

# The “what”, “why” and “how” of spirituality in the workplace

Spirituality in  
the workplace

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**Abstract** *While the attention to workplace spirituality is growing, there is debate as to what exactly this term “spirituality” means. There seems to be multiple views of workplace spirituality. It could be argued that there are different definitions for the meaning of “spirituality” due to the very strong personal nature of the word itself. We argue that this multiple view of spirituality is a positive thing for organizations if managers attempt to understand differing spiritual views and also encourage all views within an organization. In this paper, we summarize the different perspectives of spirituality, discuss the benefits of encouraging spirituality within organizations, and examine different perspectives of implementing a spirituality-based culture within firms.*

Without work, all life goes rotten – but when work is soulless, life stifles and dies (Albert Camus).

The recent spurt of articles in various popular and scholarly outlets (Manz *et al.*, 2001; Gunther, 2001; Graber, 2001; Brandt, 1996; Thompson, 2000; McCarthy, 1996; Hein, 1999; Herman and Gioia, 1998; Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Mitroff and Denton, 1999; Bryant, 1998) reflects the growing interest in the corporate world in “spirituality”. The question that arises is “Why is there such an increased interest in workplace spirituality”? One answer to this question could be that as society has advanced in terms of leisure time, technology and communication of ideas, people increasingly desire to experience spirituality not only in their personal lives, but also in their work where they spend a large amount of their time (Neck and Milliman, 1994; Ray, 1992; Maynard, 1992). Another answer to this question arguably could involve the benefits to an organization for encouraging spirituality in the workplace. In short, some evidence exists that suggests a link between workplace spirituality and enhanced individual creativity (Freshman, 1999), increased honesty and trust within the organization (Wagner-Marsh and Conely, 1999), enhanced sense of personal fulfillment of employees (Burack, 1999), and increased commitment to organizational goals (Delbecq, 1999; Leigh, 1997). It is interesting to note, that while the attention to workplace spirituality is indeed growing, there is debate as to what exactly this term “spirituality” means? In short, there seems to be multiple views of workplace spirituality. For example, one view defines spirituality as something originating from the inside of the individual. Another view sees spirituality as tied to one’s religious affiliation. Still another



perspective argues that spirituality involves existentialist questions such as “What is the meaning of my work?” and “Why am I doing this work?”

It could be argued that there are different definitions for the meaning of “spirituality” due to the very strong personal nature of the word. Indeed, Freshman (1999, p. 325) states that “[p]ossibly contributing to the pluralistic aspect of spirituality in the workplace is the emphasis on the uniquely personal aspect of spirituality”. Consequently, we feel these multiple views of spirituality are natural and logical (given the diversity of the workforce) and the search for a definitive description of the term is not the best exercise. Rather a better exercise is to understand the “what” (the meaning) of these multiple views of spirituality in the workplace, the benefits (the “why”) for an organization if managers encourage these differing views among organizational members, and the manner in which spirituality can be implemented/encouraged within firms (the “how”). Accordingly, the purpose of this article is as follows. First, we will define and describe these different perspectives of spirituality in an accommodative manner. Next, we will examine the positive aspects (the benefits) of encouraging spirituality in organizations regardless of the perspective adopted by organizational members. Then we will compare and contrast different models of implementation of spirituality in the workplace. Finally, we will propose a comprehensive framework of organization spirituality and discuss the implications of this framework to both theory and practice.

### **Definitions of spirituality**

A number of definitions and perspectives of spirituality appear within the literature. We will next examine some of the most popular viewpoints of spirituality including the intrinsic-origin view, the religious view, and the existentialist perspective.

#### *The intrinsic-origin view*

The intrinsic-origin view of spirituality is that which argues that spirituality is a concept or a principle that originates from the inside of an individual. Guillory's (2000, p. 33) definition falls within this perspective as he defines spirituality as “our inner consciousness” and “that which is spiritual comes from within-beyond our programmed beliefs and values”. One of the most observed characteristics about this perspective or class of definitions about spirituality is that most of the proponents argue that spirituality is something which is beyond the rules of religion (Guillory, 2000). In support, Graber (2001, p. 40) argues:

Spirituality avoids the formal and ceremonial connotations of religion; it is non-denominational, non-hierarchical, and non-ecclesiastical. Spirituality implies an inner search for meaning or fulfillment that may be undertaken by anyone regardless of religion.

While this spirituality perspective predominately speaks about some power which originates from inside, it also involves a feeling of being connected with

one's work and with others (e.g. Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Neck and Milliman, 1994). For example, Mitroff and Denton (1999, p. 83) define spirituality as "[t]he basic feeling of being connected with one's complete self, others and the entire universe".

Turner's (1999, p. 41) definition of spirituality can be classified within the intrinsic origin perspective as he views spirituality as "that which comes from within, beyond the survival instincts of the mind". Likewise, Guillory (2000, p. 33) provides a parallel view as he defines spirituality as "our inner consciousness".

### *Religious views*

A definition of religion is given by Bruce (1996, p. 7):

Religion consists of beliefs, actions, and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose.

Hence, religious views of spirituality are those that are specific to a particular religion.

For example, the Christians believe that spirituality is the "call for work." As Naylor *et al.* (1996, p. 38) attest, "[t]o be sure, our work participation in the creativity of God is a great blessing, a divine summons, a vocation". The Hindus believe that their spirituality is in doing the work with utmost devotion. For the Hindus, one of the important principles is that the effort towards the goal is most important, and the results are supposed to be provided by god. This is embodied in one of the most important tenets, "*Karmanyevadhikarasthe*" in their religious text "The Bhagavad Gita" (Menon, 1997). In the Buddhist's view, hard work and devotion are the tools used to modify an individual's life and also the institution as a whole, which ultimately results in total enrichment of life and work (Jacobson, 1983). In the Christian view, there is also another side to work, the "darker side" (Naylor *et al.*, 1996, p. 39). It speaks about man deviating from the god's good intentions and leaning towards greed and immoral actions (Naylor *et al.*, 1996). Obviously, the goal of the Christian view is to steer clear of this dark side of work.

The protestant work ethic is well expressed in the views of Martin Luther. He was of the view that God is continually creating, and he would invite us, human beings, to participate (Naylor *et al.*, 1996). The views of Islam about the workplace are commonly denoted under the term "Islamic Work Ethic (ISE)." Islam preaches its followers to be more committed towards the organization. This commitment is said to make the employees embrace organizational change more readily than others (Yousef, 2000). Cooperation and consulting is also encouraged by ISE. This is said to alleviate mistakes (Yousef, 2000). The Islamic work ethic also argues that values such as generosity and justice should be inevitable to the workplace (Yousef, 2000). Other religious views like Taoism and Confucianism also propose spiritual views which can be

interpreted in the context of that inexplicable feeling of connectedness with the others and the universe (Rice, 1978). Thus, it would seem that a Taoist and Confucianist perspective on workplace spirituality would place importance on teamwork and togetherness.

Perhaps, religion-based spirituality is the most controversial when compared to the other views of organizational spirituality. There have been a number of criticisms to this view among managers. For example Gunther (2001, p. 64) states that “[a]s much as the Americans say they believe in god, most also believe in religious freedom”.

#### *Existentialist views*

This view of spirituality is perhaps the most connected to the concepts such as the search for meaning in what we are doing at the workplace (Naylor *et al.*, 1996; Neck and Milliman, 1994; Kahnweiler and Otte, 1997). The “search for meaning” has been one of the most quoted phrases in examples of people who quit their jobs to lead a more spiritually enriching life (Naylor *et al.*, 1996, p. 56; Burack, 1999, p. 12).

Some of the existential questions which come up are:

- Why am I doing this work?
- What is the meaning of the work I am doing?
- Where does this lead me to?
- Is there a reason for my existence and the organization’s?

These questions assume importance when people are involved in jobs which are immensely repetitive and boring. The lack of a meaning in the daily work, can lead to “existential sickness” (Naylor *et al.*, 1996, p. 57). The lack of meaning or purpose of work, can lead to “separation/alienation from oneself” (Naylor *et al.*, 1996, p. 59). This can greatly reduce the productivity and can result in employee frustration (Naylor *et al.*, 1996).

The preceding discussion provided a brief overview of the differing perspectives of spirituality. We argue that it is only logical that there are different views on the meaning of spirituality, given that this concept is very personally driven. Hence, the importance lies not in providing a single definition for the spirituality term, but rather to first understand the differing perspectives and then to encourage employees to practice their own sense of spirituality in the workplace. Benefits to organizations will be the outcome of such encouragement. Next we discuss some of these benefits of encouraging spirituality in the workplace.

#### **Benefits of spirituality in the workplace**

Research suggests that the encouragement of spirituality in the workplace can lead to benefits in the areas of creativity, honesty and trust, personal fulfillment, and commitment, which will ultimately lead to increased organizational performance.

### *Intuition and creativity*

Spirituality can assist the individual to expand the frontiers of his consciousness beyond the normal boundaries, leading to increased intuition and creativity (Guillory, 2000; Cash and Gray, 2000; Harman and Hormann, 1990). Spirituality has the potential to link the creative power of the human mind with that of God's (Gunther, 2001). Spirituality also breeds awareness, which in turn breeds intuition, and intuition in turn leads to creativity (Freshman, 1999). The completeness that spiritual enrichment provides to the employees will lead to happiness and satisfaction which will cause the employees to be more creative (Turner, 1999). This will result in increased organizational performance and financial success (Turner, 1999). Creativity in the case of spiritually enriched organizations is also encouraged through the continual improvisation in service and also in adapting to the customers' needs (Guillory, 2000). The turnaround of the IOmega Corporation is a good example of how a careful analysis of the customers' needs can foster creativity and thereby lead the organization to success (Guillory, 2000). Intuition and creativity can be powerful tools in problem solving. Since spiritual encouragement leads to better insights and also better mental growth and development and thereby the improvement of the person as a whole, the problem solving capabilities increase (Burack, 1999). Creativity is also encouraged by religions, for example, Christians believe that creativity, even in an industrial enterprise, works towards the common good of the community and the society as a whole (Delbecq, 1999). Islam stresses creativity as a way for attaining happiness (Yousef, 2000). Buddhism has creativity as one of its central ideas (Jacobson, 1983). According to Buddhist philosophy, "Creative experience is all there is" (Jacobson, 1983, p. 40).

### *Honesty and trust*

Many spiritually based organizations have made honesty their prime focus (Wagner-Marsh and Conely, 1999; Burack, 1999). An example of such a company is Wetherill Associates (Wagner-Marsh and Conely, 1999). The company instituted and implemented a policy where they promised themselves and others that they will be completely honest towards their customers as well as their suppliers (Wagner-Marsh and Conely, 1999). Also, the element of honesty or truthfulness is unmistakably present in almost all the business transactions (Kriger and Hanson, 1999). Trust is well encouraged within a spiritually enriched company. Especially in times of economic depression, when the company is not doing well, trust between the management and the employees plays a pivotal role in the future performance of the organization. On the contrary, distrust can lead to communication problems inside the organization, and co-operation between the employees and the management is seriously affected (Burack, 1999). Trust can also lead to better organizational performance through accelerated decision making, better communication between the managers, better focus on the customer issues and greater innovation (Kriger and Hanson, 1999).

Nowhere else have the qualities of truthfulness been portrayed as they are in religious texts. For example, in Hinduism, the concept of “*Sathyameva jayathe*”, meaning, the truth and only truth shall be victorious in the end, is one of the most quoted philosophies (Prabhavananda and Manchester, 1963, p. 47). Also one of the spiritual disciplines, “yama”, reiterates the qualities such as “truthfulness, non-stealing and abstinence from greed” (Vrajaprana, 2000, p. 248) Christians believe that accountability is very crucial to the workplace and also the society as a whole. Accountability towards one another, results in better relationships and understanding, which will be helpful in defeating the ways of the evil (Nix, 1997). Accountability and truthfulness towards each other is also helpful in overcoming our natural propensity for sinning (Nix, 1997).

#### *Personal fulfillment*

Spirituality has been associated with Maslow’s higher needs, such as “belonging and also some sense of achievement” (Burack, 1999, p. 284). The “economic-technological perspective” theory suggested includes this sense of personal achievement as a reason for the movement towards spirituality (Tischler, 1999, p. 274). Others have also suggested the involvement of personal development in the movement towards spirituality (Freshman, 1999). Fostering spirituality will lead to the employees feeling complete when they come to work. This will result in a high degree of personal fulfillment and increased morale. This further would lead to increased organizational performance through greater financial success (Turner, 1999). For example, Muslims believe that work is a major source of personal fulfillment and independence (Yousef, 2000). This would lead to the ultimate life-fulfillment (Yousef, 2000). Personal fulfillment is also seen as a method to enhance personal development (Yousef, 2000).

#### *Commitment*

Spirituality increases commitment by establishing a “Trustful Climate” in the workplace (Burack, 1999, pp. 285). “Organizational commitment is a concept that seeks to capture the nature of attachments formed by individuals, to their employing organizations” (Ketchand and Strawser, 2001; p. 1) This quality can be viewed in two different perspectives. This includes commitment of the employees to the organization and also commitment of the organization to quality and to the customer (Wagner-Marsh and Conely, 1999). The commitment of the employees to the organization is further believed to consist of two aspects. One is “affective commitment”, where emotional attachment is seen from the individual because he is able to identify with the goals of the organization, and the individual wants to help the organization in achieving its goals (Ketchand and Strawser, 2001). The second aspect of commitment is due to the higher cost of moving to a different organization (Ketchand and Strawser, 2001). In addition to these two types of commitment there are also two main types of causal factors involved in the expression of commitment

towards an organization. The first are “personal factors”, which originate from the inside of the individual. This includes factors which exist before the individual joins the organization. The second factor is the “situational factor.” Here the individual is confronted with experiences within the organization and his work environment (Ketchand and Strawser, 2001). This will be crucial in his commitment towards the organization. In all cases, however, trust is crucial in providing a sound base for commitment (Kriger and Hanson, 1999). Christian beliefs have also helped executives to solidify their commitment towards their goals (Delbecq, 1999). Islamic work ethic also views commitment to the job as a virtue (Yousef, 2000). Judaism for example proposes that all individuals are responsible for their products and the responsibility for any defects caused should be owned by the individual who produces it and either sells it directly or through an agent (Dekro and Bush, 1998).

### *Organizational performance*

It has been suggested that organizations that encourage spirituality may experience enhanced organizational performance (Neck and Milliman, 1994; Turner, 1999; Thompson, 2000). In fact, some research reveals that organizations that encouraged spirituality experienced higher profits and success (Mitroff and Denton, 1999; Turner, 1999). According to Thompson (2000, p. 19):

In some cases (referring to research studies), the more spirited companies outperformed the others by 400-500 percent, in terms of net earnings, return-on-investment and shareholder value.

From these citations, it is obvious that organizational performance and financial success can lean heavily on spiritual enrichment of the workplace. Spirituality is recognized as one of the crucial dimensions of the human personality. Therefore, if an organization encourages spirituality, then it is actually encouraging the people to bring their whole self to work (Neck and Milliman, 1994). This would mean a greater personal fulfillment and satisfaction and greater commitment to the work and also the organization. According to Mitroff and Denton (1999, p. 91), “[n]o organization can survive for long without spirituality and soul.” These citations and views, coupled with the previous discussions on the common qualities that the spiritual enrichment brings about, like intuition and creativity, honesty and trust, personal fulfillment and commitment, prove that spirituality is indeed a valuable and inevitable tool for the people and the organization for which they work for.

### **Encouragement and implementation of spirituality in the workplace**

The implementation of spirituality in an organization can be viewed from two different perspectives. One can be denoted as the organization-centered perspective and the second is the individual-centered perspective.

The organization-based approach suggests that spirituality should be implemented to the organization as a whole. This was proposed by Mitroff and Denton after extensive empirical studies (Mitroff and Denton, 1999). They suggest that since there are a lot of conflicting preferences and interests between different individuals, it would not be possible to allow spirituality on an individual basis; rather the organization should change as a whole. Here, organizations are classified into groups based on their principle of spirituality. Mitroff and Denton (1999, pp. 8-9) classify organizations as:

- “religion-based”;
- “evolutionary”;
- “recovering”;
- “socially responsible”; and
- “values based”

Though the organizations have been classified into groups, Mitroff and Denton (1999) also lays common grounds for the factors present in all of these models which leads to the expression and realization of spirituality. These are identified as a “key crisis event or precipitating event”, “principle of Hope”, the concept of “fundamental texts”, “spiritual talking and listening”, “attitude towards the stake holders”, the concept of “limiting greed” and “the identification of functions of an organization which are spiritualized” (Mitroff and Denton, 1999, pp. 9-13). The importance of these factors varies with the specific type of organization, they identified.

The other view about the implementation, the individual-centered perspective of spirituality, acknowledges and tries to foster from an individual-centered point of view. Here, the organization would not have a strict spiritual orientation, but rather it should try to accommodate and encourage spiritual requests from its employees (Cash and Gray, 2000). This perspective assumes that the organization is a collection of individuals, and that there is a superfluity of different views about spirituality among organizational personnel. Accordingly, the individual-centered model of implementation or encouragement of spirituality starts with the individual (Turner, 1999). This would suggest that leaders in the various organizations should attempt to understand and accept the “spiritual” variety that its members have at an individual level (Turner, 1999). As Leigh (1997, p. 26) states: “[i]t [spirituality] is about acknowledging that people come to work with more than their bodies and minds; they bring individual talents and unique spirits”.

*An individual-centered approach to spiritual enrichment – “The spiritual freedom model”*

Implementation of spirituality, can lead to the creation of meaning to the work employees do everyday. This is one of the steps towards ultimate personnel fulfillment and satisfaction (Herman and Gioia, 1998). However, the implementation of common spiritual principles in an organization could lead to

the problem of employees not being able to express their own view of spirituality. For example, in a “religion-based” organization, the organization might have a particular belief, and a set of principles according to a particular religion. However, all of the organization’s members might not be willing to accept that particular religion as their only spiritual dimension. This could lead to dissatisfaction and frustration. Here, the individual may know that the end result will be the common good, but since his beliefs are different, he or she will not be willing to express spirituality in the particular manner in which the organization has implemented. Since spirituality is a highly individual-specific dimension we argue that it is necessary that spirituality should be implemented from the individual’s perspective. Also, given the contention that spirituality cannot be viewed in a uni-definitional light, we argue that the end result of spirituality implementation based on an individual approach would be enhanced organizational performance and better personal development of the employees of that organization than that of a spiritually unified organization (Herman and Gioia, 1998). Considering the increasing diversity of today’s workforce, the individual-based approach would be all the more crucial.

The encouragement of spirituality should start by encouraging people to speak openly about their spiritual ideas and helping them to relate these ideas to the company’s values (Thompson, 2000). This again points towards an individual-based approach for the encouragement of spirituality.

Based on the reviews and the above arguments, we propose a “spiritual freedom model” of implementation. This model, represented in Figure 1, embodies the concept of “spiritual freedom” within an organizational setting. It represents the implementation where people in an organization are encouraged to express their own views of spirituality. Here, the organization doesn’t establish any particular spiritual principle as common to all its employees. The model starts with the organization where it encourages its employees to be free to express their own spiritual beliefs; it tries to accommodate the spiritual requests of its employees, irrespective of their different spiritual beliefs. Since spiritual enrichment of the workplace would do common good through the expression of positive outcomes such as intuition, creativity, honesty, trust, personal fulfillment and commitment. The end result is enhanced organizational performance and long-term organizational success.

### **From a diverse origin to the common good**

We started by reviewing the multitude of definitions about spirituality. This represented, at least in part, the individualistic differences that exist in the workforce about spirituality. It is also important to look for the key benefits of spiritual accomplishment provided by the different views of spirituality, considering the highly diverse nature of today’s workforce (McCormick, 1994). A workplace without spirituality can ultimately result in high absenteeism, high turnover rates, high stress associated with work deadlines, and depression (Thompson, 2000). On the contrary, an encouragement of spirituality within a firm can lead to enhanced creativity, honesty and trust, personal fulfillment,

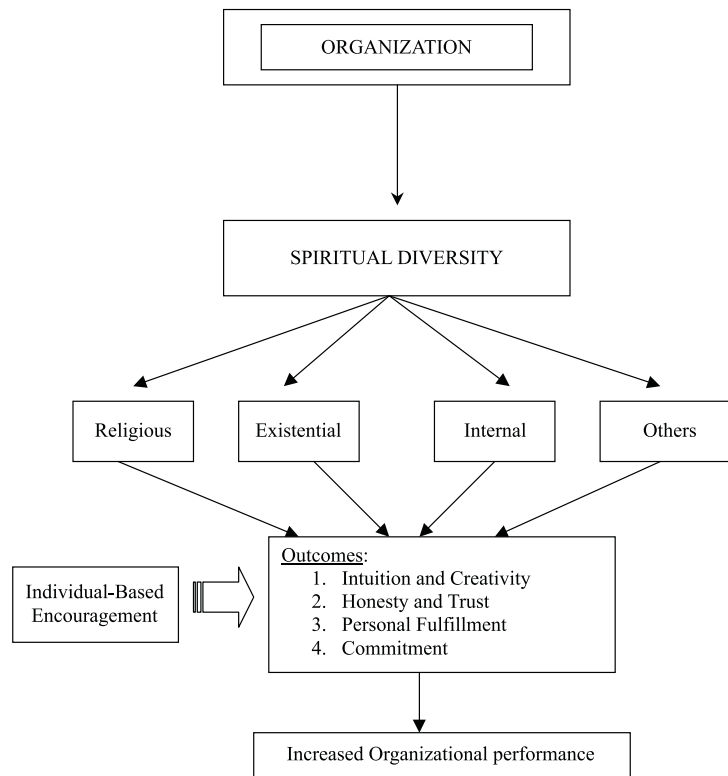


**Figure 1.**  
Individual-based  
“spiritual freedom”  
model for incorporating  
and encouraging  
spirituality among  
today’s diverse  
workforce

and commitment, which will ultimately lead to increased organizational performance. Hence there is little doubt that spiritual enrichment brings a number of common benefits to an organization and its people, including those benefits discussed here. It has been proved that “spirited workplaces” have done better with respect to profitability (Thompson, 2000). Therefore, we argue that all views of spirituality should be encouraged in the workplace. However, due to the diversity in the beliefs and definitions that each individual has about spirituality, it will be ideal if managers can encourage the employees to follow their own spirituality path and to relate this path to the goals of the organization. However, this might lead to a wide, diverse set of accommodation requests and also a lot of different views being floated among the workforce in the organization, and there might be times when the organization has to exercise restraint. However, this might only be an extreme case. The organization that has a policy towards spiritual freedom will make its employees develop their potentials fully. This, again, would lead to better work performance and a friendlier corporate world.

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