



Spirituality: The Secret Success Factor in Project Management

Published in Industrial Engineering 2013

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Overview

This article describes how spirituality has always been a part of project management, and offers a business case for why it should be more explicitly embraced. Practical guidelines and exercises are offered to help the Project Manager who feels called to lead in a more spiritual way.

History of Spirituality in Project Management

Project Management has ancient and sacred roots, although that is not commonly recognized or talked about in the industrial engineering field. Professionals pride themselves on rationality and problem solving skills. The idea of spirituality and project management might seem odd at the very least, and at worst downright crazy. Yet if we look historically at the beginning of civilization, almost all major projects were created for a spiritual purpose. Consider the pyramids and temples that were built because of a belief in the afterlife and a desire to create a sacred place to honor the gods of the land. The Great Wall of China was designed and built over around B.C., with acres of land covering a whole army of terra cotta warriors, a circus, a menagerie of terra cotta and bronze animals, and chariots and other things that would be needed by the Emperor of China in his afterlife.

As Christianity became a dominating force in Europe, many people dedicated their lives, their skills and their riches to building beautiful and inspiring churches and cathedrals that continue to be visited by pilgrims and tourists many hundreds of years later. The same is true of building projects in all of the other major religious traditions around the world.

Humanity has evolved and developed over the ages and our consciousness has evolved. We are not superstitious, and have learned the gifts of science, rationality and problem solving. The nature of projects has also evolved; moving on from a primary focus on construction into complex science and engineering projects and more recently into IT, communications, aerospace, pharmaceuticals, nanotechnology, medicine and energy. Project Managers of modern day projects are still seeking the same kind of esprit de corps in their project teams. They want the same kind of high innovation and creativity and inspirational leadership as existed in these earlier historical projects.

Spirituality = Meaning and Purpose

As human beings, we have always felt the pull to work with others to create something of lasting value and beauty that honors the divine and the transcendent, whatever that might mean to us. Spirituality is defined as that which gives us meaning and purpose in life and which connects us to something greater than ourselves. Projects have historically provided this kind of spiritual meaning and purpose, and the potential still exists for that today. Spirituality is an inherent part of any project, just as spirituality is an inherent part of being human. We just don't typically talk about it, or we call it something else.

But there is a value to calling a spade a spade and to talking openly about spirituality in project teams. The more we can differentiate what spirituality brings to the field, the more we can consciously tap into what it has to offer to project success.

People have four different kinds of energy they bring to the work that they do: (1) physical, (2) intellectual, (3) emotional, and (4) spiritual. Cindy Wigglesworth, in her book

SQ21: The Twenty-One Skills of Emotional Intelligence, talks about each of these energies as forms of intelligence. Project Managers have primarily been interested in the IQ – the intellectual intelligence quotient – that people bring to the team. They may also be interested in PQ – the physical intelligence or the physical skills that someone can bring to a project. More recently, there has been an interest in Daniel Goleman’s ideas about EQ from his book *Emotional Intelligence* when his research demonstrated that EQ was a better predictor of leadership success than IQ.

Stephen Covey, the author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* identified spiritual intelligence as a key component of leadership. Cindy Wigglesworth defines spiritual intelligence as “the ability to behave with wisdom and compassion, while maintaining inner and outer peace, regardless of the circumstances.” If Project Managers can learn to behave with wisdom and compassion while leading their teams, and if they can tap into a deep sense of meaning and purpose for members of the project team, they are much more likely to be successful. They will be able to unleash all four types of human intelligence, which leads to higher motivation, better quality problem solving, and greater creativity.

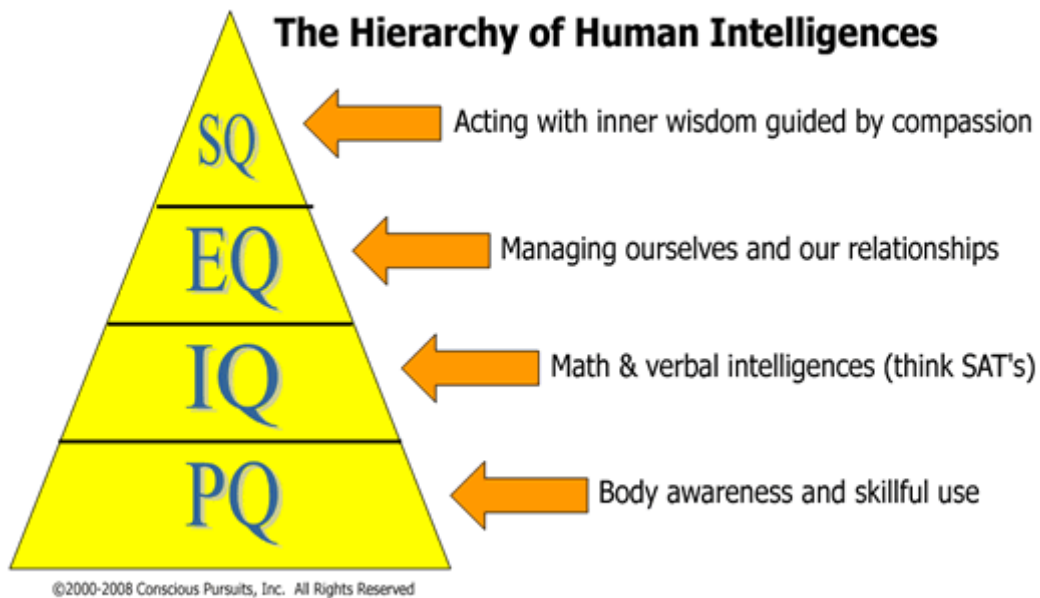


Figure 1: Wigglesworth’s Hierarchy of Human Intelligence

Resistance to Spirituality in Project Management

When you start to talk about spirituality in any work setting, including in project management, many people start to have a visceral negative reaction and a sense of trepidation. This is a normal reaction because people typically equate spirituality with religion, and are usually concerned about someone pushing their religious beliefs on others. Or they are concerned that someone will be judgmental because others are not in the “right” or “true” religion. That kind of behavior is not to be condoned in the workplace, and could actually lead to religious discrimination lawsuits. It is wise to avoid that kind of conflict and legal problems in the workplace. If the organization or project team has a strong culture in valuing differences, and a commitment to good human relations skills, potential legal problems can be avoided.

For some people, the idea of spirituality is too fluffy or soft. They equate it with New Age or touchy-feely approaches. Spirituality seems too much like superstition or irrational thinking. These people are probably not aware that there is a professional field called “spirituality in the workplace” that has been around for over 20 years. It is an interdisciplinary field of study and practice that is primarily based in the field of management, but also draws on sociology, psychology, anthropology, and theology. Classes and programs exist at elite schools such as Yale, Harvard, and Princeton; in public universities like the University of Arkansas and the University of California, and in private faith-based universities like Fordham University, Loyola University and Naropa University. In the early 1990s, the Academy of Management (the professional association for management professors) approved a special interest group called “Management, Spirituality and Religion.” This group created an academic journal titled “*The Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion*,” which accepts only the highest quality research in the field.

It might also be interesting to know that many mainstream organizations have embraced the concept of spirituality in the workplace. For instance, Ford Motor Company has an Interfaith Network that meets regularly and integrates the activity of different religious affinity groups. Bill Ford is known for his practice of Buddhism and is respected for the ways his Buddhist practice have guided Ford Motor Company towards a greater commitment to environmental sustainability. Tyson Foods, the largest protein producer in the world, prides itself on striving to be a faith-friendly organization, and it has the largest number of workplace chaplains of any company in the world. Boeing was written up in *Business Week* for bringing in the poet David Whyte to help people tap into deeper purpose and meaning and to think about how to live more in alignment with their core values. More examples can be found by studying the companies that

have received the *International Spirit at Work Award*, and the *International Faith and Spirit at Work Award*.

Spirituality: The Secret Success Factor

What does spirituality bring to Project Management that is beyond good leadership and team building? Surveys by the Pew Charitable Trust consistently show that around 95% of all Americans believe in God or some form of higher being. People who see themselves as spiritual are more likely to desire to live ethically, to work harmoniously with others, to be of service to others, and to make a positive difference in the world through their work. Each person has a certain amount of discretionary energy that they can bring to their work. If they are angry, feel undervalued or feel uninspired, they will not use that discretionary energy in service of the project. They will do what is required, but no more.

But if they see that the purpose of the project is in alignment with their spirituality, and if the values of the Project Team are in alignment with their spiritual values, they will bring every bit of that discretionary energy to the work. They will be engaged body, mind, heart, and spirit.

Research and case studies on spirituality in the workplace are showing that the kind of outcomes leaders can expect from the integration of spiritual values and practices in work include:

- A greater sense of service to internal and external stakeholders
- Higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment
- In hospitals, an increase in nursing retention and in patient satisfaction scores
- Greater creativity and innovation
- Higher ethics

- An increased commitment to sustainability and to community involvement

At this point there is only anecdotal evidence in the field of Project Management that these kinds of outcomes are likely for project teams. But it seems to make sense that if a Project Manager can create a framework where team members can really see and feel the higher purpose of the project, where people are encouraged to live their spiritual values in their work, and where they feel committed to something greater than themselves, there is a greater likelihood of positive human and organizational outcomes.

Daryl Conner, founder of ConnerPartners, one of the most successful change management consulting groups in the U.S., firmly believes that spirituality is the critical success factor for their firm. The company hires people who are open about having a connection to something greater than themselves, however the employee might define that, and they then invest in programs and coaching that support each person's unique spiritual development. They have found that their consultants have "presence," a kind of spiritual energy that clients are drawn too. Clients will say, "There is something different about the people from ConnerPartners. I can't put my finger on it, but it works." If you think back to Project Managers that are memorable because of their leadership style and their ability to create successful teams, you are likely to remember that they had a kind of "presence."

George Pitagorsky, in *The Zen Approach to Project Management*, describes the importance of Project Managers staying centered and operating from a strong sense of spiritual integrity, especially given the competing demands of client expectations, unexpected delays and costs, and unplanned for surprises and delays. If a Project Manager and his or her team have a shared sense of meaning and purpose about the project, and a shared sense of values and

commitment to being centered, there is a much higher likelihood of handling the challenges that arise with presence and equanimity.

Getting Started

Project Managers do not decide to integrate spirituality and project management in order to improve the schedule or the bottom line, even though that might actually be the result. Those who take a spiritual approach to project management do so because of who they are, and from a desire to live an authentic and integrated life. It is a spiritual calling for them. Because explicit expressions of spirituality in the workplace can be uncomfortable for some, and even feel oppressive to others, it is of the utmost importance to create a safe environment in the project team before beginning any kind of approach to integrating greater spirituality. As mentioned earlier, many people confuse terms like faith, spirituality and religion, and become very concerned that someone may try to force their spiritual views on them. If this were to happen, it would be very disruptive to the relationships on the project team and to the project itself.

The best way to begin to create a safe environment is to have a discussion about team members' understanding of spirituality. Here is a very simple introductory exercise that has been used with thousands of people as a way to comfortably introduce conversations about the connection between spirituality and work. Begin by creating three flip charts or a white board with three columns with the words "faith," "religion," and "spirituality." It would look like this:

Figure 2: Chart for brainstorming definitions

FAITH	RELIGION	SPIRITUALITY

Project team members are asked to brainstorm words that they feel help define or describe each of these three words. Often there are words that fit into more than one column. As

people list words, write them in the column that they tell you to put them in. It is okay to ask for clarification, but it is important not to try to guide or control the conversation. After the list feels complete to everyone, open up the discussion and ask people what they see as the similarities and differences between these concepts. This feels like a safe way to begin exploring ideas around spirituality, because the definitions have come from the team itself, not imposed from someone else.

After the discussion, the Project Manager can offer dictionary definitions of these terms. It is important to emphasize that the team not be talking about religion, which is personal and private, but that the goal is to create an environment where people feel safe in talking about what they have faith in, and what feels spiritual and inspirational to them. This exercise and similar activities are described more in depth in *The Spirit of Project Management* by Judi Neal and Alan Harpham.

Spiritual Skill: Deep Listening

If a Project Manager wants to create an environment where people are encouraged to bring their spirituality and to grow spiritually through the work of the project, one of the skills that can be developed is deep listening. This skill can be developed at the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, the team, and the transcendent level.

At the intrapersonal level, deep listening consists of a willingness to take contemplative time in silence to discern what is calling you, and whether or not the project is in alignment with core personal values. At the interpersonal level, team members listen to each other at a very deep level with caring and compassion. Both head and heart are engaged, and listening is not

only to what's said, but also to what's unsaid. Deep listening at the team level can consist of taking time for silence when the direction of the project is unclear, or when there is conflict that is going nowhere. The Project Manager can set the tone in a different project team meeting by saying, "Let's just take a moment of quiet to sit here in quiet and let things settle down. Then let's see if something new wants to emerge." Deep listening at the transcendent level is the practice of getting in touch with, and communicating about, the deeper meaning and purpose of the project and the benefit to the world. In some teams, there can be a feeling that the work is divinely guided or inspired by something greater than the team or even the client, and deep listening can be the willingness to notice that and honor that inspiration.

Guidelines for Spirituality and Project Management

The following guidelines may be helpful in the beginning of any program having to do with spirituality and project management.

- Spirituality is defined primarily as meaning, purpose, and wanting to make a difference
- No proselytizing or promoting of religion
- Understand that everyone is a spiritual being
- Be willing to listen to differences in life experiences and to value and honor them.
- Identify shared values and principles that everyone on the team can agree to
- Commit to a culture of valuing diversity

It is helpful at the beginning of a new project to pull the team members together to look at the practical aspects of the project such as goals, milestones, due dates, client expectations, budget, and

critical path analysis. In addition, consider also focusing on the value of a spiritual approach to a project, clarifying definitions as described earlier, having discussions about values, creating values alignment, and creating a safe environment for bringing in this spiritual aspect of our work experience.

Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am” (Matthew 18:20). Hindus gather together in Satsang, or spiritual community, as an important part of evolving in their consciousness. Native Americans gather in Wisdom Councils for spiritual guidance about major decisions that affect the tribe and future generations. All of the faith traditions have spiritual practices that incorporate a group of people coming together for some higher purpose. Each tradition has something to offer to project teams that truly want to tap into the deeper dimensions of meaning, purpose and commitment to the project. Many resources, such as books, consultants and websites, exist to help the Project Manager who is interested in exploring how these spiritual practices might be applicable to the project he or she is leading.

In our book, *The Spirit of Project Management*, Alan Harpham and I describe five approaches that a Project Manager might consider when leading project management teams in a spiritual way:

1. Alignment: Aligning vision, meaning, and purpose at the team level.
2. Spiritual leadership: Seeing oneself as a Servant Leader to the team and being committed to helping each team member be a Servant Leader to others.
3. Esprit de corps: Understanding and honoring the collective spirit of the team.
4. Communication: Using non-traditional communication methods as a way of building trust and openness.
5. Creativity: Recognizing that inspiration comes from Spirit, and utilizing group spiritual practices from the wisdom traditions to support inspired problem solving.

There is not enough space here to go into all five approaches, but for purposes of illustration, here is one example of a spiritual approach to team alignment at the beginning of a new project. This is based on the Native American process of vision questing.

Consider kicking your project off in a project management planning retreat. Select a retreat location where team members have access to nature, whether that be gardens, a forest, or seashore. After sharing your personal vision, meaning and purpose of the project, invite team members to spend time in nature, reflecting on their personal vision, meaning, and purpose for the project. Ideally, plan to schedule at least one hour for them to be in nature, and one hour for processing their experience. Depending on team size, you may need more time, or you may need to break them down into smaller groups to process their experience.

In your instructions for their vision quest, the Project Manager can ask them to look to nature for symbols and messages. In all wisdom traditions, spiritual leaders from time immemorial have gone into nature for guidance from God. A vision quest is the process of seeking a vision and asking for guidance from the spiritual world about the purpose and meaning of what you are about to undertake. It helps if each person brings a journal, and the leader can suggest that if they receive a message from nature, they can bring back a symbol of that message.

When people return, they can assemble into a circle for a wisdom council meeting. Each team member shares something about their experience and the message they brought back, knowing that the message is not just for them, but for the community that is the project team.

Here's a specific example we shared in *The Spirit of Project Management*:

The former CEO of Rockport Shoes, Angel Martinez, is a very spiritual man and took a spiritual approach to the way he ran the business. As a result of his inspired leadership, the company did a major turnaround from losing a lot of money to becoming one of the most profitable businesses in the shoe industry. The company was growing and needed a new corporate headquarters. Mr. Martinez shared his vision of the company culture as being one that nurtured the artist within. At a project planning retreat for the design of the new headquarters, each of the top managers of the organization was asked to take a camera and to go into nature for one hour to look for a symbol or message of what the new corporate headquarters should be like. When the managers returned, they loaded their photos onto a computer and each person showed one or two photos and talked about their photo of a rock, leaf, bird or stone, provided a vision for what they would like to see in the corporate headquarters and how they would like the new design to support the organizational culture. The Vice-President of Human Resources pulled all their ideas together and that collective vision created the basis for the architectural plans of the new building. Thomas Merton, the famous Trappist contemplative monk of the Abbey of Gethsemane, also used photographs to capture images of the God within. (p. 79)

The Secret

The secret of successfully integrating spirituality and project management is to be very committed to your own spiritual development, while creating an environment that allows others to develop along their unique spiritual path. There is no formula or guidebook, but a connection to something greater than oneself, through prayer, meditation, being in nature, or other means, can be a powerful resource for you in your leadership, and will have immeasurable positive benefits of the members of your team, and for all of the project's stakeholders.

Bio

Judi Neal received her Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior from Yale University and has been studying spirituality in the workplace since 1992. She is the Director of the Tyson Center for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace at the University of Arkansas, and President of Neal & Associates. She is the founder of the Center for Spirit at Work and the creator of the International Spirit at Work Awards, and serves on the Management, Spirituality and Religion Interest Group executive board. Judi is the author of *Edgewalkers: People and Organizations that Take Risks, Build Bridges and Break New Ground*, co-author with Alan Harpham of *The Spirit of Project Management*, editor of *The Handbook for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace*, and author of *Creating Enlightened Organizations*. She is a consultant, executive coach, internationally recognized speaker, and a guitar player.