*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**The disappearing work ethic**

I was having a conversation recently with a crop farmer who remarked that she was enjoying the calm before the storm.

It was early April and in just a few days she and her husband would be busy with fieldwork and planting at least through July, she said. It’s just the way it is when you have to battle Mother Nature to earn a living.

I’ve written before about the work ethic of farmers and how growing up on a dairy farm molded and shaped me. Cows had to be milked twice a day – every day – and had to be fed. The seasonal cycle of work meant crops were planted, harvested and put away for the winter. Dad was the chief executive (a working one at that), Mom was the herd manager (when she wasn’t teaching), and my brother and I – along with other family members – were the labor pool.

At times it was hard, physical work. Stacking hay bales, forking manure, and cutting and splitting wood were demanding. In between the predictable chores of cleaning the barn and feeding cows and calves were the unpredictable events of equipment breakdowns, sick animals and the relentless battle with the weather.

I opted for a career off the farm and became a journalist. Back in 1987 when I was cutting my journalistic teeth as a reporter for the Winona Daily News, I was interviewing a fairly new CEO at Watlow in Winona by the name of Keith Laken. Watlow – which makes temperature and power controllers for industrial use – had plants in other parts of the country and today has 13 facilities around the world.

I remember sharing with Laken – who had a long career with Watlow – that I grew up on a farm and had recently spent a summer during college working at a local factory during the day and working at the newspaper at night. He smiled and said I had the classic midwestern work ethic.

I asked him if that work ethic was real and he assured me it was, saying that the Winona plant was by far the most productive in the company – which he credited to his workforce.

But the world of the small family farms where I grew up has mainly disappeared and we’re now several generations past our immigrant ancestors who carved out a living through hard work and dedication.

Many people get their first work experience as a teenager, but that percentage has dropped as well. The percentage of teens between 16 and 19 who were enrolled in school and working hit a high of 31% in 1998 and had fallen to 17.6% in 2020.

Explanations for that drop range from focusing on more academic-building activities to competition from older workers. I’d even suggest that you can blame the ubiquitous nature of smartphones and the endless hours teens spend on those devices.

Whatever the cause, we have fewer teens holding jobs, which means they eventually enter the workforce without that valuable first-job experience. They have different expectations, which can be perceived by their employers as having a lower work ethic.

Is that perception true? In 2017, nearly two-thirds of business executives surveyed by Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce said the work ethic of Wisconsin employees had declined over the last 20 years. Sixteen percent said the work ethic had strongly declined and another 49% said it had somewhat declined.

Many connect the declining work ethic with a lack of soft skills. Soft skills are the personal attributes you need to succeed in the workplace. As opposed to hard skills — the specific training required to perform your job — soft skills are usually connected to how you work with others, having good communication skills, problem-solving skills, having a positive attitude, and being a team player.

You know, it’s all those things that Congress doesn’t have.

Can we re-instill work ethic in today’s younger workers? It’s something that you can’t learn in school — you either have it or you don’t. It’s the drive to be on time, do what takes to get the job done, and take responsibility for your actions.

At the risk of sounding like a curmudgeon, I say that has to start at home. Even if children don’t live on a farm, they can still be taught the value of doing chores in the form of housework and tasks at home.

The rewards could be limitless.

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