

## **SPIRITUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE**

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### **Summary**

The emergence of spirituality in modern business has its roots in multiple sources. Both the separation of work and community during the industrial revolution and the volatile changes in the era of the “new economy”, as well as other forces past and present, have shaped the desire for more meaning in the workplace. Spiritual and meaningful activities and work processes, the ways in which leadership can be more spiritually oriented, and the development of an organizational culture of spirituality, are being explored through both research and practice.

### **1. Introduction**

In the past decade, a paradigm for modern society emerged which has been described by some as being as significant as the scientific revolution in the Western world, representing “a profound change occurring simultaneously in all units and sectors – the culture, individuals, organizations, the global economy.” It is characterized by an increased emphasis on the inter-connectedness of everything, as well as a shift in the perceived locus of *authority* and *cause* from external to internal.

This integrated, personalized perspective has expressed itself within the business world and in organizations, underscoring the importance of self-management, the dynamism of whole systems and the pursuit of higher ideals in relation to one’s work – from Peter

Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* to Steven Covey's popular *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Then came Tom Chappell's *The Soul of A Business: Managing for Profit and the Common Good* in 1993, David Whyte's *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America* and Matthew Fox's *The Reinvention of Work: A New Vision of Livelihood for Our Time*, and many others have followed. Overall, spirituality has been the fastest growing segment of the book market since 1990. By the mid-90's, many conferences, books, newsletters, and non-profit organizations had sprung up, as well as some recent academic research, focusing on issues of wholeness and spiritual values in relation to work.

A November, 1999 article in *Business Week* suggested that what is happening is a reflection of broader trends: "People are working the equivalent of over a month more each year than they did a decade ago, the workplace churches and town squares – is where American social phenomena are showing up first." Many people -- westerners in particular -- experience a certain fragmentation in their lives, in which work has become compartmentalized and 'just a paycheck,' as opposed to a place to find deeper meaning, satisfaction and connection. One recent poll found that American managers say they want a stronger sense of meaning and fulfillment on the job, even more than they want money and time off. A 1994 International Workplace Values Study conducted in over 18 countries, sponsored by Industry Week and The New Leaders, a California-based business newsletter,<sup>2</sup> supports this

In addition, a growing interest in systems thinking and chaos theory found in the New Economy share some common ground with religion and spirituality, suggesting that science is partly about inexplicable and paradoxical phenomena. And, the self-organizing, nonlinear nature of the cyber-age and the Internet is pushing people to take more unconventional, intuitive approaches to their work.

Alan Briskin, author of *The Stirring of Soul in the Workplace*, suggests that people desire, at the level of their soul, to seek *logos* (literally *the word* in Greek), which is associated with qualities such as meaning, understanding, voice, language and expression. It seeks to understand the principles of wholeness and universal action. He suggests that individuals require both reflective time and dialogue with others to achieve *logos* – time and space to wonder, imagine, and see meaning emerge from apparent disorder. Without reflective time, our worldview becomes fragmented and chaotic.

Simultaneously, we need dialogue with each other that evokes a greater whole – dialogue, from *dia* and *logos*, meaning *across the meaning of the word*. "Without a capacity for meaningful human dialogue, the information age will split, chunk and cluster bits of information just as we once broke down mechanical parts for assembly. The ability to hold onto the whole, to create coherence, happens in relation with others."

## 1.1 Background

The emergence of spirituality in modern business has its roots in multiple sources. One, the slash-and-burn economics of the 1970's and 1980's generated a workforce strongly antagonistic to certain corporate policies, which caused prolonged stress leading to

employee burnout, increased absenteeism, medical leave and turnover costs. When a more recent prosperous, tight labor market resulted in an effort to retain employees, the subsequent organizational sensitivity to workforce interests has revealed a preference among employees to work for socially responsible, ethically driven organizations that allow the “whole self” to be brought to work. Another source of employer motivation stems from advances in science and health care, which has established the role of an integrated, wholistic approach to health (including the healing power of the mind and ‘spiritual fitness’), which can mitigate the effects of stress and reduce health care expenses.

Finally, the rapid rise of social interest in such matters is correlated with a generation of baby-boomers experiencing mid-life review, although the craving for meaning in the workplace spans all generations. Large multinational companies such as Exxon, AT&T, Boeing, Motorola, Levi-Strauss, Intel, Microsoft, as well as the National Institute of Health and the World Bank are a few of the organizations that have found value in exploring and implementing spirituality-based themes within their operations. It is often operationalized as “values-based business.”

But the history for this movement goes much further back. Prior to about 1800, human work for many was understood as part of a larger spiritual order: God had fashioned a world, and humans imitated that labor through the manual arts and crafts. From agriculture to smithing, ancient lore is filled with the mythic or sacred dimensions of work and craft. In the west, this was celebrated through festivals, religious services and within craft guilds, where the apprentice was initiated not only into the material techniques of the craft, but also into its spiritual significance as well. Leaders, historically, were also often perceived as carrying a spiritual task or duty.

The dramatic changes in how people worked and lived in the second half of the nineteenth century were driven by four key processes: the move from farm to factory, the dramatic increase in wage labor, the explosive growth of the cities, and the massive increase in immigration. Each of these social processes solidified the relationship between work and working for someone else. Prior to this time, many individuals worked for themselves as farmers and trades people. Gradually, with the industrial revolution, the relationship of work to creating something, seeing the result of one’s efforts in a finished product, or taking pride in one’s labor, was lost. In addition, the factory started to separate the work of the tradesperson from the community, so that one’s work and personal life became less and less intertwined.

Briskin comments that as we are “born into a century of valuing technology and production over soulfulness and relationship, we carry a little bit of Frederick Taylor within us.” Through the discipline of efficiency and scientific management, focused on controlling the worker, Taylor sought to sacrifice the individual to the industrial workplace. He was “motivated by a dream of Puritanism, embedded in the strategies of efficiency, hoping that all impurities could be purified in the heat of right thinking.” Briskin contends that organizations that are reengineering today are still grappling with Taylor’s legacy. There remains a belief that once reengineered; organizations will run like the clockworks they were meant to be. Implementation of new technology,

redesign of work processes, and clearer accountability of employees still holds a seductive allure for those who wish to control the workplace.

As Margaret Wheatley points out in *Leadership and the New Science*, we have come to confuse control with order and a mechanistic predictability with the patterns and flow of dynamic living systems. “For most of history ... management has been defined in terms of its control functions. Lenin spoke for many managers when he said: ‘Freedom is good, but control is better.’”

## 1.2 Defining Values and Distinctions

One of the most interesting and provocative areas of the emerging spirit at work “movement” is the definitional side of it. What is meant by ‘spirituality’ in the workplace does it imply religion, or particular organizational values, or simply an individual search for meaning?

It is still unclear what it means in practice. Spirituality is difficult to define because of its ineffability and because of the pluralist nature of the term. While spirituality may be broadly related to some desirable individual and organizational outcomes, it is still not clear what aspect(s) of spirituality, or which elements of it, are most important. The term itself means different things to different people. It can be seen as a journey towards the sacred, however “sacred” is defined. It can also be seen as a search for meaning, or as an experience of connectedness: to others, to the world, or to something transcendent.

For some, this transcendent is God, and their spiritual path is a particular religion. For others, alternative transcendent concepts, belief systems and spiritual practices define their spiritual path.

The dictionary offers several definitions, including: 1) of the spirit or soul, as distinguished from the body or material matters; 2) of, from, or concerned with the intellect; intellectual; and 3) characterized by the ascendancy of the spirit; showing much refinement of thought and feeling. Another version offers: 1) the animating or life-giving principle within a human being; 2) the part of a human being associated with the mind or feelings, as distinguished from the physical body; and 3) the real sense of significance of something. These definitions suggest that the spiritual includes that which gives life, offers a sense of significance, and exists within the mind or feeling.

If there is in fact a common values base that defines spirituality at work, there is not yet real consensus about what specific values define it. It is still quite broad, in some respects seen as whatever the viewer wishes to see. However, there is a strong push amongst researchers, teachers and consultants in the field to be more rigorous about clarifying what it is and is not.

The more thorny issue has to do with the relationship between religion and spirituality, and there is much current discourse and debate. In general, spirituality is considered “non-denominational, inclusive, universally applicable and embracing of diverse expression, while emphasizing interconnectedness of being. Religion tends to be

viewed as dogmatic, exclusive, divisive and narrow.” Paul Gibbons offers another interesting characterization asserts that contemporary spirituality has become ‘pluralistic’ and that this pluralism “substitutes a fragmented assessment of spirituality for the Judeo-Christian concept,” but one which accommodates a diversity of spiritual paths. He suggests that modern spirituality has three types: religious, secular, and mystical. Secular spirituality is earth-centered, nature-centered, and humanistic. The mystical tradition is described as a sub-discipline within Christian, Judaic and Islamic tradition, as well as including most Eastern spiritualities. While religion and spirituality have a close relationship in this typology, each individual religion is viewed as having specific beliefs and practices which, by definition, do not apply to others.

In addition, spirituality as defined today does not rely upon a traditional belief in God, or God-concept. It does depend on a belief system that transcends rationality, that believes in a power beyond the self or the ego be that nature, art, humanity, or a Higher Power or Higher Self. Some current commentators feel that “God has been pluralized into a general spirituality and identified with virtually anything whatsoever,” thus creating a “conceptual emptiness.”

Nonetheless, to the extent managers and executives of organizations have been polled about this question, religion is viewed as a highly inappropriate expression at work, whereas spirituality is perceived as appropriate for discussion and/or exploration. The various distinctions currently being made in the field, as well as the open-ended nature of discussions about it, suggest its exploratory, adolescent nature.

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