

# Spirituality and Meaning at Work

From <http://www.drpaulwong.com/spirituality-and-meaning-at-work/> which is based on his 2003 newsletter article [http://www.meaning.ca/archives/presidents\\_columns/pres\\_col\\_sep\\_2003\\_meaning-at-work.htm](http://www.meaning.ca/archives/presidents_columns/pres_col_sep_2003_meaning-at-work.htm)

A healthy dosage of spirituality and meaning at the workplace is good for business, because it improves morale and productivity. This view is gaining currency among management consultants, human resources professionals and mainstream business schools.

The movement to bring spirit and soul to business is no passing fad; it continues to grow and with no signs of abating. Clearly, something significant and enduring is stirring the corporate world.

In the last ten years, conferences on spirituality and business have mushroomed. For example, the [Leadership, Values and Spirituality Conference](#) at the Harvard Business School in April 2003 challenged business leaders to lead with integrity, reflect on their spiritual values and create a fulfilling workplace.

A search on Google and Amazon.com yields more than 200 books on spirituality and business. Some books on soul and spirit at work have been among the best sellers. Here are some of the titles: Saving Corporate Soul, Liberating the Corporate Soul, Spirit at Work, Jesus CEO, Working from the Heart, and Leading with Soul.

Academe has also embraced the movement. Harvard Business School is at the frontier of this development. The prestigious American Academy of Management has recently formed a Special Interest Group in [Management, Spirituality and Religion](#). An increasing number of journal articles are devoted to this topic. The June 2003 issue of Organization has a themed section on [Spirituality, Management and Organization](#). [The Institute for Spirituality and Organizational Leadership](#), led by Dr. Andre L. Delbecq and Dr. James J. McGee, is influential in the field. Dr. Delbecq has just published an article on "Spirituality for Business Leadership: Reporting on a Pilot course for MBAs and CEOs" in the June 2003 Issue of the Journal of Management Inquiry.

## **Spirituality at Work**

The vitality of this movement is evident in many fronts. The presence of spirituality is felt in boardrooms as well as in office cubicles. Many corporations allow employees to hold religious classes at work. Spiritual study groups at noon are called "Higher power lunches".

Prayer groups have also sprung up. For example, Boeing has Christian, Jewish and Muslim prayer groups. It is not uncommon for senior management and board members to seek moral and spiritual guidance through prayers and consulting spiritual leaders. Many companies are willing to invest money to sponsor seminars or workshops on religious wisdom, spiritual growth, yoga, meditation, balanced life, creativity and authentic communication. Both management and employees now feel more comfortable in expressing their personal faith publicly and in integrating their faith with work.

In the past decade, consultancy and ministry activities in this area have increased phenomenally. An increasing number of management consultants claim to specialize in spiritual transformation at both the individual and organizational levels. The Dallas-based [Marketplace Ministries](#) and similar organizations

have placed hundreds of chaplains at various companies and government offices to provide personal spiritual counselling and perform religious services.

This new movement has raised more questions than answers. What is the impetus to this movement? What is spirituality? Will it transform corporate America? How does spirituality influence the decision making process? How does it benefit community and humanity? How do spirituality and profitability interact? What is the downside of this newfound interest in spirituality? What kills spirituality at the workplace? Space will not permit a thorough treatment of these and other related questions. I will just briefly touch on some of these questions.

### **Why the Spiritual Interest?**

Many forces have contributed to the revival of spirituality at the workplace. These include social and economical changes and shifts in demographics of the workforce.

- Instability as a result of layoffs, downsizing, merger, and globalization
- Increased stress in remaining workers, who are required to do more for less
- Declining job satisfaction and increasing incidents of depression and burnout
- Environmental pollutions and energy crisis
- Scandals of unethical corporate behavior and the “Enron effect”
- Technology-driven information economy and its dehumanizing effect
- Workplace violence, office rage and threats of terrorism
- Unraveling of traditional institutions, such as schools and the family

In these turbulent times, it is only natural that workers turn to spirituality and religion for remedies, security and inner peace.

Since many people have to work longer hours and longer years just to survive financially, there is a greater need for them to incorporate the spiritual aspects of their lives into their work.

In order to cope with increasing feelings of stress and alienation, both managers and employees alike are trying to create meaning and purpose in the workplace. They are also searching for a renewed sense of community.

The hunger for spirituality and meaning among aging baby boomers may also contribute to this movement. Similarly, the increasing number of women joining the workforce also creates a demand for caring and nourishing at the workplace.

The holistic approach towards management suggests that it is good for people to bring their whole persons to work, their body, mind, and spirit. This approach also emphasizes the need of bridging analytical and artistic sides of workers to increase their creativity.

There is the widespread belief that for companies to survive into the 21st century in the face of economical downturn and global competition, it would be helpful to seek inspiration from Above and tap into employees’ spiritual resources.

## **What is Spirituality?**

But what is spirituality, given the many different perspectives on this question?

Spirituality overlaps with religion with respect to belief in the mystical, transcendental reality, and affirmation of meaning and purpose in the midst of suffering and death. But spirituality does not need to be confined within the structure of any organized religion or a particular set of religious beliefs. In short, spirituality is more inclusive than any faith traditions.

Spirituality should not be used as a religious garment or a marketing tool. It is concerned with substance rather than image. More specifically, it has to do with how we define ourselves, view the world, relate to others, and make ethical/moral decisions. Here are some of the attributes of spirituality within the context of work:

- Defining ourselves as having inherent values, greater than our roles, titles, and possessions
- Affirming meaning and purpose in spite of absurdity and chaos
- Emphasizing authenticity, inner wisdom, creativity and transformation
- Recognizing the immaterial, transcendental, sacred dimensions of reality
- Having a servant's attitude towards work and leadership
- Embodying spiritual values of integrity, honesty, love, kindness, and respect
- Emphasizing social responsibility toward the community, society, and environment
- Viewing God and spiritual principles as the grounding for moral decisions

In the February 2003 issue of [Christianity Today](#), Jeff Sellers points out that "Most of the New Business values fit well into Christ's kingdom: love; honor; service and servant leadership; trust-based ("covenantal") relationships between manager and employee, rather than fear-based ones dependent on corporate hierarchy; community; environmental stewardship; creativity; cooperation; qualitative company assets like a sense of achievement; competence; ethical behavior; corporate higher purpose and responsibility; and personal fulfillment and development" (p.39).

## **How to Bring Spirituality to the Workplace?**

One has to tread carefully in this matter. Imposing spirituality and religion on employees would be counterproductive. Most corporations simply encourage religious expressions at the workplace, and make some resources available to help meet employees' spiritual needs.

However, to be effective, spirituality needs to be integrated into the corporate culture and reflected in organizational policies and practices on a daily basis. This can be done only when senior management and the governing board embrace it as part of their vision. The full benefits of spirituality on morale and productivity will not be realized without a sustained, large-scale cultural transformation at all levels of the organization. When this happens, you will see the following changes at the workplace:

- The organization will become purpose-driven and meaning-based
- Management with a mission will replace a management of efficiency and control.

- There will be a shift from fear-based culture to love-based culture.
- Management practices and decisions will be clearly consistent with spiritual values such as integrity, honesty, love, hope, kindness, respect, and nurture.
- Spirituality is about bringing passion – bringing your heart, soul, and spirit – to what you do because from a spiritual perspective, work has a deeper meaning and serves a higher purpose.
- Management learns to truly listen and builds a safe place where employees can speak the truth without fear of repercussions.
- Management will break down the walls of hierarchy to create a sense of community and inspire a sense of belonging in workers.
- There is a new willingness to reflect on the meaning of life and moral implications in making important decisions.
- There is a shared attitude that products and services need to be beneficial to community and humanity.
- Management will value employees based on who they are, what they can become, rather than what they can do for the company.
- Bosses will treat employees in a responsible, respectful and caring way because people are not instruments to be used and exploited.
- Management will also resort to spiritual ways of resolving conflict. Therefore, they will be reluctant in issuing an ultimatum and slow in the “firing trigger”.
- There will be a move from command-and-control leadership to horizontal servant leadership, which emphasizes empowering, delegation and cooperation.
- There will be an improvement in morale, job satisfaction, loyalty, and productivity.
- Spiritual dimension will be fully integrated with every aspect of work life, such as relationships, planning, budgeting, negotiation, compensation, etc.

Such a company sounds like Utopia. It may not exist even among religious organizations, which wear spirituality on their sleeves and requires all employees to endorse statements of faith. A great deal of soul searching is needed to find out what is preventing management from creating a truly spiritual work climate.

## **Conclusion**

It turns out that business is more than just business. We need to consider workers’ need for meaning and spirituality in order to unleash their full potential. It is refreshing that more and more companies and corporations are embracing spiritual values.

The present spiritual movement is probably the most significant trend in management since the human-potential movement in the 50s. It appears to be a grassroots movement, as more and more people

entertain the notion that work can be meaningful and fulfilling. In the wake of the Enron debacle, management is also more willing to take spiritual and moral values seriously.

This trend will endure, simply because it speaks to the deeper needs of the human heart, and provides a promising remedy to declining job satisfaction. Even if research fails to establish a direct link between spirituality and profitability, an enlightened business attitude may still have the benefit of creating a more compassionate, caring and ethical workplace. This alone would be good news for people, who spend most of their adult lives at work.