

Success In Style: A Model Organization for Extending Access to Opportunity Through Training Rooted in the Beauty of Work

A recurring theme in the preaching of Pope Francis is the sanctity of work and the great danger of unemployment as “social damage” especially among the young. In a general audience in 2015, he pleaded, “Work — I repeat, in its many forms — is proper to the human person. It expresses the dignity of being created in the image of God.” He also suggested that “the lack of work also damages the spirit, like a lack of prayer damages practical activity.” (Francis, 2015.)

The Pontiff speaks as a voice among many along an ancient continuum of teachings by the Church on the nature of work in the life of the human person. Indeed, we have the words from the Old Testament (See Genesis 2:15; Sirach 34:26-27; Isaiah 58:3-7; Jeremiah 22:13, etc.) and of Christ himself presented to us throughout the gospels (See Matthew 20:1-16; Mark 2:7; Luke 3:10-14; Luke 12:13-21, etc.), the ideas presented in the landmark body of thought by Pope Leo XIII in *Rarem Novarum*, (Leo, 1981) and a remarkable clarification of how work is a part of full human development in *Populorum Progressio* by Pope Paul VI. (Paul VI, 1967)

St. Josemaria Escriva, in his very practical way of explaining doctrine to the lay faithful, brought the ideas on the dignity of work to a level which the humble laborer could understand even in his most monotonous kinds of work. “Christians should do all honest human work, be it intellectual or manual,” he said, “with the greatest perfection... for love of God's will and as a service to mankind.” He also explained the value of this same work in a way which might make a noble person crave more: “The world's divine dimension is made more visible and our human labor is thus incorporated into the marvelous work of Creation and Redemption. (Escriva, 1968)

Later, John Paul II, who had witnessed first-hand what happens when labor is de-humanized to mere capital, wrote about the contemporary issue of perpetual unemployment in *Laborem exercens* (a work in honor of the 90th Anniversary of *Rarem Novarum*). He observed, “it becomes an especially painful problem when the young, after preparing themselves with an appropriate cultural, technical, and professional formation, can’t find a job and see their sincere will to work frustrated, as well as their willingness to take up their responsibility for the economic and social development of the community.” (John Paul II, 1981)

If a lack of employment – even without the knowledge of the sanctifying nature of work - seeds frustration among the prepared, imagine the hopelessness it can create among those who face barriers to full employment because of a lack of preparation. Of course, it has been long understood that formal education, skills training, and assistance with access to opportunity significantly help to reduce the number of perennially unemployed among the poor and vulnerable. However, *hidden barriers*, such as a lack of “soft skills” including grooming, choosing and maintaining work-appropriate attire, and the many micro-skills of professional physical presence, (the root causes of which have been debated for decades) complicate the situation even further. (Barth & Wagner 2017)

Obviously, some institutions built for the Common Good in an inclusive economy address opportunity for employment through formal education and training. The problem which has been less addressed (or never officially acknowledged by some, dismissed by others, and justified by a radical few) is the need for training among the poorest and most vulnerable in our own communities in behaviors necessary to succeed in a “business-related” setting. Traditionally, the

professional presence skills of conversational eye contact, hand shaking, grooming, posture, and especially the choosing of appropriate dress have been passed from parent to child, or have been absorbed through repeated exposure to modeling by others already educated and/or employed as professionals.

Indeed, to many of the chronically unemployed and underemployed from backgrounds which lack this sort of training either because of cultural differences or lack of access to resources, the interactions they may eventually come to observe at the bank, in a courtroom, at a corporate meeting at even a low-paying job, or – most acutely – at a job interview, may be viewed as frustrating episodes veiled in mystery and full of secret knowledge and, at times, even intrigue.

Of course, the rules for conducting oneself at a business meeting or interview are not always intuitive in this changing economy, and there are many, even among the highly educated, who feel the same way about professional presence as those who are on the outside of our economy. (There is a long tradition of rejecting formal attire among academics.) In business, however, an understanding of what appears to be secret codes and signaling, must be understood and rendered unthreatening for anyone to participate with any confidence or degree of credibility, and the ability to groom and choose appropriate clothing is important for entry into the workforce.

(Ruetzler, Taylor, Reynolds, Baker, & Killen, 2012)

Clothes do Not Make the Man but They Help

The term “dress for success” is now a clichéd slogan which has deflated further into material for the comic and satirical, and the book from which it originated is regarded as a cultural curiosity piece, known for its author’s zealous attempt to quantify every bit of sartorial advice given. The

basic premise, however, still holds true, and although recent thinking has dismissed its advice as “middle class,” thus perpetuating the uneven balance of power between populations so that barriers to full employment can continue unchecked, (Ostrander, 1980; Cummins & Blum, 2015) there has been a growing body of evidence that the practice of some very basic behaviors do indeed elicit positive results such as hiring and promotions. Therefore, it is a serious disservice to this population to dismiss these soft skills as undesirable because of their alleged origins (the “Patriarchy,” “advantaged white women,” “neoliberal maternalism” or the “thin”). (Cummins & Blum, 2015)

Specifically, Forsyth (1984) showed that a woman’s choice of dress can influence perception of management characteristics, and Ruetzier et al. (2012) proved that certain choices of dress can affect an interviewer’s decision to hire. Additionally, Warhust (2000) studied what’s been termed “aesthetic labor” and concluded that the clothing and appearance of poor women negatively affected their entrance into the workforce. Barth and Wagner (1990) found that grooming is especially important for women in job selection, and Mack and Rainey (1990) found that grooming is important even when decision makers report that is not. Stewart, Dustin, Barrick, and Darnold (2008) raised the status of the handshake as a necessary skill, and researchers Howlett, Pine, Tracey, and Moggridge (2017) found that even posture can shape perceptions on candidate competency.

Although current “work attire” even for the highly educated can include anything from faded blue jeans to a made-to-measure suit, the operative word for distinguishing the appropriate from the inappropriate for the less educated who wish to enter the workforce is “formal.” (Slepian,

Ferber, Gold & Rutchick, 2015) Structure in a garment still connotes seriousness, cleanliness still connotes virtue, and garments which signal the hallmarks of the businessperson (collared shirts and jackets or even hosiery and ties) neutralize class and status to a theoretically “even playing field” for the candidate in his or her chances at job selection. In short, *formal* implies a tone that is not leisure or personal. Therefore, it is still very prudent to avoid garments for work which signal activities such as ball playing, hiking, motorcycling, swimming, golfing (unless its “business casual) or “partying.” (It is not surprising to note that golf, which has made its way into business apparel, holds a great barrier to entry for the poor. This observation gives credence to the popular idea that the garments for leisure time signal class and status much more than garments traditionally chosen for business settings.) (Hahn, 2016)

As Anne Hollender (1994) observed in her history of fashion, *Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress*, only the suit has consistently remained the *sine qua non* for professional presence across the majority of industries for a very long period of time. In fact, despite its recent decline in use and abandonment by some “style tribes,” (Steele, 2000) it is currently enjoying a serious revival by younger men and even some women for leisure time (Beuscher, 2017), perhaps because, as Hollendar explained, “the staying power of male tailoring shows how visual form can have its own authority, its own self-perpetuating symbolic and emotional force.” (Hollendar 1994) Or, these younger enthusiasts may have experienced what Slepian et al. (2015) found when they observed an effect of formal clothing on cognitive measures, a refinement of the discovery by Howlett, Neil, Pine & Orakcioglu (2013) that a well-fitting suit (bespoke) elicits more positive responses in a first impression than an ill-fitting (cheap) one.

Whether or not it's the suit which remains the faithful signaler of all that is virtuous in business, the most revealing measure for whatever should be decided upon as "appropriate" for the dignity of any kind work will be the behavior of the person wearing the garment as measured through self-reporting on levels of confidence and ability, and the observations of actual behavior. In recent years, stemming from the research on "embodied cognition," there is a very small but growing body of evidence that the garment (and therefore the ideas associated with the garment) can affect performance on cognitive tasks. Termed "Enclothed Cognition," researchers Galinsky and Moskowitz (2012) found a significant difference in cognitive performance between a group of subjects who believed the white lab coat they each wore belonged to a painter, and a group of subjects who believed the white lab coat they each wore belonged to a physician. The group wearing the "physician" coat performed significantly better than the "painter" and control groups, and the researchers speculated that the effect was mainly due to unconscious symbolic associations with the job label given to the white lab coat. Of course, most of our grandmothers could have told us that, but currently all sorts of sartorial enthusiasts are beginning to demonstrate that the (uniform, suit, dressy clothes) have significant effects on many aspects of human behavior.

Before moving on to the logistics of teaching the skills of professional presence, some obvious questions should be answered: What happens when the symbolism of any dress changes? And, even if it never fully changes for the sartorially conservative aesthetic of banking, law, accounting, and business management, how does an organization help someone who is attempting to enter an industry which prides itself on an aesthetic other than the formal, business-like, or traditional? (For example, a candidate would never wear a business suit to an interview

with a fashion marketing firm, even if the job is reception or secretarial work.) How does the organization know the aesthetic or company culture and, therefore, the correct choices for attire? How does the organization know that its clients are experiencing the benefits of enclotted cognition?

The answer to each question above is related to one very critical component of any training in this area: Personalized training almost to the level of mentoring. The organization must attract and retain both male and female trainers from a great variety of backgrounds and industries who are willing to provide more than simple style advice. They must bring their own professional expertise to any consultation, personalizing the advice, and connecting to the client on a human level. It is only through this kind of interaction and investment of self, that the trainer can elicit honest and heart-felt responses from the client. This is the core of truly effective professional presence training, and it should have the goal of sharing the experience of work as something good and beautiful.

A History of the “Dress for Success” Model

Any one-on-one training session of this nature needs a formal structure from which to tap resources and share experiences with other trainers. Most of the formal solutions set up to promote professional presence skills are built around the distribution of free or low-cost suits, suit-like separates, or what is more often referred to as “work-appropriate” clothing. The trend began after the so called “welfare-to-work” reform of 1996 when many benefits for the poor were tied to their search for work. Organizations such as *Dress for Success* (founded the year

after in New York City) and then *Suited for Success*, *Suited for Change*, or *Bottomless Closet* became pipelines for donated clothing to dress men and (mostly) women from disadvantaged backgrounds who were looking for employment. Most of these “clients” were referred from job training programs, private services such as domestic abuse shelters and food banks, or government-run programs and institutions such as homeless shelters and prisons.

The earliest efforts to dress men and women in need for job searches had begun earlier on the very local level in many church basements or on site at food banks and emergency shelters. However, the sheer volume of people in need and the logistics involved with collecting, sorting, sizing, storing, and distributing the clothing became far too overwhelming for generally very small groups of volunteers already committed to other missions. Quite rapidly, nonprofit organizations, such as the ones mentioned above, were founded specifically for women to fill the gap left by other groups attempting this great task. In general, these organizations focused on the complete “dress for success” model, including suit fittings, practice in handshaking and posture during an introduction, and even help with resume writing.

In 1999, five of these organizations formed a larger group, *The Women’s Alliance*, to “leverage their collective knowledge and experience to provide a greater impact and support for small independent non profits providing work clothes and interview clothes to women seeking economic independence and leaving welfare.” (ACDN Website, 2018) This new organization grew, and by 2014 was rebranded as Alliance of Career Development Nonprofits (ACDN) to reflect its support for varied career services and greater inclusion of male clients. ACDN now exists to train and educate its member organizations, coordinate large scale group purchases of

needed clothing (generally larger sized clothes), and coordinate clothing donations with manufacturers.

Today, nonprofit organizations dedicated to the dress for success mission, both inside and outside the ACDN, are located in every state in the U.S. One such organization, Success In Style, a member of the ACDN and founded in 2002 in the Maryland suburbs, sharpens its focus on the experience of beauty.

A Day in the Life of Success In Style

Unlike most other dress for success-like organizations which are founded by business professionals and career philanthropists, Success In Style (SIS) was started by two fashion designers, Patti Francomacaro and Jeannette Kendall, each with formal training in fashion design and merchandising. They had very little experience with social service organizations, at-risk populations, or even philanthropic work in general, and initially, they worked from their homes, placing a great deal of attention on rescuing only professional and “beautiful” clothing from many pounds of cast-off or donated clothing.

Currently, SIS operates a headquarter “studio” at the Historic Savage Mill retail complex along an industrialized stretch of Route 1 along the Howard County/Prince Georges County border in suburban Maryland. Along with this studio for clients who receive career wear and very basic professional presence training, SIS operates four second hand clothing retail establishments mixed into the small businesses, cafes, restaurants, antique dealers, and artist studios of the

complex: *Charity's Closet* (women's clothing all priced at \$5 per item); *Phil(anthropy)'s closet* (men's clothing all priced at \$5 per item); *Charity's First Picks* (higher end used women's clothing and accessories priced accordingly); and *Cherie Amour* (donated wedding dresses sold with complimentary private bridal consultations). Proceeds from these four shops provide over 90% of the financial support for the organization's entire operation, and items for sale are clothes which had been donated by individuals and companies but were not deemed "career-appropriate" enough for the studio by SIS volunteers.

Although the Savage Mill complex is on a bus route and close to a major connecting artery between Baltimore and Washington DC, the leadership of SIS had discovered that in order to reach some populations, studios had to be established closer to centers of government services. For example, men and women who were processing out of the Maryland Correctional Facilities (prisons) or the Anne Arundel County Courthouse need to have services on site. Therefore, SIS established a studio in a space provided by the Anne Arundel County Courthouse. Similar to the studio at the Savage Mill complex, the studio is set up as a boutique, with clothing and accessories arranged by size, dressing room space, and a consultation meeting area.

Studios were also set up at the Howard County Services Center in Laurel, Maryland, and at the Job Corps locations in Woodstock, Maryland; Laurel, Maryland; and the District of Columbia. Each studio follows the same boutique pattern and is staffed at least one day a week with volunteer mentors, referred to as "consultants." Clients are referred to the organization by partner agencies such as the *Foreign Immigrant Resource Network (FIRN)*, *Maryland DLLR*, *Veterans Community Resource Center*, *Legal Aid Bureau*, *Anne Arundel Workforce Development*, *Anne*

Arundel Social Services, Community College of Baltimore County, Fort Meade Army Community Service, Howard County Public Schools, Columbia Workforce Center, and dozens of others.

The Difference is Beauty

Why choose beauty as the differentiating factor in the Unique Value Proposition of SIS?

Francomacaro and Kendall would agree that the boost of cognitive benefits and extra confidence from the suit is due to the client's symbolic associations between the suit and professionalism, industriousness, intelligence, and even dignity. But they would also insist that the feelings of "being beautiful" are what's especially needed for a client who is also coming out of poverty, prison, substance abuse, prostitution, or an abusive relationship. They believe that the concept of self as beautiful is a prerequisite for an understanding of one's own dignity, even more so than the concept of self as professional, industrious, or intelligent. The beauty which SIS fosters and which the client inherently appreciates is not simply in the service of sexual attraction (although this is indeed a minor part of the aesthetic) but touches upon the person's sense of value and worthiness, i.e. a person to behold as an experience of beauty for others. (It is true that there's a difference between men and women in degree and kind, but that is a discussion for another time.)

Despite the organization's strong opinions on the dignity of work, the truth and goodness it reveals about the human person made in the image and likeness of God, and, most especially, the beauty which its experience reflects about God as our Father and Source of dignity, the mission of SIS is quite daunting. Practically, these ideas demand that the fashion chosen for the clients of SIS, the environment where the services are offered, and the tone of every single consultation *be*

beautiful (and therefore dignified and positive) despite the chaotic nature of a “store-front” nonprofit, the unpredictability of volunteer time and commitment, and any inevitable lack of resources.

What that looks like in the studio itself is the work of 3 paid employees, 12 nearly full time volunteers, and 120 periodic volunteers. The pattern for establishing a studio is the following:

1. A space is located and rent is negotiated. Generally, Jeannette Kendall reconfigures the layout and designs the space to create a true boutique which includes at least two dressing rooms, an area for the consultation, and an area slightly out of view from the public for processing and storage. Fixtures (lighting, racks, furniture, fabrics, window treatments, etc.) are acquired through purchasing, repurposing, or “dumpster diving.” All elements (color, texture, line) are chosen with a guiding theme so that there is harmony, completeness, and brightness in the space.
2. Contractors and volunteers execute the design plans which usually include carpentry, floor coverings, dry wall or wall restoration, installation of light fixtures, painting, wall papering, and decorating.
3. Inventory is displayed in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Clothing and accessories are carefully chosen for a.) perfect or nearly perfect condition; b.) professional tone; c.) perception as current or “in style.”
4. Consultants are recruited and trained. Training eventually involves “shadowing” a more experienced consultant.

5. Grand opening usually includes a press release, communication with our partners, additional clothing drives, and, of course, a ribbon cutting ceremony.

When the studio is fully functioning, a coordinator will schedule clients through partner agencies, local churches, and cold calls from the public. A consultation follows the pattern:

1. When the client arrives, the consultant greets the client at the door. Handshake, smile, eye contact, and posture are addressed through modeling and coaching immediately, perhaps right after the greeting. Sitting down at a clean table, the consultant and client discuss the client's circumstances (perhaps life story), and current needs. Special attention is paid to the kind of work the client is looking for.
2. The consultant states the objectives of the session, focusing primarily on the most pressing need of the client. ("We'll get you a complete outfit for this interview," or "Let's find you a mini-wardrobe for this new job," etc.)
3. The consultant guides the client through a styling session which involves discerning fashion personality, recommending best colors, and discussing basic strategies for balance and proportion in the silhouette. A card stock guide is used and personalized for the client with the consultant's notes. The guide also lists what is appropriate for career apparel so that the consultant may guide the client through the information if necessary. Makeup may be applied and hair may be styled at the headquarter studio if appropriate.
4. The consultant and client peruse the inventory together. The consultant gathers garments and places them in the dressing room. As the client tries outfits, the consultant gives feedback on why an outfit is appropriate or not.

5. Typically, a client is supplied with 1-2 pairs of socks (men and women), 1-2 undershirts (men), 1-2 bras and hosiery (women), 1-2 dress shirts or blouses, 1-2 bottoms (trousers or skirts for women), 1-2 sport coats or blazers (men), jackets (women) - OR 1-2 complete suits (men and women), 2 ties (men), 1 pair of coordinated dress shoes, 1 handbag (women), 1 briefcase (men and women), earrings and/or necklaces and/or bracelets and/or watches and/or fashion scarf (women), and cufflinks and/or watches (men). Occasionally, a donation of unused cosmetics in a small bag will be distributed as well.
6. The consultant narrates why items were chosen, how to wear the items, and how to take care of them. Some men will be instructed on tying a tie and some women will be instructed on the wearing of hosiery. Referrals are given for any hemming, repair, or pressing which cannot be done in the studio. (SIS provides Zips Dry Cleaner coupons.)
7. The consultant answers questions from the client. The client is given a chance to check him or herself in a full length mirror, and a photograph is taken (usually using the client's phone as well).
8. The consultant re-greets the client, practicing handshake, eye contact, posture, body language etc. This role-playing can be adjusted for the client's particular situation. The mentor coaches the client for any necessary modifications, and by this point, issues regarding grooming would have been addressed and any necessary dental or hair styling referrals will have been made. The client parts with the clothing, accessories, style guide, and follow up information.
9. The client returns to the dressing room to change back into his or her street clothing and the consultant bags the career clothing.

10. The consultant completes a record of the consultation and confirms completion with the referring partner.

Measuring success for this organization is easily quantified with the numbers of clothing distributed to clients, numbers of clients, and job placement rates, (See SIS Performance Measures Chart for Howard County Government, 2017) but measuring the deeper and more lasting effects is another matter. Certainly, this measurement hinges on the quality and outcomes of any given training mentorship, so that sincere initial dialogue, follow up, and further dialogue between the consultant and client are both the tools for reporting and the vehicles for success. Ultimately, one major objective would be that clients continue as consultants within the organization or ones like it, and that a community is established; one that renews the surrounding culture, family by family, to understand that work is something good and beautiful. Measuring this involves setting up methodical, long term tools which center around these mentor relationships.

Success in Style will continue to provide professional presence skills and career wear to men and women in the foreseeable future because of the generosity of its volunteers. What must change for SIS to “renew the surrounding culture” is to recruit and retain a greater number of trainers who have the capacity to form personal, mentor-like relationships, and who bring experience from their own professions (business, medicine, education, etc.). Further research must be completed to demonstrate the qualities any mentor must have to meaningfully connect with and inspire a client in this particular context, including an extension of the research by Mitchell, Eby, and Ragins (2015) concerning the nature of mentoring young men, and if the preponderance of

older and affluent women among the volunteer ranks of this and most other dress for success-like organizations may be stunting the breadth and depth of connection and inspiration for the male clientele.

Beautiful People

Volunteer consultants are continually amazed at the stories which clients reveal about their lives, so much so, that the consultants walk away with a lot more than simply a volunteer experience.

Three stories (with names changed and circumstances obscured) are presented below:

Ana came to our Savage Mill studio as a referral from FIRN (Foreign Immigrant Resource Network). Ana, a registered nurse in her late thirties, had narrowly escaped her west African country during its civil war. She had arrived in Baltimore with her husband, three of her seven children (she couldn't locate her other children before escaping), and no clothing for the current winter season in Baltimore (it was an especially harsh winter that year). Her objective for SIS was to find enough clothing for the interviews she had as part of her search for a job as a practical nurse. She spoke candidly and gratefully with the consultant, sharing her story but hesitant to receive too many items. The consultant asked Ana if she had a coat. Ana said yes, but the consultant was inspired to ask to see the coat. Ana proudly pulled out a windbreaker! So, Ana received, in addition to a mini wardrobe for her interviews, a full length wool coat.

Ana found her other children through FIRN, secured a job at the local hospital as a practical nurse, and entered school for her certification as an RN in the U.S. Now, Ana is working as a registered nurse for the county hospital and lives with all seven of her children.

Jose, a trained carpenter in his mid thirties, insisted that the consultant at our Howard County Multi Service Center studio meet with both him and his wife for a consultation in preparation for an interview for a job as a foreman. The consultant asked Jose if he would prefer to wear a pair of trousers and dress shirt instead of a complete suit for the interview. His wife hesitated in her answer, but he quickly replied, "Of course not! I think a suit is always best."

Two weeks later, Jose reached out to the consultant to say that he had gotten the job. He added, "They said I got the job because I was the only candidate wearing a suit!"

Tanya, an African American woman in her early thirties, was finally out of prison and out of a life of drug addiction, prostitution, and petty crime. She had been in prison many times before, each time praying to God that she would die. During her very last time in prison, when she realized she wouldn't die anytime soon, she told God that He had "better get her in touch with the right people" to straighten her out. He did: She met women who belonged to the group, "The National Women's Prisons Project," and they encouraged her in her journey of renewal and re-education. She came to the Savage Mill studio for a consultation to find an outfit to wear as a speaker for the group's Mother's Day celebration for inmates at the local prison.

The consultant noted that Tanya rarely spoke during the consultation, but when she faced the mirror in her new outfit, she shared that all her life – especially when she was high or prostituting – people would tell her that she was nothing; not even trash. Finally, before the mirror, she simply said, “Now I am somebody.”

Conclusion

Success In Style is a model organization for extending access to opportunity to the poor and vulnerable through training in professional presence, including grooming, posture, greeting, and the selection of career wear. The immediate value of this organization and others like it is that both men and women find employment and, as the Church teaches, the expression of the “dignity of being created in the image of God.” Success In Style has been designed with the enhanced mission to guide each person to an understanding of the dignity of himself and his work through the experience of beauty: The beauty of a professional appearance; the beauty of the surrounding space for the consultation; and the beauty of an inspirational mentor relationship.

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