace. The belief was that if only given the opportunity and provided with sufficient accommodations, those with disabilities could prove themselves as capable and belonging as any other worker. What they discovered was that while they gained access (to varying degrees) to the workforce, they were not accepted as equals nor have negative stigmas been minimized. As the focal article suggests, acceptance by others in the workplace remains even more elusive for those with invisible disabilities.

We suggest the need for substantial cultural change in organizations: change that transforms not only the physical work environment through accommodations but also the values and deeper virtues that shape practices. Virtues have been described as important aspects of individual and organizational character. They have been defined as habits of thinking, feeling, and acting that comprise an aspect of the thriving of an individual within a flourishing community (Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004). Among virtues to be embraced are those that open individuals or groups to valuing persons beyond a simple determination of efficiency or cost effectiveness, virtues oriented towards humanity and justice. Peterson and Seligman (2004) explain the virtue of humanity as positive traits manifested in caring relationships between others, whereas justice centers on the optimal interactions among individuals and community.

Culture change shaped by an embrace of virtues must be driven and supported by top leadership. Despite popular belief, such transformation is not a bottom-up effort. The words and actions of top management have a major impact on the organization's culture (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Senior leaders institute norms that permeate the organization by embracing the cultural shift, not the least through instituting broad organizational training that encourages employees to see the value of all humans. Regarding those with invisible disabilities, leaders must

not simply offer policy directives affirming commitment to federal law, but must, through their own practices, exemplify a consistent affirmation of the value of all variously abled workers. An embrace of virtues of humanity and justice, an appreciation of difference, and a willingness to enthusiastically support creative ways of accommodating the distinct needs of all workers will provide an environment more receptive to workers with disabilities.

Despite a commitment from leadership, the cultural change we envision will still happen slowly. One way to understand this is through the attraction-selection-attrition framework (Schneider, 1987). This theory holds that (a) individuals are attracted to organizations whose members are similar to themselves in terms of personality, values, interests, and other attributes; (b) organizations are more likely to select those who possess knowledge, skills, and abilities similar to the ones their existing members possess; and (c) over time, those who do not fit in well are more likely to leave. Owing to these three factors, the personal characteristics of those who work for an organization are likely to become more similar over time, leading to the consolidation of organizational culture. Importantly, in a context in which those with invisible disabilities are welcomed and their unique abilities and ways of accomplishing tasks are affirmed, not only will the organization attract more able-bodied workers who share this view of persons, but it will necessarily also attract more workers with disabilities. In such a circumstance, we imagine that opportunities for positive encounters will be plentiful, in turn reinforcing a new image of the worker with disabilities as a valued member of the team.

With this in mind, we will highlight only one particular virtue from among the many that would be formed in an organization so as to affect a deep cultural change necessary to mitigate or eradicate the stigma associated with disability. Among the core virtues of humanity is kindness (along with associated terms including generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, and altruistic

love). Kindness is described as “a common orientation of the self towards the other” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 326). Even in difference, the other is recognized as sharing a common humanity and as such is worthy of “attention and affirmation for no utilitarian reasons but for their own sake” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 326). An organization in which the daily practices are habituated to this view of persons would significantly challenge the stigma against those with disabilities. A culture informed by kindness would be defined by attitudes that “give rise to helping behaviors that are not based on an assurance of reciprocity, reputational gain, or any other benefits to self” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 326). Accommodations for special needs in this context would be accepted, regular practice and applied to any and all workers, thereby helping to minimize perceived stigmas.

In one of the few studies on virtuous organizations and disability, Barclay, Markel, and Yugo (2012) discuss how organizations might ease the inclusion of people with disabilities. They use virtue theory to explain how organizations can develop a culture of support and respect for all persons. As well as helping people with disabilities remain in the organization, the emphasis on virtue helps organizational members deal with the accommodations that may be required by people with disabilities. In virtuous organizations, supervisors are more likely to exhibit good citizenship behaviors that include empathy, courage, and compassion, and these behaviors should benefit all members of the organization.

Ethicists back to Aristotle have acknowledged the need for motivation for virtuous behavior (*Nicomachean Ethics*, book 10). What might motivate present day leaders of organizations to value such attempts to inculcate a culture that rejects the stigmatization of those with invisible disabilities? Recent research suggests that virtuous practices are more likely the cause rather than the outcome of abundance (Lewis, 2011). Although it might seem likely that organizations that are already successful can afford to be virtuous in their dealings with their

staff and community, it increasingly appears as if it works the other way around. We are beginning to understand the processes at play that create this association between positive organizational behavior and performance. Cameron et al. (2004) found that the perceived level of virtue (trust, optimism, compassion, integrity, and forgiveness) in an organization is positively correlated with various performance indicators (innovation, quality, turnover, and customer retention) of the organization. These in turn may be associated with three positive outcomes: (a) the creation of positive emotions, (b) fostering an organizational culture of cooperation and teamwork, and (c) the accumulation of social capital. Of these positive outcomes, the circles of positive emotions among groups of people coupled with the creation and accumulation of social capital within the organization combine to convert virtuous, positive orientation into abundant performance. Organizational outcomes (e.g., employee turnover, employee attendance, safety, employee productivity) that have a direct impact on the bottom line are being impacted by culture changes that are oriented to creating a more virtuous workplace environment (Cameron, 2011). In fact, Caza, Barker, and Cameron (2004) suggest that virtue has a place in strategic management that impacts both externally applied rules such as laws and professional practice, as well as an internalization of a code of responsibility based on virtue. If an organization aligns practices related to virtuousness with its overall strategic planning efforts, it is not only likely to comply with external legislation but be characterized as an organization known for its excellence.

Cameron (2008) reports on the results of a major clean-up effort at Rocky Flats nuclear arsenal that took a distinctly positive approach to addressing the most contaminated nuclear plant in the country. It was estimated that the project would take 70 years and \$36 billion to clean up and close the facility. Organizational leaders focused on identifying and building on sources of strength (such as virtues), resilience, and vitality, rather than simply

solving problems and overcoming difficulties. The task was accomplished in 10 years with \$6 billion—significantly better performance than expected.

Finally, in a recent review of the research on positive psychological interventions (including building virtue and positive institutions), Meyers, van Woerkom, and Bakker (2013) concluded that positive psychology interventions seem to be a promising tool for enhancing employee well-being and organizational performance.

In conclusion, the focal article notes that many individuals with disabilities continue to face “negative employment outcomes” after requesting accommodations. In addition, 13.3 million Americans with disabilities reported having difficulty finding or keeping a job (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Certainly, almost 25 years of disability rights legislation has sought to counter these consequences, but as Santuzzi et al. recognize, “the high risk of stigmatization for people with invisible disabilities who disclose and receive accommodations is likely to perpetuate less disclosure among workers, hindering accommodations and integration of these workers in the workplace.” Our hope is that in addition to policy awareness on the part of organizations, a more fundamental cultural change that orients the workplace toward virtues that challenge stigmas associated with difference will open possibilities for positive work relationships for those with invisible disabilities. This organizational change begins with leaders who are committed to encouraging the contributions and worth of differently-abled workers, and who likewise are committed to the slow process of offering humanity and justice to all workers. In so doing, not only will the worker with invisible disability experience the positive impact of these efforts, but the organization as a whole and the individuals who share the daily workplace.

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