

Empathy for the Wage Worker

Implications for Industrial Safety

As I walked through the Atlanta International Airport, I noticed for the first time that vendors were standing in front of their product booths with no place to sit down. I sat in a waiting area close to a female vendor selling sunglasses. During my 30 minutes of observation, this woman made no sales but merely stood calmly in front of her booth. She appeared quite weary.

After 30 minutes, another lady approached the booth and the two convened to an airport waiting area, sat down together, and exchanged money. It was obvious the second woman was a manager or supervisor collecting sales money and then paying out wage compensation. When the supervisor left, I approached the sales person, introduced myself, and asked the following:

How long did you work today? Answer: 8 hours

Did you get tired standing? Answer: Yes, very much.

Why don't you have a chair or stool to sit on? Answer: We're not allowed.

How much do you make per hour? Answer: \$7.50

How old are you? Answer: 38

Then she volunteered she has only been in the U.S. for two years, and asked if I could do something about the "no-sit-down rule." "If only I could sit down once in a while, I wouldn't be so tired."

Nickel and Dimed

Perhaps you're wondering why I even noticed the work conditions of this vendor and took the time to observe and ask questions. I must confess I've never

shown such concern for airport vendors. Although I travel through the same airport more than 20 times per year, I never noticed that the vendors have no place to sit. Subsequently, on a trip through the Philadelphia International Airport, I observed that all vendors there have stools in front of their booths, and most were sitting on them.

The *New York Times* bestseller, “Nickel and Dimed,” by Barbara Ehrenreich, activated me to notice the uncomfortable and unhealthy work conditions at the Atlanta airport. From 1998 to 2000, the author of this nonfiction book took a number of hourly jobs in three states to study the culture of the low-wage work world and to see how well she could live as a minimal-wage worker. She worked as a hotel maid, house cleaner, and nursing-home aid in Maine, a Wal-Mart sales associate in Minnesota, and a waitress in Florida.

She found it necessary to work two jobs at \$6 to \$7 per hour in order to cover the cheapest lodging available. And, none of her six jobs provided overtime pay, retirement funds, nor health insurance. Furthermore, she found that no job, regardless how lowly, was unskilled. For each job she had to master new terms, new tools, and new behaviors. Furthermore, the author quickly discovered that each job required exhausting mental and physical effort.

Each of Ms. Ehrenreich’s wage jobs presented a self-contained social world, with distinctive personalities, customs, standards, and hierarchies. There were some commonalities. For example, regarding standards, you shouldn’t be “so fast and thorough you end up making things tougher for everyone else.” And,

you learn not to “reveal one’s full abilities to management, because the more they think you can do, the more they’ll use and abuse you.”

Meeting Basic Needs

While the author reports relative competence handling the challenge of various menial jobs, she documents numerous problems meeting life’s needs, especially eating and sleeping. From her detailed cost analysis, Ehrenreich concludes “wages are too low and rent is too high.” She documents deplorable room-and-board situations, revealing a U.S. culture of extreme inequality. “Corporate decision makers...occupy an economic position miles above that of the underpaid people whose labor they depend on.”

Ms. Ehrenreich’s profound report also gave me a glimpse into various management systems from the perspective of the minimum-wage earner. I never realized, for example, how humiliating a routine drug test can feel. Or, how demeaning some managers or supervisors are when administering an intrusive, pre-employment interview or personality test. And, the author discusses the psychological toll resulting from treating people as untrustworthy with top-down rules and regulations designed to catch a potential slacker, drug addict, or thief. I wonder if some safety rules add to this unhealthy and unfair perspective.

A Disconnect Between Worker and Supervisor

The author of “Nickel and Dimed” gives one real-world example after another to illustrate how management systems remind low-wage earners of their low position in the social hierarchy. In her words, “if you’re made to feel unworthy enough, you may come to think that what you’re paid is what you are actually

worth.” With lowered self-esteem and a sense of disconnectedness with the management of an organization, it’s unlikely these workers will go beyond the call of duty to actively care for industrial safety. They can be expected to do only what’s required, and no more.

Barbara Ehrenreich documents a number of experiences where management actually prevented a job from getting done as it should be done. She concluded from watching waitresses, retail workers, and housecleaners that “left to themselves, they devised systems of cooperation and work sharing... In fact, it was often hard to see what the function of management was, other than to exact obeisance.”

This is obviously a selective and biased view of management, but nevertheless it activates empathic concern and perhaps a need for change in some situations. Actually, my numerous conversations with wage workers over 30+ years tells me this perspective is not unusual. Although most supervisors mean well, many do not take time to understand the perceptions of those they manage. Time pressures dictate a perceived need to enforce top-down generic rules that seemingly consider wage workers as objects or a means to an end rather than people with special needs, aspirations, emotions, and challenges. The result: unhappy wage workers who do not contribute to industrial production and safety as much as they could.

The Sins of Wages

Another book I read recently, “The Sins of Wages” by William Abernathy, defines a major reason – perhaps a “root cause” – of the deplorable circumstances depicted in “Nickel and Dime.” Specifically, most workers are not paid for what they accomplish but only for the amount of time they put in. This diverts focus from the real intrinsic fruits of labor, and motivates a “just-put-in-your-time” mentality.

This misplaced contingency, combined with a perception that management and the company it represents does not care about the individual worker, can lead naturally to peer pressure and norms to do only enough and no more. Actively caring or going beyond the call of duty is out of the question.

Bill Abernathy refers to the typical hourly-wage system as “entitlement pay” which contributes to an “entitlement culture” in which “employees believe they are owed their pay regardless of personal or company performance.” This will be the theme of my *ISHN* contribution next month. Here, my point is that the disconnect between job performance and wage compensation makes it necessary to add an extrinsic accountability system. Often such systems are based on behavior-based threats rather than recognition and are implemented by supervisors who have not received effective behavior-management training, and have little empathy for the distressful plight of the minimum-wage worker.

In Conclusion

This article does not provide a practical strategy for addressing the human dynamics of industrial safety or health. But it does offer some insight into the

experiences and perceptions of many wage workers. As such, it illustrates the remarkable challenges facing safety professionals who work with low-wage workers and command-and-control supervisors.

We don't envy any of the players in this scenario. Obviously any attempt to improve safety here must begin with empathy. I hope this article provided some understanding and compassion for the exigency of the minimum-wage worker. To gain more empathy, I recommend reading "Nickel and Dime." It had substantial impact on my view of both the work world and my own behavior. For example, before leaving my hotel rooms, I now leave a gratuity for the housekeeping staff. And, I feel guilty for not having done that previously for thousands of opportunities to show my appreciation for an under-paid employee.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help people develop, refine, and implement interventions that prevent workplace injuries. SPS is offering a series of seminars throughout 2004. For more information about these seminars, related books, training programs, video and audiotapes, and customized consulting and training options, please visit safety@safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233.

Note: If you are interested in participating in our ongoing research to study personality determinants of occupational safety, please contact Douglas M. Wiegand at dwiegand@vt.edu or (540) 231-8145. Or, log on to www.safetyperformance.com and view the link to the Safety Identity Questionnaire (SIQ) under "related links".