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Spirituality in the Workplace: What it is Why it Matters How to Make it Work for You

Foreword

I am often asked if spirituality in the workplace is a movement, and my answer is, yes, it is. Individuals and corporate leaders show a steadily increasing interest in creating organizations that nurture the human spirit. Yet, walk into almost any corporation these days and you still find an organization full of fear, anger, resistance to change, and employees who are there just for the paycheck. The best employees are usually looking to go elsewhere, and the employees who are not so marketable are trying to stay under the radar and just hang on for dear life. Is this a formula for high productivity and high performance? Is this the way to create a sustainable organization? I think not.

This book offers another way, the way of spirituality in the workplace. This new paradigm is a natural evolution of earlier management theories and approaches, and Joan Marques, Satinder Dhiman, and Richard King are pioneers in this evolution. A very brief overview of the development of management thought over the past century can help provide some context.

The earliest management theories were developed by people in the early 20th century with an engineering approach, most notably Frederick Taylor. His focus was on the physical effectiveness and efficiency of workers. He saw the human body as an extension of the machine, and studied ways to utilize the human machine with as little wasted energy and motion as possible.

The next phase of management thought came out of the Hawthorne studies and similar work in the 1930s and 1940s. These studies actually originated as Tayloristic industrial engineering studies of the effects of lighting on worker efficiency. However, there was an anachronistic finding that led the researchers to conclude that emotional and social needs were just as important to high performance as physical efficiency.

In the late 1970s and throughout the 1990s, an expansion of management theories included focus not just on the workers as physical beings, or as emotional beings, but also as thinking beings. With the advent of quality circles and similar approaches came the recognition that workers did not check their minds at the door when they came to work, but, in fact, they were actually the experts at their jobs and probably knew more about how to make things better than the engineers.

As our concept of what it means to be human is expanding, so too are our management theories expanding. With recent research in quantum physics and holistic medicine, people are coming to accept that humans are also spiritual beings, that we are the sum of body, emotion, mind, and spirit. Pioneers such as the authors of this book have been teaching management theories and practices that now include our spiritual nature.

As crass as this may sound, spirituality is the new competitive edge. Most organizations are physically efficient, and they attend to the emotional and social needs of employees to some degree. They have learned how to involve employees in decision making and to tap their intellectual abilities. But how many have learned to tap into the human spirit?

When I talk about spirituality and human spirit, I mean two things: first, I mean a connection to something greater than ourselves, whatever you might call it; second, I mean a sense of meaning and purpose that guides our lives.

This book makes a strong business case as well as a moral case for the importance of spirituality in the workplace. It also provides you with practical steps and models that will help you to unleash that creative and passionate energy that comes from the Transcendent. Organizations that learn how to unleash this energy will be more innovative, will be able to use intuition to make effective decisions, will be able to attract and retain high-integrity and high-performing employees, and will make a positive difference in their communities and in the world.

Part of my own personal mission has been to identify organizations that are open about their commitment to spirituality in the workplace and to tell their stories. With the help of many wonderful people, we have created the International Spirit at Work Awards; as of 2006 we have identified and honored 36 organizations in eleven different countries. As you read this book, you may want to refer to the case studies of these organizations at www.spiritatwork.org.

I see these organizations as akin to Roger Bannister's four minute mile. Before Roger ran a mile in less than four minutes, the experts of the day believed that it was humanly impossible to run the mile faster than four minutes. It had never been done. But once Roger broke that barrier, several people were able to replicate his feat in the following year. Most people, when they hear the phrase *spirituality in the workplace*, say, "Isn't that an oxymoron?" They think that it is impossible to work in an organization with principles of love, kindness, humility, and compassion. Yet these 36 organizations prove that it is not only possible, it is good business.

It is my sincere hope that, as you read this book, you find the courage and inspiration to help your organization to live in alignment with deeper spiritual principles, and that you find creative ways to nurture the human spirit of all those who are touched by your organization. The world desperately needs a shift in consciousness in business, and every organization that takes steps in the direction of greater spirituality in the workplace is making a significant difference.

Judi Neal, Ph.D.

Executive Director
Association for Spirit at Work
East Haven, CT
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Chapter 1

Meaning of Spirituality in the Workplace

One day a man came across three stonecutters working in a quarry. Each one was cutting out a block of stone. Curious, he asked the first stonecutter what he was doing. "What? Are you blind?" the stonecutter shouted, "Can't you see, I'm cutting this stupid piece of stone." Shocked, but still no wiser, the man turned to the second stonecutter and asked him what he was doing. "I am cutting this block of stone to make sure that its sides are straight and smooth so that the builder can build a straight wall." Feeling a lot better, but still not really any wiser, the man turned to the third stonecutter, who seemed to be the happiest of the three, and asked him what he was doing. "I am building a cathedral," the third stonecutter replied.

This chapter will explain the confusion that lies at the root of business executives' possible aversion to refer to their workplace as a spiritual one. Since we are reviewing various study findings, as well as an extensive amount of literature in this book, we will start by presenting our assumptions here before engaging into definitions of the phenomenon. Spirituality in the workplace will then be reviewed as an emerging paradigm in the third part of this chapter, after which we will end with the presentation of various definitions and perceived crucial factors for a spiritual workplace.

The Confusion

Although the term *spirituality in the workplace* has increasingly gained popularity in the past few years, there still seems to be much confusion around the topic. According to Judi Neal, this confusion occurs predominantly when managers confuse *spirituality* with *religion*.⁽¹⁾ Some authors believe that you can have a deepening of the spiritual experience at work without shoving a particular point of view down people's throats.⁽²⁾ Others feel that the language of spirituality in the workplace is grounded in the traditions of religious imagery.⁽³⁾

*The bond that links
your true family is
not one of blood,
but of respect and
joy in each other's
life.*

Richard Bach

From the foregoing, it is apparent that confusion exists regarding the meaning of the terms *spirituality* and *religion*; the term *spirituality* clearly means various things to various people.⁽⁴⁾ You may find one author who explains that spirituality at work is “something we all possess,”⁽⁵⁾ while another refers to spirituality in the context of employees who understand themselves as spiritual beings whose souls need nourishment at work, and who wish to experience a sense of purpose and meaning in their work and a sense of connectedness to one another and to their workplace community.⁽⁶⁾ While none of these explanations is wrong, they demonstrate a wide divergence of opinions as to what spirituality at work really means.

Accordingly, one of our main purposes in studying spirituality at work was to establish a more general perspective on the topic by formulating a broadly acceptable definition of spirituality in the workplace, and then to identify the essential elements of a spiritual workplace. Our initial study focused on business executives, but as we continued to gain information and insights in the ensuing years, we expanded our findings based on the views of middle, lower, and non-managerial workers in addition to executives.

Assumptions

To ensure consistency in understanding the topic, we start by outlining the assumptions we went on throughout our studies. Although these assumptions may seem minimal to some and redundant to others, they have served to establish a clear perspective for the research:

1. The first assumption is that spirituality exists in the workplace. An abundance of material proves that authors, leaders, and members of the general workforce at various levels increasingly recognize and discuss this trend. Based on the widespread availability of material on the subject, we see no need to prove the existence of spirit at work, as we take it to be an established fact.
2. The second assumption is the existence of both elements included in the concept of *spirituality in the workplace*:

- a. Spirituality has been an intriguing topic throughout human existence. As indicated above, spirituality means many different things to many different people.⁽⁷⁾ The enormous body of literature on the topic of spirituality, of which we will review a small selection later in this chapter, serves as evidence of the broad interest and variety in experience existing around it. Because there is so much material already available on the topic, the scope of our study precludes an in-depth explanation of the broader topic of spirituality.

The foundations of a person are not in matter but in spirit.
Ralph Waldo Emerson

- b. We define the *workplace* as a meeting place of the people employed by an organization. The variety of workplaces has only expanded in past decades, from a growing number of possible physical locations to an even greater number of virtual ones. For this reason, we can accept workplaces as a generally established fact.
3. The third assumption is that every person has spirituality; therefore, every *working* person has spirituality as well. Thus, in this book we look at spirituality as an environmental factor that can be present in all possible work settings. We have therefore set no limitations to the fields of the people we reviewed in our research. In other words, spirituality can be applied and experienced in any and every type of workplace.

These three assumptions served as the foundation of our research of spirituality in the workplace.

An Emerging Paradigm

Work is a spiritual journey for many of us, although we talk about it in different ways.

The emerging paradigm we call “spirituality in the workplace” is expressed in many ways: Some authors say that a fundamental tension between rational goals and spiritual fulfillment now haunts workplaces around the world, and that survey after management survey affirms that a majority want to find meaning in their work.⁽⁸⁾ Other authors hold that something has been stirring in workers’ souls for quite some time now—a longing for deeper meaning, deeper connection, greater simplicity, a connection to something higher.⁽⁹⁾ Bruce Jentner, president of Jentner Financial Group in Bath, Ohio,

recognizes this trend: “I have a deep conviction that everybody has a need for something bigger in life than just making money and going to work.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Other authors view the topic even more broadly, describing work as a spiritual journey for many of us, although we talk about it in different ways.⁽¹¹⁾

It seems that there is an overall agreement among researchers that a major transformation is occurring in today’s organizations.⁽¹²⁾ To underscore the point, a survey conducted a few years ago by human resource strategists Act-1 found that 55 percent of the 1,000 workers polled consider spirituality to play a significant role in the workplace. In addition, a third of those cited (34 percent) said that the role had increased since the September 11, 2001 terrorist acts.⁽¹³⁾

A 1999 issue of *U.S. News & World Report* revealed that, in the preceding decade, more than 300 titles on workplace spirituality—from Jesus CEO to The Tao of Leadership—had flooded the bookstores. Indeed, 30 MBA programs now offer courses on the issue. A recent issue of the *Harvard School Bulletin* focused on the trend as well. Signs of this sudden concern for corporate soul are showing up everywhere, from boardrooms to company lunchrooms, from business conferences to management newsletters, from management consulting firms to business schools. Echoing Andre Malraux, who said that this new century’s task will be to rediscover its gods—some management thinkers are prophesying that the effective leaders of this century will be spiritual leaders.⁽¹⁴⁾

Organizations increasingly realize how shortsighted it is to focus solely on financial success at the expense of humanistic values. Since the beginning of the new millennium, a growing number of organizations have tried to discover ways to help employees balance work and family, and to create conditions wherein each person can realize his or her potential while fulfilling the requirements of the job. One writer has called such enlightened organizations “incubators of the spirit.”

Work has ceased to be just a “nine-to-five thing,” and is increasingly seen as an important element in fulfilling one’s destiny. As James Autry observed, “Work can provide the opportunity for spiritual and personal, as well as financial, growth. If it doesn’t, we are wasting far too much of our lives on it.” Leading others is now seen as an extension of managing ourselves. The implications of this change are clear: On one hand, it is about working collectively, reflectively, and spiritually smarter; on the other hand, it

The effective leaders of 21st century will be spiritual leaders.

implies employment that is mind-enriching, heart-fulfilling, and soul-satisfying, as well as financially rewarding.

Many individuals, including business executives, management theorists, researchers, and employees in general, confirm the emergence of this organizational transformation.⁽¹⁵⁾ These sources generally conclude that American society and its political and legal institutions are moving toward a more open, value-expressive environment that will put even greater pressure on companies to honor employees' requests for spiritual accommodation. One author pointed out a dramatic upsurge in interest in spirituality even among those who study, teach, and write about business management.⁽¹⁶⁾ This new interest is also apparent among practicing managers.

Defining Spirituality

Webster's defines spirituality as relating to, consisting of, or affecting the spirit; relating to sacred matters; concerned with religious values; of, related to, or joint in spirit. The term *spirituality* comes from the Latin *spiritus*, which means vapor, breath, air or wind.

Spirituality is the desire to find ultimate purpose in life, and to live accordingly.

Gerald Cavanagh provided an interesting illustration of the divergence of opinions regarding the definition of spirituality. He cited Ian Mitroff, professor of management and author on this topic, who defined spirituality as "the desire to find ultimate purpose in life, and to live accordingly." Cavanagh compared Mitroff's definition to others that define spirituality "loosely as energy, meaning, knowing, etc." Reviewing authors who relied heavily on Taoist, Buddhist, Hindu, Zen, and Native American spiritualities, Cavanagh saw these non-Western perspectives as superior in integrating personal life, work, leisure, prayer, religion, and other aspects of life.⁽¹⁷⁾

Willa Marie Bruce enumerated opinions on spirituality in a 2000 edition of *The American Review of Public Administration*:

Only modest agreement on the definition of spirituality exists. For one Catholic theologian, spirituality is "the way we orient ourselves toward the divine." For a physician at the Harvard Medical School, it is "that which gives meaning to life." For one social worker, it is "an individual search for meaning, purpose and values which may or may not include the concept of a God or transcendent being." For others, to be "Spiritual" means to know, and to live according to the knowledge, that there is more

to life than meets the eye. To be “spiritual” means, beyond that, to know, and to live according to the knowledge that God is present in us in grace as the principle of personal, interpersonal, social, and even cosmic transformation.⁽¹⁸⁾

Ian Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton, authors of *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America*, explained their view on spirituality as informal and personal, that is, pertaining mainly to individuals. They also view spirituality as universal, non-denominational, broadly inclusive, and tolerant, and as the basic feeling of being connected with one’s complete self, others, and the entire universe.⁽¹⁹⁾

Broadly speaking, spirituality encompasses the ultimate ends of life—the questions of meaning and purpose of life. The underlying assumption is that everyone and everything has a purpose. Spirituality assumes that there is more to life than our material self and existence. As one writer puts it, “We are not human beings on a spiritual journey; we are spiritual beings on a human journey.” At its very best, it is our link to the deepest, most profound core of our existence. As Mitroff and Denton put it: “If a single word best captures the meaning of spirituality and the vital role it plays in people’s lives, that word is interconnectedness.”

Viewing life from a spiritual perspective provides a certain humility, a compelling sense of modesty about our existence and our place in the universe.

Spirituality vs. Religion

Spirituality is distinct from institutionalized religion. While religion often directs people outward toward social rites and rituals, spirituality directs one inward toward the wealth of knowledge, senses, aspirations, and feelings one harbors within. Spirituality recognizes that there is something sacred at the core of all existence. Whatever its source, this one sacred element dwells within every living organism. Spirituality is a non-dogmatic, non-exclusive, non-patriarchal, and gender-neutral approach to connect with this one source of all existence. Regardless of our outward differences, there is an underlying sacred commonality, *the ground of being*, to borrow a phrase from Paul Tillich. The essence of this difference and commonality is displayed in the title of Mortimer Adler’s book, *Truth in Religion: Plurality of Religions and Unity of Truth*.⁽²⁰⁾

Spirituality in the Workplace: The Many Definitions

The fact that there are so many different views of spirituality in the workplace is one of the issues that makes this phenomenon so intriguing. Brenda Freshman, author of a study that analyzed definitions and applications of spirituality in the workplace, made a few interesting observations in this regard:

1. Not any one, two, or even three things can be said about spirituality in the workplace that would include the universe of explanations.
2. There is no one answer to the question, "What is spirituality in the workplace?"
3. Definitions and applications of spirituality in the workplace are unique to individuals. One must be careful not to presuppose otherwise. Therefore, when planning any group or organizational intervention around the topic, the suggestion is made to derive definitions and goals from the participants themselves.
4. [There are] many possible ways to understand such a complex and diverse area as spirituality in the workplace.⁽²¹⁾

Defining spirituality in the workplace is like capturing an angel. Explaining spirituality at work is ethereal and beautiful, but perplexing.

Freshman's findings demonstrated once again the complexity and multiple interpretability of this topic. Yet another author, Jennifer Laabs, seemed to agree with all of the above when she pointed out that defining spirituality in the workplace is like capturing an angel. Laabs felt that explaining spirituality at work is ethereal and beautiful, but perplexing.⁽²²⁾ And so, it surfaces once again: the term *spirituality* means many things to many people.

Spirituality in the workplace is an experience of interconnectedness among those involved in a work process.

After in-depth study of the topic, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz defined a spiritual workplace as a "framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promote employees' experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy."⁽²³⁾

Based on the findings of our phenomenological study in 2003, and following some modification through subsequent research, we have formulated the following definition of spirituality in the workplace:

***Spirituality in the workplace is an experience of interconnect-
edness among those involved in a work process, initiated by
authenticity, reciprocity, and personal goodwill; engendered
by a deep sense of meaning that is inherent in the
organization's work; and resulting in greater motivation and
organizational excellence.***

After conducting additional research among business executives in 2004 and 2005, we compiled a list of phrases that exemplify spirituality in the workplace:

- Vision as a concentration on the greater good, passion, and purpose;
- Enhancement of personal fulfillment and creativity through spirituality and enlightenment;
- Work as a life-fulfilling activity—not as a means to simply fund an otherwise personally fulfilling life;
- Work as a contribution toward an integrated life;
- Seeing the potential for businesses to achieve enhanced goals by helping their people at all levels achieve personal fulfillment through their work.

The 2003 definition, in addition to the 2004/2005 characterizations presented above, serve as the development interpretation for the subsequent chapters of this book.



Chapter 2

Need for a Spiritual Workplace

In this chapter we will present a number of pressing matters that have prompted the increasing call for spirituality in the workplace. We will particularly review some of the mentality issues in the average U.S. corporate workplace that we identify as potential obstacles toward the establishment of this affirmative mindset in work environments.

Reasons for the Call for a Spiritual Workplace

Organizations, which have long been viewed as rational systems, are considering making room for the spiritual dimension, a dimension that has less to do with rules and order and more with meaning, purpose, and a sense of community.

The current need for transformation in the workplace finds its foundation in a multitude of causes. Neal, for instance, thinks that the past few years—with 9/11, the market crash, the fall of Enron, and the lack of integrity in organizations—have caused people to hunger for more human connection and a deeper sense of meaning at work.⁽²⁴⁾

Yet, the awareness of spirituality in the workplace was awakened long before the shocking terrorist acts of September 11, 2001. By 2000, Donde Ashmos and Dennis Duchon had already introduced the term *spirituality movement*, whereby they noted that organizations, which have long been viewed as rational systems, are considering making room for the spiritual dimension, a dimension that has less to do with rules and order and more to do with meaning, purpose, and a sense of community. Ashmos and Duchon subsequently listed five reasons for corporate America's growing interest in spirituality at work:

1. The downsizing, reengineering, and layoffs of the past decade, which have turned the American workplace into an environment where employees are demoralized;
2. The fact that the workplace is increasingly seen as a primary source of community for many people because of the decline of neighborhoods, churches, civic groups, and extended families as principal places for feeling connected;
3. The increased access to and enhanced curiosity about Pacific Rim cultures and Eastern philosophies. Philosophies such as Zen

Buddhism, Taoism, and Sufism encourage meditation and emphasize values such as group loyalty and finding one's spiritual center in every activity;

4. The fact that aging baby boomers are moving ever closer to life's greatest uncertainty—death—and thereby develop a growing interest in contemplating life's meaning;
5. The fact that there is increasing pressure of global competition, which has led organizational leaders to realize that employee creativity needs nurturing.⁽²⁵⁾

Nonetheless, the above list is not exhaustive; other social scientists have added reasons to this enumeration, some of which are:

- The arrival of the new millennium, which has made many people come to the realization that life progresses, and that at this monumental stage in time it might be suitable to rethink our behaviors toward one another if we want to continue the human race successfully;
- The increasing search for meaning through work, which is specifically fueled by the increasing numbers of higher education courses offered such as organizational behavior, spirituality in the workplace, workplace diversity, human resource management, leadership theory and practice, and courses that focus on doing international business. Through these courses, new members of the workforce become influenced to search for the meaning they are being taught in educational institutions, and to apply this mindset systematically wherever they work;
- The quest for stability in an unstable world, which ends up being a continuous quest, as change increases. Yet, employees want to feel comforted in an environment that is subject to multiple disruptions, triggered by constantly emerging global trends. The workplace, and therefore the team of colleagues at work, becomes a place where people seek support, trust, understanding, and all those other qualities that contribute to an emotionally stable environment;

With the increased exposure to other ways of living, members of the entire global workforce are realizing the essence of balance in life: refraining from parking your values at the door of your workplace, thus bringing your entire self into work...

- The movement towards more holistic living. With the increased exposure to other ways of living, other cultures, and other mindsets, and encouraged by the Internet, members of the entire global workforce are realizing the essence of balance in life; refraining from parking your values at the door of your workplace, thus bringing your entire self into work, and spending quality time with loved ones are some of the outgrowths of the movement toward more holistic living;
- The greater influx of women in the workplace. Women are known for their nurturing and non-confrontational ways of solving problems, while still keeping track of the goals that need to be reached. With the percentage of women increasing in the workplace, styles of decision making and entire work processes are being reexamined;
- Developed countries' progression from belly needs to brain needs. The so-called industrialized countries are evolving their economies toward service orientation and brain product output rather than manufacturing output. This change instigates a trend of rethinking values and connections. Increasingly, brainworkers on one continent team up with brainworkers on other continents as well as manufacturing units on yet other continents. This brings about a greater sense of interconnectedness, which, in turn, instigates increased realization of the need for spirit at work.

The Paradox of Contemporary Workplace Mentality

Competition could become a significant threat toward a cooperative mindset if it is encouraged too forcefully among colleagues.

One problem that many thinkers on the topic of spirituality in the workplace seem to overlook is the current workplace mentality in the United States, which supports individualism and competition in every area of the work environment. Although competition may be considered a driving factor among various business organizations in any industry, when it is

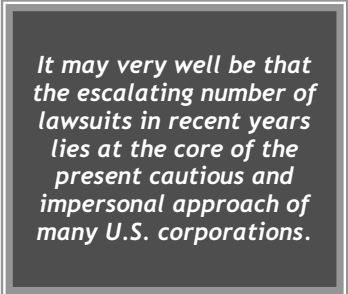
encouraged too forcefully among colleagues it could become a significant threat to the cooperative mindset that spirituality in the workplace advocates.

Various management books promote the mindset of conflict in the workplace, explaining that constructive conflict can lead to the development of new, improved, and more efficient work methods,

while destructive conflict puts the work relationships and productivity in a downward spiral.

Although there is some truth to this philosophy, it leaves little room for the perspective of cooperation, in which co-workers develop and maintain such a high level of understanding and work motivation that they assist each other without inhibitions, and solve problems that surface in the workplace at a much higher rate. In encouraging the conflict and competition perspective, management theorists often neglect the fact that constant striving can lead to fast but mediocre and short-lived results, and can prevent co-workers from cohering effectively enough to examine the bigger picture of their performance in order to establish a structurally better running department.

Another current attitudinal workplace problem is that of changed inter-human approaches that we have witnessed in the past decades throughout work environments in this country. The older generation of readers may remember “the good old days” in U.S. workplaces when people got holiday turkeys or gift baskets instead of gift certificates, and when there were regular boat trips or picnics for families. These older readers may also recall the liveliness that preceded those events: the female colleagues agreeing among themselves on the dishes to prepare, and the male employees making well-coordinated plans. The essence of these gatherings was to bring employees of all levels together and give them the opportunity to get to know each other in a different setting. It increased the mutual bond, and it enhanced understanding and empathy.



It may very well be that the escalating number of lawsuits in recent years lies at the core of the present cautious and impersonal approach of many U.S. corporations.

However, somewhere down the line the majority of U.S. companies decided that a present around the holidays was just too much hassle, and that the risk of organizing family days was too great. Employees or their family members could get hurt during the event, and the company could easily be sued over a serious or a frivolous issue. In other words, a seemingly innocent gathering could become hazardous for the corporation and its very existence!

Here is a point to ponder for all of us who favor the spirituality-at-work mindset: it is highly likely that the escalating number of lawsuits in recent years, even for harmless incidents, lies at the core of the present cautious and impersonal approach of many U.S. corporations. Understandable yet unfortunate, for, at the same time, the sense of togetherness and acceptance toward one another, and seeing each

other as more than just a production factor in the work setting, has diminished accordingly.

The above-described trend reveals a paradox in regard to the surging call for spirituality at work. Increasingly, authors, workplace analysts, social researchers, and maturing employees call for better understanding between co-workers at all levels in the belief that it will enhance the willingness among employees to contribute more than just the required skills and give people who spend so many hours with each other a better sense of purpose and a higher level of satisfaction. The key word here is *interconnectedness*; however, interconnectedness will remain a utopian ideal if people are denied the one activity that would enhance it in the first place—getting to know and value each other as whole beings. For this process, gatherings outside the workplace play an important role.

We may as well admit it: indirectly, this estrangement from family activities has been caused by the same society that now yearns for it. In other words, the current absence of spirituality in the workplace may have been brought upon us by ourselves.

It is, after all, unattractive for any organization to continue sponsoring extra-work activities if the risk of a multimillion-dollar lawsuit lurks behind every employee or family member's mishap. The business environment is a hard one and competitive enough as it is. Business organizations have to remain on their toes in order to stay abreast of the developments in their area of expertise. New inventions, and the subsequent changes in market demands, occur at a much faster pace than ever.

The current absence of spirituality in the workplace may have been brought upon us by ourselves.

Spirituality in the workplace can be an invaluable contribution toward better relationships in the work environment, raising productivity through increased cooperation (as we will discuss below). However, it is often under-emphasized by employers, not necessarily by choice but as a result of the ever present threat of escalating and costly repercussions of an overly litigious society.

Insights Obtained from the Increased Call for Spirituality in the Workplace

In the following section we will discuss three main insights gained from the increased call for spirituality in the workplace. Then, we will elaborate on some of the major advantages of applying this mindset versus some major disadvantages of not doing so. We will subsequently examine one of the main reasons that today's corporate workplaces remain unspiritual.

Spirituality in the workplace is a term that, for some, merely means yet a new buzzword in the business environment. Fortunately for an increasing number of business executives and employees at various levels, the concept is emerging into a serious trend that can no longer be brushed aside with an annoyed shrug or rejected with the reproof that it is just another disguise for instilling religion into work environments. Up to this point we have provided a number of reasons for taking this trend seriously. After reviewing all statements made in our research and comparing them to the existing literature on the topic, we have identified three main insights in the minds of members of corporate America:

1. The first and least complicated insight we have distinguished in the American workforce is the realization that something is wrong with the majority of our work environments. More and more people want to feel comfortable and important in their workplace. They do not want to be considered yet another name tag with yet another set of functions to fulfill. Employees want to be recognized for who they are—people, with families, ups and downs, skills and talents, and diverging yet oftentimes very useful perspectives.
2. The second and slightly more comprehensive realization is that the implementation of spirituality in the workplace is not happening as smoothly and rapidly as some may have expected. This unfortunate setback has a number of important reasons of a persistent nature at the core including cultural values and social trends that have been in place for almost a century and are therefore very hard to correct. The individualistic mindset of the average U.S. corporate worker and its encouragement from childhood on immediately come to mind. While spirituality in the workplace calls for an interconnected approach and an enhanced level of trust among



employees at various levels, the bare-bones reality is that we learn not to trust anyone but ourselves—definitely in the workplace, where we learn “everyone may be after your position.”

3. The third realization, although more subtle in nature, may be the hardest to overcome on our way toward comprehensive implementation of spirituality in the workplace. It pertains to the human tendency to surround ourselves with similar-looking and like-minded associates, because this guarantees faster decision making, less time investment in learning about each others’ perspectives, and a higher level of reflectivity. In other words, the human inclination tends toward homogeneity rather than diversity. The implementation of diversity has brought with it much upheaval, which can now consequentially be traced as a particular point of attention on practically all corporate Web sites. Unfortunately, the comfort zone of remaining surrounded by kindred individuals, predominantly based on backgrounds and looks rather than on mindsets, has turned out to be more persistent than many could initially estimate.

Need for a More Spiritual Workplace

In a review of workplace trends since the 40s and 50s, which ran from company picnics and anti-smoking programs to on-site yoga sessions, Raizel Robin concluded that people now “have made the link between mental health, productivity and absenteeism—and the whole notion that people who are happy at home and happy at work are more productive in the workplace.” However, Robin also found that the well-being of knowledge workers is suffering. She categorized modern knowledge workers (not to be confused with Peter Drucker’s information technology workers) as all those who put their college degree to work in any work environment. Robin claimed that work for these employees can be physically strenuous, contributing to illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes, and nervous disorders like anxiety and depression. Calling for wellness initiatives in the workplace, Robin advised business corporations to particularly ensure that such initiatives are implemented regularly. While wellness programs are the first to be discontinued in tight budget times, Robin warned, “a worn-out, unhealthy workforce is a costly one.” She also stated that, even in workplaces that offer wellness programs and employee facilitation projects, top management often maintains a culture that seems to discourage employees from making proper use of the accommodators.⁽²⁶⁾ Indeed, how many of us have not faced the stress

*People who are
happy at home and
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the workplace.*

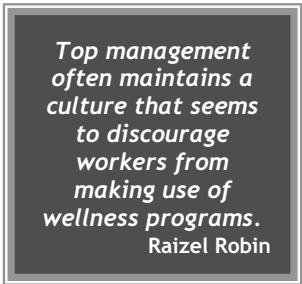
Raizel Robin

of wanting to spend more time with our loved ones versus meeting the deadline for an immense project at work?

Disadvantages of Failing to Implement Spirit at Work

Alert authors warn that, despite an extensive set of critiques and criticisms offered by scholars and practitioners, most modern organizations lack a spiritual foundation and deny their employees the opportunity of spiritual expression through their work.⁽²⁷⁾ The neglect and ignorance that corporations exhibit bring about higher costs and damages than they are willing to acknowledge.

The most obvious costs result from hiring and training new entrants to the workplace at a higher pace due to high turnover rates. The high level of absenteeism that is also part of the culture in these work environments is another factor to consider: because people endure higher levels of stress and resentment in these unpleasant, high-pressure workplaces, they use every opportunity to stay away. Worse, their resentment toward having to perform in such an environment creates various psychosomatic symptoms within them, providing them with genuine reasons to stay home.



Top management often maintains a culture that seems to discourage workers from making use of wellness programs.
Raizel Robin

The increasing numbers of absentees place excessive pressure on the employees who show up, so that they, in turn, get overworked and become discontent about their workplace; thus, the downward spiral is established. One should not underestimate the level of aggravation that emerges among employees who continuously have to fill in for colleagues who are absent. This regular trend of double-working for the same pay finally motivates these employees to look for another job.

Advantages of Applying Spirit at Work

The authors cited above also referred to the potential benefits to managers, employees, and society of a spiritually oriented workplace. It follows logically that employees who feel connected and find meaning in their workplace perform better, show up more often, and contribute more proactively to a better atmosphere in the workplace.

A team of researchers presented four interesting advantages in their review of employees who maintain the spiritual mindset:

1. The stronger the spiritual factor of personality, the more tolerant the person is of work failure, and the less susceptible the person is to stress.
2. The stronger the spiritual factor of personality, the more the person favors the democratic style of leadership, the more trusting the person is, and the higher the person's tolerance is of human diversity.
3. The stronger the spiritual factor of personality, the more the person exhibits altruistic behavior and citizenship.
4. The stronger the spiritual factor of personality, the more the person's commitment to the organization and work group increases. (28)

Yet another major advantage of nurturing the spiritual mindset within each employee in the organization is that of ethicality. A team of authors on this issue found, "Fundamental aspects of workplace spirituality such as meaningful work that provides a feeling of purpose, a sense of connection and positive social relations with co-workers, and the ability to live an integrated life in which the work role does not conflict with the essential nature of person as a human being, may interact to create different perceptions of ethicality within the organization." (29)

The stronger the spiritual factor of personality, the more tolerant the person is of work failure, and the less susceptible the person is to stress.

Mohamed et al

The statement made above has merit; one would indeed assume that an employee with an elevated spiritual approach toward life would be more attuned into doing the right things for the right reasons, even though the actions may vary from person to person. These authors therefore conclude that the "degree of individual spirituality influences whether an individual perceives a questionable business practice as ethical or unethical." They maintain that the "predominance of personal ethical standards applied to organizational environments is driven by employees' growing desire to merge their personal and professional values, viewing their career as an avenue through which to express themselves and make a positive difference in the world." The authors further feel that this is particularly true of today's emerging workforce, explaining the reasons as follows: "While employees are generally insecure and frightened at work, they increasingly depend upon [work] environments for primary links to other people as more traditional support systems have weakened." (30)

Author Debbie Carter, underscored this perspective in stating that “the ethics or morals of our organizations are becoming increasingly important to employees.”⁽³¹⁾ Carter cited an article by Chris Sangster, who wrote, “Spirituality can be seen basically as displaying and applying a heightening level of awareness towards others in a selfless way. The benefits of such an approach are clearly greater staff loyalty and retention leading to increased creativity and productivity.” Sangster reemphasized an often-presented clarification in context of spirituality in the workplace when he placed religion out of the scope, stressing that “it is possible to lead a ‘spiritual’ way of life without following any particular religious path.” In Sangster’s opinion, spiritual workers are those who

Spirituality can be seen as displaying and applying a heightening level of awareness toward others in a selfless way.

Chris Sangster

think co-operatively and/or altruistically; have a balanced, objective view of the world; listen as much as (or more than) they speak; apply three-dimensional bigger picture thinking; believe in some higher driving force and purpose beyond humankind; find the time to think things through objectively; think laterally in order to promote realistic solutions; encourage and empower others selflessly; work open-mindedly with a wide range of people; consistently display integrity and trust, and; expect the best from people without being a “soft touch.”

Like many other authors, Sangster acknowledges the fact that spirituality in the workplace, as a term, is perceived somewhat cautiously and suspiciously by business corporate leaders; he therefore recommends the term *holistic thinking* as typical of the mindset of a spiritual worker. He subsequently asserts that “one of the key principles for applying holistic thinking successfully within business is the simple concept of the three-step continuum: belonging, assertion, and cooperation.” In foundation, Sangster explains that a spiritual worker will first elevate him- or herself toward increased confidence, after which he or she will assist others in achieving this level of performance as well through mentorism. Hence, the upward spiral is established. Sangster offers a final warning to corporations: “In order for this level of motivation to be maintained, it is crucial that these individuals get the required ongoing support from both superiors and the company itself.”⁽³²⁾ In line with Sangster’s statements, Gul and Doh “advance the position that for spirit in the workplace to be fully realized, organizations must enable the unfolding of each individual though his or her participation in the work of the organization.”⁽³³⁾

Why Today's Corporate Workplaces Remain Unspiritual

In an article published in *Training* in 2004, Heather Johnson asserted that an incredible 61 percent of adults believe their workplace would benefit from having a greater sense of spirituality, according to a recent survey conducted by Spirituality.com. Johnson referred to the exploding sales figures for self-help books of all sorts—an obvious sign that people are looking for guidance on how to live happier, more fulfilling lives. In her article, Johnson portrays the story of a man who, after 17 years, found that nothing in his life was functioning well:

What is work and what is not work are questions that perplex the wisest of men.

Bhagavad Gita

neither work, nor marriage, nor anything else. He finally decided to start writing, and although his book mentioned God as his CEO, this man, who is now a consultant and motivational speaker, explains that the essence of his book is about finding meaning. “It’s not about forcing a religion. It’s about offering a menu of things to think about that

allows the worker to ultimately make a choice,” writes Johnson, citing this turnaround person. She continues her citation, “You need to let who you are speak to what you believe. It doesn’t come down to words and practices. It’s taking what you believe and making decisions on what you believe.”⁽³⁴⁾

Cases like the one described above are numerous in our society. After working for several years in an unspiritual work environment, many people find themselves searching for meaning. Those with entrepreneurial skills ultimately leap into a small venture in which they no longer have to endure the typical corporate, suffocating phenomenon of “little kingdoms, protected by little people.” For, what is this whole trend about? Perhaps the entire foundation of unspiritual workplaces lies in the vulnerability that human beings detect within themselves, which they want to conceal at any price. In their fear of being overthrown by others who seem stronger or better equipped in certain ways; who seem to be descended from an unfamiliar culture, ethnicity, generation, or any other unfamiliar background or conviction; the fear mongers use all kinds of trivial ways to keep these perceived invaders out of the door, thereby protecting their position as if it were their life. The logical consequence of this hidden but very human vulnerability is that these people make life unbearable for others who enter the workplace with the best intentions, causing the new entrants to either bow to their invisible but very vividly sensed authority, or exit.

Agreed, it is hard to see the weakness under the steadfast shell of some authoritative people, but once discovered, it becomes easier to understand why so many workplaces are still unspiritual. It is the foundation of personal protectionism and the deeply ingrained fear of insecurity that causes those in leadership positions of so many work environments to seek and find their mental and emotional shelter in grudge, coercion, ridicule, harshness, backstabbing, setting up for failure, or hiding behind the misuse of phenomena such as jingoism, partisanship, and loyalty toward locals.

And these are exactly the demeanors that label a workplace as unspiritual, that form the basis of the cry of those who simply seek connection and work satisfaction for increased spirituality.

Based on the assertions made in this part of the chapter, Figure 2.1 on the next page clarifies the reasons that too many organizations are still unspiritual; the advantages of applying spirit at work; and the disadvantages of refraining from doing so. The figure portrays the descending trend of organizations that submit to the “traditional” mentalities of “-isms,” while it also displays the ascending trend of institutions that practice the “-ties” that bind. The ultimate results of both trends also display the leadership style practiced in these two types of organizations: while the traditional trend ends in top-down leadership, the non-traditional trend results in bottom-up (servant-oriented) leadership.

A Positive Endnote

On a more positive note, it seems that mid- and senior-level managers, according to a study conducted by Hanna Ashar and Maureen Lane-Maher, do not define success in materialistic terms—money, positional power, and status symbols—but instead use terms such as connection, balance, and wholeness to define and describe success. Even more encouraging, the participants in Ashar and Lane-Maher’s study linked the concept of success to spirituality and stated that to be successful one needs to embrace spirituality as well.⁽³⁵⁾

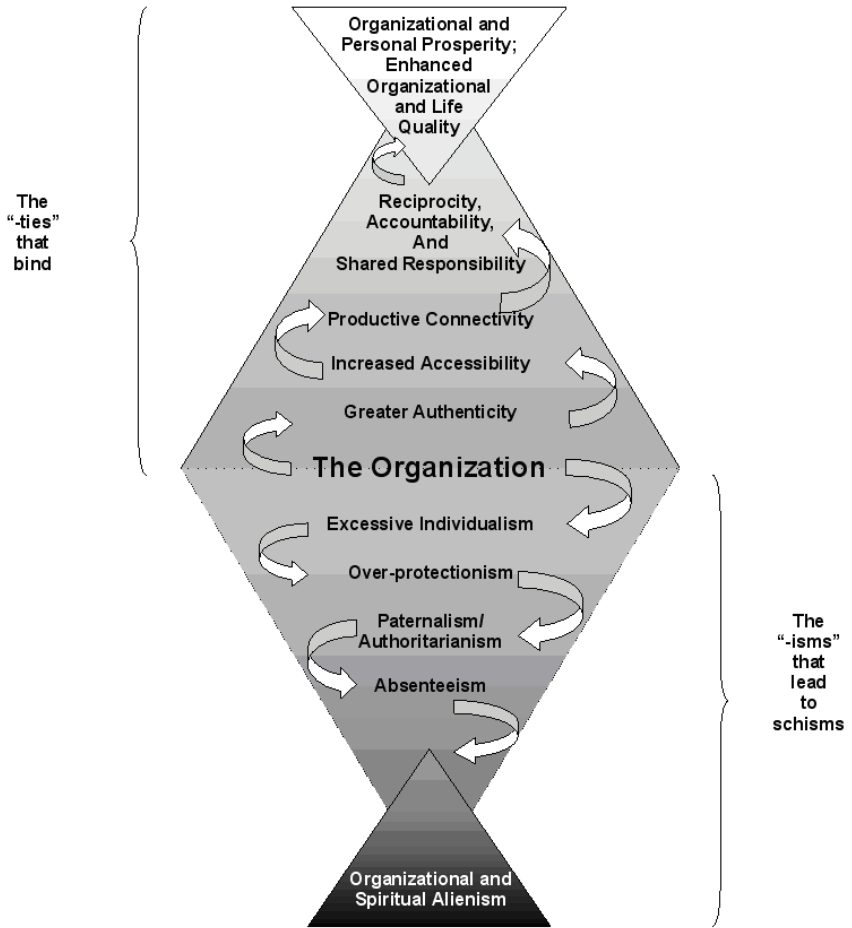


Figure 2.1. Why too many organizations lack a spiritual perspective.

It cannot be just a hollow desire when we state that spirituality in the workplace is on the rise, in spite of some of the setbacks mentioned in this chapter. It may even be constructive that the establishment of this mindset is encountering all the significant setbacks at one time, so that they can be dealt with acutely and eliminated effectively before a massive establishment of this phenomenon becomes fact. The number of employees that yearn for the application of spirituality in the workplace grossly exceeds the number of those who oppose it. If we have learned anything from the majority of Eastern cultures, it is that power resides in numbers. What more hopeful sign could there be?

*The only way to
achieve true success
is to express
yourself completely
in service to
society.*

Aristotle