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# Seeking the Lost Spirit

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# Seeking the Lost Spirit: Understanding Spirituality and Restoring It to the Workplace

David W. Adams Rick Csiernik

ABSTRACT. Employee assistance professionals are continually confronted with the behaviours of people and procedures that challenge, excite, or demoralise. Within the context of productivity oriented organizations, culture, personal interactions, interpersonal caring, and spiritual values can be diminished or altogether lost. This article explores where spirituality fits into the contemporary workplace, its role in respect to the workplace challenges we encounter, and its potential in helping us deal with the suffering created by dysfunctional and demoralising work environments. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Spirituality, workplace, suffering, shuddering

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Who can separate his faith from his action, or his belief from his occupations?

-The Prophet, Kahlil Gibran (Knopf, 1965)

## CASE STUDIES

## Barbara

Barbara, age 43, is a registered nurse with 10 years experience in a large teaching hospital. She worked as an acute care oncology nurse in the same unit for five years. Last fall, due to cutbacks in funding, she was moved to a surgical unit. Since then, she has struggled with her new assignment and encountered many frustrations. For example, the nurse assigned to orientate her toward procedures was reluctant to provide detailed instructions, saying she was too busy. Being a newcomer, Barbara did not want to complain, so she kept silent. When she was ill with the flu in November and missed five working days, Barbara returned to her unit with trepidation. She knew whenever the ward was short her co-workers grumbled and sometimes made it difficult for anyone who took additional time off. She was no exception, and on her first weekend, she was left with the most difficult to manage patients and a disproportionate workload compared to the "old regulars." When she fell behind in her work she was left to fend for herself. At the end of the day, she was still trying to catch up, while everyone else left on time. Two days later, the nurse manager told Barbara that she hoped Barbara wouldn't make a habit of working late and taking time off ill. Barbara was upset. In her previous position, the health care professionals worked as a team, helped each other, and took a positive approach to caring for patients and their families. As a primary care nurse and relief team leader, she felt close to everyone. She was appalled that on her new unit several colleagues told her families were a "time consuming pain," and that nurses were paid to do nursing care and not to baby sit. If patients or families had medical questions they suggested that it was not the nurse's responsibility to answer them. Physicians and residents needed to earn their money for a change. They also told her not to worry about the nurse manager, as she didn't pay much attention to details on the unit because she was too busy elsewhere-the message was not to bother her or stir up her emotions.

Over Christmas and New Years, as on-duty scheduling was done by one of the regular nurses on the unit, as the newcomer, Barbara and two other recently transferred nurses worked 12 hour shifts on Christmas, New Year's Eve, and New Year's Day. In early January, she was very fatigued, developed a severe migraine headache, and had to use two more sick days. On returning, Barbara felt very self-conscious and was certain two senior colleagues resented her absence and would likely hold it against her. As expected, she again received the heaviest workload.

On a Friday afternoon in late February, when Barbara's mother suddenly died of a coronary, Barbara was due to work nights from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. She was devastated by her mother's sudden death but immediately worried that if she was off again her colleagues would certainly punish her. Her mother was buried Monday and reluctantly, Barbara was given Friday, Saturday and Sunday as bereavement leave and Monday and Tuesday nights as her regular days off. On Saturday, the nurse manager called Barbara and coldly told her she had approved three days bereavement leave and was sorry that her mother had died. No one from her new unit came to the funeral home or went to the funeral. When Barbara returned to work the day shift on Wednesday, only one nurse, the float social worker, and the area chaplain were consoling. In the middle of her first shift, Barbara started to cry and briefly left the area. One nurse offered to help by calling the nurse manager for relief so Barbara could go home. The other nurses paid little attention. She thought she overheard one nurse say to the other, "What's the matter with her? By now she should be able to manage her feelings and get on with it."

### Father Mark

Father Mark is a 35-year-old assistant chaplain and serves in a hospice, a nursing home, and a rural community hospital. As the living quarters for the clergy are located 17 miles away in the next community, Mark requested permission to rent a small apartment in the community where he worked because he was frequently on night call and did not like driving, especially in winter. To his surprise, he was offered accommodations by a local physician.

In addition to his dislike of night driving, Mark has a mild residual limp resulting from a childhood disease. He frequently suffers from extreme fatigue when physically overtaxed or sleep deprived. However, he hides this from most of his peers because of their tendency to gossip and be critical. His supervising chaplain lives on church property in the

next community and works within walking distance at the large teaching hospital. He and several other male clergy who lived in the same residence could not understand Mark's request. They were upset and avoided him as much as possible. Only the housekeeper and cook were speaking to him.

Mark's desire to be more independent and have his own parish made him fearful of short-circuiting his supervisor. From previous discussions, Mark knew that if he approached the Bishop he might be reassigned to a less desirable posting. For Mark, it is not the hospice, nursing home, or hospital that are challenging his wellness; it is those directly in charge of his career, his work assignment, and his living conditions.

# Kathy

Kathy, age 25, is a quiet, intelligent, and creative physiotherapist. Last summer she took special courses and learned new skills prior to joining a private clinic employing 14 other physiotherapists. From the beginning, the clinical director was ecstatic with Kathy's skills and enthusiasm. She immediately assigned her to a special unit to work with practitioners from several other disciplines in a large rehabilitative facility. After three weeks, Kathy was shocked to learn that:

- her skills were devalued;
- referrals seldom came her way despite obvious patient need;
- several staff constantly made unsavoury comments about the patients, physicians, social worker, and nutritionist;
- the clinical director was seldom present and leadership was generally lacking; and
- relatives were expected to be the major care providers and were openly criticised for their omissions or questions.

Kathy's new skills were totally lost. She found herself becoming increasingly irritable and less interested in her job. Her next step was either to request a transfer or resign her position.

### THE SEVEN CHALLENGES OF THE WORKPLACE

In contemplating the difficulties faced in these three cases, we can increase our understanding of the stressors faced by each professional

by delineating seven challenges that impact on their daily working lives:

- i. The practical-how can Barbara deal with the disproportionately heavy workload?
- ii. The physical-how can Father Mark cope and manage his physical fatigue?
- iii. The behavioural-how can Kathy maintain her professional manner and practice effectively when others behave negatively, and from Kathy's perspective, so destructively?
- iv. The emotional—how can Barbara manage her grief in such a demanding and hostile work environment?
- v. The cognitive-how can Father Mark, in his current situation, strategize to effectively meet the demands of the different organizations that he serves and fulfil the needs of his diverse clients?
- vi. The social-how can Kathy talk openly, associate with co-workers, and become part of a health care team, when she knows she is disliked as much as other professionals and her skills and abilities are not valued?
- vii. The spiritual—how can Barbara, Mark, and Kathy maintain their spiritual wellness when faced with increasingly negative work environments?

These seven focal points are typical of the challenges encountered regularly in our workplaces. They are not only the source of our stresses and frustrations but also the forces that involve and motivate many of us. These obstacles prevent many of us from acquiring and maintaining a high level of wellness and achieving a feeling of success and wholeness (Csiernik, 1995).

Of these seven aspects of workplace wellness, spirituality is the most recent to be actively studied (Adams and Csiernik, 2001). The idea of spirituality at work raises profound questions. Does a workplace have a sense of spirituality? If so, is this simply the cumulation of the spirituality of individual workers or is it a gestalt, with workplace spirituality being greater than the individual spirituality of each employee? What does the spirit of the workplace look like? What are its components? What are the qualities of working life that prevail in an environment that has little or no spiritual dimension?

## SPIRITUALITY AND THE WORKPLACE

Dr. Jack Morgan (1993) suggests that spirituality includes a person's ability to transcend the physical limits of time and space, the ability to reason, to will, be creative, and to seek meaning. Spirituality also entails self-awareness, adherence to values, being ethical, being connected with others, and maintaining a belief system that includes a religious dimension. Anderson and Worthen (1997) suggested that our spirituality hinges on three critical assumptions:

- i. an awareness of the existence of a supreme power or force;
- ii. the innate yearning of people for connection with this supreme entity; and,
- the belief that this power is interested in humans and acts upon this relationship in order to promote changes that benefit humans.

If these assumptions are correct, how does the supreme power, or God, impact on our work environments and influence change in the workplace? Are contemporary workplaces aware of such assumptions or indeed, aware of any aspects of spirituality? Are they capable of meeting any of the spiritual needs of individuals, let alone themselves? Has the typical workplace not, in fact, been antithetical to meeting individual spiritual needs and historically been a force that prevents us from reaching spiritual fulfillment? Does God, as the supreme power, really impact on our work environments and influence change in the workplace?

In comparing the spiritual components of the individual and those of the workplace, similarities are found in respect to dynamics, responsiveness to stimuli, the capacity to reason, endorsement of values and ethics, creativity, and the ability to transcend individualism (Adams, 2000). When the components of spirituality are contemplated we find that workplaces, like people, tend to be governed on some level by principles that are based on a system of values and a code of ethics. Such principles have an extensive and diverse sphere of influence and may define how to attend to their product be it treating families or disposing of hazardous waste. At the same time, each workplace is faced with the need to demonstrate creativity and remain innovative in order to compete and survive in this continuing time of rapid institutional and technological change.

Further spiritual comparisons between individuals and workplaces tend to reflect more differences than similarities. For example, workplaces are created by individuals rather than being ontological. They seek meaning in a systemic, as opposed to, a personal context and in most instances, lack a religious dimension, and certainly do not transcend an earthly presence. However, one other critical similarity should be noted. Just as individuals are vulnerable and may fear death, contemporary workplaces are vulnerable to failure and dissolution, a reality to which anyone who has experienced a plant closure can readily attest (See Table 1).

## SIX STATIONS OF OUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Percy's (1997) conceptualization of the spiritual journeys taken by both individuals and workplaces allows us to further examine the fit between the spiritual needs of ourselves and the workplace. Percy describes six stations or stages of our inner spiritual journey: innocence, independence, institution, irritation, insight and integration. We suggest that these six specific stages are readily applicable to our working lives. The first station, *innocence*, is the birthplace of hope. It is based upon trust and a belief that there is justice in the workplace environment that we are entering when we are hired by an organization. The second station, independence, revolves around the ideas and ideals of determining whom we are, where and how we fit into this new setting, and how we strive to be creative and self-sufficient. If we are successful, the outcome of independence is to become the masters of our own fate. The third spiritual station is *institution*. Here, as individuals, we are pressured to conform, to meet the standards and norms of others, and to fit into a cultural box. The workplace is among the most prominent and dominant of institutions in our society (Morgan, 1986). It can be a controlling force that may eventually overpower and disempower us as witnessed in our three case studies. Too often as individuals, we become stuck and cannot move beyond this stage in our spiritual journey, either in our personal lives or in the workplace.

The next station of our spiritual evolution, *irritation*, is perhaps the most essential and difficult stage to move through in order to continue moving toward spiritual wellness. Here, we actively seek our own destiny and rebel against the power others hold over us, especially the power of institutions and the workplace. In order to move forward, we must successfully resist external controls and achieve self-direction. It is often during this re-emergence of youthful rebellion in the face of

## TABLE 1. A Spiritual Comparison

#### Individual

Living
Sensate
Reasoning
Valuing
Ethical
Rational Thinking
Creative
Individual
Fears Dying
Seeks Meaning
Religious
Ontological
Transcends Life on Earth

## **Workplace**

Dynamic
Responsive to Stimuli
Learning and Strategizing
Valuing
Ethical
Governed by Reason
Creative
Transcends Individualism
Fears Dissolution
Seeks Place Within a System(s)
Religion Not a Factor
Created by Individuals
Earthly

controlling forces that the real truth of corporate reality is perceived. We see how our individuality is curbed and our creativity is limited. We frequently react with anger, and, if we successfully emerge from this corporate dominance, we advance to the stage of *insight*, allowing ourselves to be driven by our spirit. We shed what is unimportant and our power emanates from our soul. In the workplace, this stage involves a return to hope and a wisdom born from revisiting the why of existence and our examination of how it conforms with our working self.

The last stage of our inner journey, and our corporate journey, is *integration*. In this stage we learn to truly value ourselves for our uniqueness and reach Percy's (1997) spiritually better and deeper place. When we reach this place in our working lives, we reach a place of harmony where our sense of self and purpose is integrated with our vocation. Unfortunately, many of us are unable to experience the benefits of this stage, especially when we are employed by corporations characterised by an historic lack of spiritual wellness. We are limited in our ability to feel energised, valued, and fulfilled. Such environments support a belief that spirituality has a minimal impact on our work and that spirituality does not belong in the workplace unless it is formally sanctioned or mandated.

Returning to the work environments of Barbara, Mark, and Kathy, it is clear that their workplaces were spiritually unhealthy. Their workplaces exhibited unresolved conflicts, a lack of caring for people, continuous criticism, an endless flow of demanding tasks, top down and absentee management, a lack of recognition and respect, threats of dis-

solution or expulsion, a poor physical environment, and both real and perceived discrimination. Each employee is confronted with workplace systems and sub-systems that are rejecting, demoralising, and noxious. Each workplace contains destructive qualities that cause anxiety and spiritual demoralisation. A workplace with spiritual turmoil perpetuates physical, emotional, and social pain that results in genuine suffering.

# MANAGING AND OVERCOMING SUFFERING IN THE WORKPLACE

Historically, a key function of a strong spiritual self has been to enable us to effectively face, cope with, and overcome our personal and collective suffering (Maes, 1990). Our spirituality is essential to our belief that our suffering will be removed or that we will be rewarded or compensated in some tangible manner for the suffering that we have endured (Epstein, 1994; Frankl, 1984, and Maes, 1990). Our spirituality provides us with hope, connects us with forces beyond the present, gives us inner strength to cope, encourages us to look for meaning in our tribulations, and aids us in managing our lives and transcending our suffering (Eaton, 1988 and Highfield, 1992). Percy's concept of "shuddering," the process of living through the pain and experience of our suffering, is a critical concept to consider when examining spirituality in the workplace. Shuddering occurs when we succumb temporarily to our suffering as we are caught up in the rapids of change in our daily and working lives and react to the cumulative stress and overload. The process of shuddering in the workplace draws upon and may deplete our spiritual strength. However, it may alternatively, enhance our spiritual energy and motivate us to regain control, find new hope and new purpose in our working lives, and move through Percy's third spiritual development station of institution on to the next stations of irritation and insight. By shuddering, we learn that we can and will use our renewed energy to move forward.

Spirituality is essential in being able to find faith in ourselves, in our beliefs, and our connections to others. It is also vital in aiding us to find faith in an uncertain future. Shudderings are truly transitional points. They provide us with unique insights and even enlightenment concerning our states of being. Due to shuddering, we may find the motivation, strength, and courage to make decisions such as staying in a spiritually unhealthy workplace and applying for a position of leadership and trying to positively influence change in spite of the uncer-

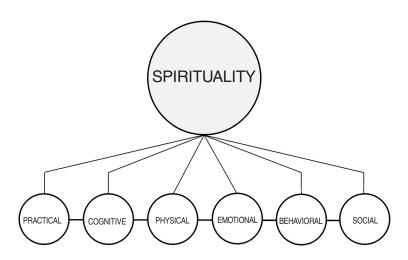
tainty. Contrarily, a shuddering may enable one to take the steps necessary to leave the workplace on one's own terms. Shuddering enables us to take risks that demonstrate initiative, creativity, and innovation as we challenge stagnation or unhealthy or unreasonable changes. At the same time, shuddering may provide us with the impetus to reorder our work and family priorities, deal with personal life-cycle crises, or take action against unresponsive systems with, or on behalf of, our clients.

# SPIRITUALITY: AN INTEGRAL COMPONENT IN MANAGING WORKPLACE CHALLENGES

Not only is spirituality in the workplace one of the seven challenges of working life, but is also an integral component of all of the other challenges. Spirituality may provide the calm for us to find that we have the tools for success in place to deal with the practical challenges of the workplace. It may assist us in coping with the physical challenges through encouraging self-care and the ability to balance the demands placed upon our physical selves. Spirituality may also contribute to meeting intellectual challenges by allowing room for humour and mutual support, particularly when we must manage demands emanating from a multitude of workplace stressors. Behaviorally, spirituality may motivate us to care for and respect each other and perhaps move towards shared responsibility or ownership of the workplace as we engage in participatory democracy, and the sharing of common tasks. Respite, positive social interaction, and diversion may be further contributions that spirituality provides in order to help us deal with the social challenges of the workplace. In summary, spirituality may thus bring serenity, energy, direction, creativity, connectedness, goal attainment, and perhaps, most importantly, hope for the future to our working lives. In reality, it is an essential force within the workplace and, as illustrated in Figure 1, can be viewed as the overriding factor that allows us to successfully meet all the challenges we encounter within the workplace.

However, the obstacles to applying spiritual principles to the workplace are many and formidable. Fixed beliefs, chronic inaction, tolerance of employee abuse and neglect, culture dicta, economic deficiencies, emotional overload, social isolation, third party

FIGURE 1. Spirituality as an Overriding Force in Meeting Workplace Challenges



forces, the unrelenting flow of information and demands created by the continually enhanced ability to communicate, and the lack of access to counsellors may all limit the spiritual growth and development of the workplace and everyone associated with it, including ourselves.

# TOWARD A SPIRITUALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACE: A ROLE FOR EAP

The keys to formulating and maintaining a spiritually healthy work-place are to be found in an organisation's ability to be responsive to human needs, to engage people in planning and managing their working lives, and to find ways to enhance how employees feel about themselves, their contribution to the workplace and its clientele, and the workplace itself. If we return to our case examples and the difficulties encountered by Barbara, Mark, and Kathy, we can recognise that in order to promote their spiritual well-being within the workplace there are some fundamental needs that must be fulfilled. Each would benefit from being:

- acknowledged and valued for their skills, capabilities, and contributions to the workplace;
- helped to gain the knowledge and skills required to engage the system and their colleagues in supporting them personally and professionally;
- respected for their knowledge, skills, and experience;
- trusted to manage themselves and their jobs effectively;
- engaged with motivated colleagues in providing a unified approach to improving their working lives; and accepted as a person with individual needs, concerns, and capabilities.

We can also suggest that for this to happen the workplace must be:

- dynamic and responsive to the needs of employees, the organization itself, and its clientele;
- posed to acted efficiently and effectively at any time;
- able to manage and resolve conflicts and differences in order to achieve internal harmony;
- connected to external systems that may benefit the organization at large, the workplace, and the personnel within it;
- willing to take pride in its self-image and enable employees to do likewise, both for themselves and the workplace;
- able to promote and maintain an environment in which employees feel needed, respected, and valued by the employer and each other;
- engaged in continuous evaluation of the human as well as the business component of the workplace;
- capable of measuring, acknowledging, and communicating success in human as well as business achievements to individuals and groups within the workplace and beyond;
- combining the acknowledgement of success, the need to continuously improve, and initiatives to resolve conflicts in order to stimulate personal motivation and promote teamwork; and,
- concerned about and tangibly engaged in promoting the health and well-being of employees, their families, their clientele, and the community at large. (Table 2)

## **CONCLUSION**

There is still much to study and learn about spirituality in the workplace. Work environments offer an exciting forum for exploration, cre-

## TABLE 2. Spiritual Wellness

#### Individual

Alive/Energetic
Feel Capable
Internal Harmony
Symptom Free
Externally Connected
Function Effectively
Positive Self-Image
Positive Mood
Satisfied

Able to Enjoy Feels Connected Excited About Life Potential

Values Higher Purpose

#### Workplace

Dynamic/Responsive
System Ready to Perform
Internal Harmony
Conflicts Managed
Externally Connected
Function Effectively
Positive Reputation
Positive Work Environment
Continuous Quality Improvement:
Always Seeking Positive
Workplace Change

Measures and Acknowledges Success Enables Team Work Excited About Future Goal Attainment

Values Altruism/Employees/Clients

ation, and innovation as we strive to understand in greater detail the spiritual evolution of people and organizations. We have examined Percy's six stations of our inner spiritual journey and their application to the workplace and we have explored how spiritually unhealthy workplaces inhibit spiritual development and inflict spiritual suffering on their employees. In so doing, we have taken advantage of Percy's creative term "shuddering" as it applies to the ability of each of us to experience and move through suffering as we proceed along a continuum of spiritual development in the workplace. We have also discussed how spirituality is both an integral and overriding force influencing the other six workplace challenges and our ability to master them successfully. Finally, we have suggested how organizations can enhance the spiritual health of the workplace, its employees, and other people and systems affected by it.

In closing, we offer a definition of workplace spirituality to assist with the fostering of spiritually healthy workplaces:

Workplace spirituality involves positively sharing, valuing, caring, respecting, acknowledging, and connecting the talents and energies of people in meaningful goal-directed behaviour that enables them to belong, be creative, be personally fulfilled, and take ownership in their combined destiny.

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