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Market norms bring confusion

Fascinated by human behavior, I'm loving *Predictably Irrational* (Harper Collins, 2008) — a book by Dan Ariely that has implications for education. "We live simultaneously in two different worlds," writes Ariely, "one where social norms prevail and the other where market norms make the rules." Social norms, Ariely explains, are the warm-and-fuzzies of our lives. When you freely volunteer to help someone because you care, you're operating in the world of social norms.

On the other hand, market norms — based on the fair exchange of goods and services — define the scope and sequence of every action before work begins. Market-based relationships tend to be cold and formal. "I'll commit to completing tasks for you, but I'm expecting compensation in return and there is a limit to the contributions that I'm willing to give."

Ariely argues that when work environments muddle the line between social and market norms, trouble is sure to follow — and that is a struggle that today's schools are wrestling with.

Think about it. Schooling has always been driven by social norms. Teachers often expect nothing more than smiles in exchange for their work. We stay after school for hours working with students or perfecting lessons, even if our efforts are uncompensated. Slogans like "To teach is to touch a life forever" and "To be important in the life of a child is our greatest reward" are worn like badges of honor in workrooms where self-sacrifice is a prerequisite to professionalism.

But society isn't satisfied with social norms defining the relationships between communities

and schools any longer. Afraid that our children are falling behind their peers in nations around the globe, leaders are demanding much more from those who spend their lives in the classroom. The government has set rigorous performance expectations, some districts use standardized test scores to evaluate teachers, and the drive toward accountability requires consequences for failing schools. Market-based decisions drive communities dedicated to "increasing effectiveness."

The challenge is that introducing market norms into settings built on social exchanges can have catastrophic consequences. Employees working in market environments are less willing to give the kinds of uncompensated effort that teachers are known for. Commitment wavers when new expectations are introduced without matching rewards. As Ariely writes, "People are willing to work free, and they are willing to work for a reasonable wage; but offer them just a small payment (for a complex task) and they will walk away."

For Ariely, addressing the confusion introduced to education by market norms requires skilled leadership and messaging. "Instead of focusing attention ... on test scores, salaries and competition, it might be better to instill in all of us a sense of purpose, mission, and pride in education. ... This way the students, teachers, and parents might see the larger point in education and become more enthusiastic and motivated about it."

Have you been investing enough time in inspiration to ensure that pride, care, and compassion continue to drive the work in your building — or are teachers being chased off by the curse of market norms? ♦



DUKE PHOTOGRAPHY

Dan Ariely

The book

Ariely, D. (2008). *Predictably irrational: The hidden forces that shape our decisions*. Pymble, Australia: Harper Collins.

Join the conversation with Bill by visiting www.nsd.org/learningblog/ and offering your opinion. Bill posts his provocative ideas frequently — be sure to return often.