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## **Getting kids into unfilled and good-paying blue collar jobs will require a cultural shift**

*Steven Malanga, Contributor*

Experts testifying before Congress don't typically start by describing the insights they've gained from backed-up toilets. But when reality TV star Mike Rowe appeared before the Senate committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation in 2011, he detailed two incidents involving malfunctioning commodes.

When he was 12, he saw everything that went down the toilet reappear "in a rather violent and spectacular fashion," Rowe recalled. His grandfather — Rowe describes him as a blue-collar magician who "woke up clean and came home dirty most of his life" — quickly ascertained the problem. What followed was an entire day of digging in the front yard, followed by welding, pipe fitting, and other hard work that Rowe participated in until the toilet was behaving again.

By contrast, Rowe told the senators, when his own toilet blew up three decades later in San Francisco, he called Roto-Rooter, left a check and never saw the guy who fixed the problem. "It occurred to me that somewhere during those last 30 years, I had become disconnected from a number of things that used to fascinate me," Rowe said. "I no longer thought about the person who was growing my food, or the person who was making my clothes, or the person who was making my car."

Rowe created the TV series *Dirty Jobs* partly as a tribute to his grandfather, and he spent eight years traveling the country for the hit show, looking for, and profiling, experts who do hands-on things like make charcoal, paint

bridges, sterilize dirt and fix wastewater pumps. He gained respect for the competence of these tradesmen, but he also began to see lots of "help wanted" signs on the job sites, and he heard steady complaints from employers about how tough it was to find trained help.

When the economy cratered in 2008, the press overflowed with stories about the newly unemployed, hungry for work; Rowe started getting the word out about those unfilled, well-paying trade jobs. What he soon discovered, though, was that not all people in contemporary America were willing to get their hands dirty, even when they desperately needed work.

That attitude represents a profound cultural shift. What we call the skills gap, the millions of decent-paying, blue-collar positions in America that go unfilled, even as critics decry the lack of good jobs, has widened as the economy has rebounded and the job market tightened. To close the gap, many are urging renewed commitment to vocational education and technical training, both devalued by the educational system over the last 50 years. But the real challenge is cultural: changing the conversation about the importance and dignity of blue-collar work, not only with kids but also with parents and educators, who've latched on to the idea that college is the only route to success.

### **A character crisis**

The challenge includes not just promoting careers in the trades but also teaching those seeking a vocation that traditional values like showing up on time, working diligently, and seizing opportunities when they arise are crucial. "The workforce crisis is a character crisis," says Danny Goldberg, head of a Milwaukee program, Building2Learn, which brings together students from urban neighborhoods with trade and technical workers, showing the youngsters what it takes to succeed.

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Danny Goldberg, Executive Director,  
Building2Learn

What was known as the work ethic, with a strongly physical component, once permeated American society, including the educational system. Early American promoters of public school emphasized the role that education could play in molding students into productive, hard-laboring adult citizens, and nineteenth-century schoolbooks embodied that spirit. *McGuffey's Sixth Eclectic Reader* contained Horace Greeley's essay "Labor," which observed that all the natural calamities that befall us are nothing compared with the woes

society suffers "through human idleness and inefficiency, mainly caused (or excused) by lack of industrial training."

This thinking also suffused the American high school movement, which emerged in the early 20th century as people began to migrate in large numbers from farms into the cities. The promoters of high school education saw it as a way to prepare students for the challenges of an industrial age.

By the 1950s, though, American schools had begun to shift their emphasis to getting students ready for college. Trade work became a second-best option in the eyes of parents, teachers, and guidance counselors, a path for kids who couldn't cut it in college-preparation courses.

Over time, that perspective hardened into the "college for all" ideal. Many school officials and parents came to view physical work with outright abhorrence — as "jobs from hell." During his presidential campaign, Senator Bernie Sanders even promoted his free college-for-all plan by tweeting: "At the end of the day, providing a path to go to college is helluva lot cheaper than putting people on a path to jail" — as if those were young people's only alternatives.

The consequences of this cultural transformation have been profound. A growing number of college graduates leave school buried in debt and struggling to find work in their field. Many students don't finish their degrees. About half of adults with only a high school diploma say that they're underemployed. Millions of prime-working-age adults have dropped out of the workforce. Even with today's low unemployment, about 15 percent of males between the ages of 25 and 52 aren't working, compared with just 5 percent in 1967.

One common theme among Rowe's allies and other advocates is to go beyond offering technical training to include instruction in personal virtues. Skills USA, for example, delivers its technical education within a framework of integrity, respect, responsibility, citizenship, and service. "The hardest skills to teach these days are not the technical skills, but the skills that make workers employable, like getting to work on time," says Tim Lawrence, executive director of the program, which has enlisted Rowe to encourage students.

Rowe has his own criteria for training, which he presents in his no-nonsense style. All students accepting scholarships must sign a SWEAT pledge (Skill & Work Ethic Aren't Taboo). It includes such bracing statements as "I believe

there is no such thing as a bad job," "I believe that all jobs are opportunities," and "I believe that I am the product of my choices -- not my circumstances. I will never blame anyone for my shortcomings." Students must promise to "deplore debt," not follow their passion but bring it with them, and "show up early, stay late, and cheerfully volunteer for every crappy task there is."

Anyone who thinks such a list isn't countercultural in 21<sup>st</sup> century America doesn't recognize how much the country has changed.

Promoting such old-fashioned values got Rowe accused of writing a "conservative manifesto." But he had no political intentions in establishing his pledge, he says, pointing out that "most of these statements are in line with classical liberal thought." Even more revealing is that his insistence that kids work hard and tackle tough jobs has been labeled anti-worker and pro-employer.

### **Overcoming parents' fears**

Parents can be a hurdle for promoters of blue-collar employment. Danny Goldberg's Building2Learn, which got off the ground thanks to a grant from the Milwaukee-based Bradley Foundation, enlists young

people with an aptitude for working with their hands and pairs them with successful trade workers for training. Goldberg visits with the parents of each student recruit, trying to get them to buy into the effort. He hears doubts. "Typically, they say something to me like, 'You're not taking him out of math, are you?' I tell them they'll need math skills to work on our projects," he said.

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Danny Goldberg

Some parents, influenced by media reports about blue-collar jobs shifting overseas, are surprised to learn that good manufacturing positions still exist in the U.S. and that firms are struggling to fill them. Once they hear about the pay, their interest perks up. Skilled factory jobs can start at \$50,000 a year after a student serves an apprenticeship. And, unlike so many college graduates, the students usually emerge from apprenticeships debt-free.

After Rowe started his foundation in 2008, an executive at Caterpillar, the giant equipment company, called to tell him that workers and customers

were reporting positively on his efforts. Caterpillar, which mostly employs skilled trade workers, enlisted Rowe to star in a series of award-winning commercials highlighting the firm's abundant job opportunities.

Koch Industries has sponsored sessions at the annual SkillsUSA national competition. As Charles Koch puts it in a recorded conversation with Rowe: "People who lead happy, fulfilling lives are ones that develop their abilities ... and are rewarded for it and respected for it." Koch Industries has its own worries about the future of the workforce. At any given time, it has thousands of jobs available, as much as 70 percent of them in good-paying skilled positions.

So pressing is the need that the company has extended its search for employees beyond the usual labor pools. One program, for example, focuses on hiring armed-services veterans, who know something about the work ethic. "Employers of military veterans, including Koch, have found that the traits which define the men and women who served our nation — character, dedication, perseverance and courage — match those of our most successful employees," retired U.S. Army Colonel John Buckley, head of the company's veterans' outreach, wrote recently. "That is no coincidence."

In our hyper-partisan moment, the notion of reinvigorating something as old-fashioned as the work ethic is controversial. Even promoting investment to create more blue-collar positions in America can arouse the furies.

When Rowe narrated a 2014 Walmart television ad called "Work is a beautiful thing," announcing the huge retailer's plan to invest \$250 billion over ten years in buying American-manufactured products, he got a lot of pushback. "What happened to your support of the underdogs?" one critic asked. Another warned, "Make sure you're on the side of the WORKER, not the corporate greed side, OK, Mike?" Defiant, Rowe heralded the support of a huge company in what remains a struggle to change the way that people think. Rowe said: "I like this campaign because at its heart, it portrays hard work as something dignified and decent."

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