



Teaching about Spirituality and Work: Experiential Exercises for Management Educators

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Abstract

The linkage of spirituality and work is finding increasing acceptance in university classrooms and corporate training programs. In recent years conferences, books, and scholarly research have expanded the dialogue pertaining to these seemingly antithetical concepts. While spiritual life emphasizes the importance of faith, charity, collaboration, and reflection, business practices portray a world driven by competition, performance, and financial success.

The management educator faces the problem of reconciling these two different worlds in a manner that is relevant for the corporate trainee, the university student, and other potential audiences. While books and case examples on this topic are available, there is little written about effective experiential exercises that help students and trainees apply the lessons of spirituality at work to their own circumstances. A framework for discussing spirituality at work will be introduced followed by a sequence of experiential exercises designed to facilitate understanding and application in a way that is meaningful for each participant and inclusive of different perspectives.

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Spirituality and work have been increasingly linked by management educators and researchers as a promising approach to workplace improvement . In recent years, the burgeoning number of conferences, books, and scholarly articles on this topic has begun to establish spirituality and work as a mainstream topic in the management classroom. From early writings (Neal,1997, 1998; Bolman and Deal, 1995; Naylor, Willimon and Osterberg 1995), which introduced the spiritual side of work to management educators, to more recent works which have attempted to establish meaningful definitions and models of spirituality at work (Biberman and Whitty, 2000; Barnett, Krell and Sendry, 2000; Krishnakumar and Neck, 2002, Mitroff and Denton, 1999), the interest and enthusiasm for applying spiritual values to affect solutions to business problems and to enhance quality of life for organization members continues to grow.

Perhaps a telling measure of the maturation of the concept of spirituality in academic circles is the number of management journals devoting special issues to this topic. Most recently, The Leadership Quarterly published a special issue (2005) entitled Toward a Paradigm of Spiritual Leadership and the International Journal of Organizational Analysis published a special edition on Spirituality in Organizations (2005). In a forthcoming volume, The Journal of Management, Spirituality, and Religion has devoted an issue to Virtues in Organizations.

Scholarship in this domain now includes articles reviewing the development of scales to measure spirituality (Fornaciari, Sherlock, Ritchie, and Lund Dean, 2005) and the empirical outcome research of Duchon and Plowman (2005) which identified that work units with higher scores on scales of spirituality exhibited higher performance data than their lower scoring counterparts. Far reaching conceptual papers such as Pearce, Waldman and Csikszentmihalyi

(forthcoming) propose a theoretical model and a research agenda for studying virtuous leadership.

There are also numerous anecdotal reports published that support some of the promising empirical and conceptual works underway. Aburdene (2005) examines the example of Australia's ANZ Bank which went from least-preferred employer to employer of choice in four years including winning Bank of the Year Award three years running and the 2004 International Spirit at Work Award after creating a novel program based on spiritual tools to improve employee satisfaction.

In a body of related work that attempts to understand the role of positive organizational phenomena -- i.e. that which represents the best of the human condition in organizations -- Kim Cameron, Jane Dutton, and Robert Quinn are spearheading an effort to explore existing empirical research and stimulate further emphasis in this perspective. In their book Positive Organizational Scholarship (2003) they point out that the positive side of organizational life has received little attention from management scholars when compared to the traditional research emphasis on organizational dysfunction and problem resolution.

While management scientists continue to refine and develop definitions, theories, models and empirical studies, management educators and trainers face the enduring problem of introducing the concepts of spirituality and work to students of management and organizational employees who are likely to view work from a financial performance and competition paradigm rather than from a frame of reference that incorporates a spiritual view of work.

Although scholars and consultants might find the idea of combining spirit and work a fruitful undertaking for improving organizations, this blending is not a "natural" combination for

most practicing managers or students of business. For many, an introduction to the concept of spirituality in the management classroom is their first institutional exposure to these ideas.

When the concept of spirituality at work is introduced in the management classroom a predictable response often occurs. That is, one or more participants remark that the lofty moral and ethical intentions of a spiritually assisted workplace are often in direct opposition to the harsh financial realities of the marketplace, where the bottom-line performance measures govern corporate survival. While common sense might view these perspectives as antithetical, recent research findings suggest otherwise. In the book Positive Organizational Scholarship (Cameron, Dutton and Quinn, 2003), the authors investigate the impact of “goodness” and “positive human potential” (Cameron et al p. 4) on organizational outcomes. More specifically, they contrast the world of work typified by greed, manipulation and wealth creation with another kind of work environment emphasizing appreciation, virtuousness, and human well-being. Scholarly researchers investigating the former worldview study problem solving and competitive strategies while the latter worldview examines, “theories of excellence ... positive deviance ... and positive spirals of flourishing” (Cameron et al 2003 p. 3).

Based on the concept of Positive Psychology (Seligman and Csikzentmihalyi, 2000) Cameron’s own research on virtuousness and performance (Cameron, 2003) indicated that when perceptions of virtuousness in organizations are high, those organizations enjoy higher levels of profitability than comparable organizations with lower levels of perceived virtuousness. What makes these findings even more impressive is the fact that the data were collected from organizations that had recently engaged in downsizing. Cameron (2003) goes on to show that virtuousness in organizations can amplify, or foster escalating positive consequences (Cooperider, 2000) and buffer the organization against the negative outcomes of organizational

events such as downsizing “by enhancing resiliency, solidarity, and sense of efficacy” (Cameron, 2003 pg. 62, Masten et al., 1999).

Mitroff and Denton’s seminal book on workplace spirituality (1999) includes a definition of spirituality which emphasizes virtues, stating that spirituality is inextricably connected to virtues such as “caring, hope, kindness, love, and optimism.” The concept of virtuousness may offer a methodology for initiating a classroom conversation about spirituality which honors the diversity of spiritual sources among individuals yet aligns co-workers on activities that can lend to the “social betterment” of the organization (Cameron, 2003, pg. 50). As Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) state, “The spiritual freedom model” of spiritual expression at work... “represents the implementation where people in an organization are encouraged to express their views of spirituality. Here the organization doesn’t establish any particular spiritual principle as common to all its employees.” The challenge, according to Thompson (2000), is to connect the diverse spiritual paths of individual employees to a common set of beneficial outcomes for the organization.

In our exploration of the best ways to introduce the topic of spirituality in the workplace to business school students, we have come to believe that language is the first issue for the management educator to address. The challenge is how to bridge the personal, internal, and private language of individual spirituality with the inclusive and public language of the classroom and of the working world. Manz, Marx, Neal & Manz (forthcoming) have emphasized the importance of language for creating an inclusive working definition of spirituality. They suggest that using the language of “virtues” and “organizational virtuousness” can be an effective way to introduce this topic in the classroom.

Nevertheless, it can be a formidable challenge for management educators to introduce the topic of spirituality and work to a room full of engineers, accountants, blue collar supervisors, driven MBA students and busy executives whose attention is usually focused on “more pressing matters.”

However, once a theoretical and empirical basis for challenging the notion of the incompatibility of organizational virtuosity and high levels of organizational performance is established, students are more prepared to engage in the process of reconciling virtuous behavior in the organization with the bottom line. Thus it is helpful to provide a brief lecturette on the positive results connected to spirituality and virtuousness in the workplace as a way of establishing some credibility and relevance for students before inviting them to participate in experiential exercises.

The Public Face of Spirituality at Work

One approach to introducing the concept of spirituality at work to the management classroom is to use a sequence of exercises that begin to explore the nature of the workplace, what it is like to work in it currently, and what it might become. By examining the organization first, we have often been able to gain a consensus in the class for the need for improvement in the quality of work life and the level of effectiveness.

Following are two examples of exercises that can be used to introduce students to the value of exploring the link between spirituality and the workplace:

“The Messenger”: A Powerful Video Case of Spirituality in the Workplace

Video has been shown to impact classroom learning in a number of beneficial ways, including the heightening of affective arousal toward the subject matter (Hannafin, 1986) and orienting the learner to what is to be focused on in the video segment (Hooper and Hannafin, 1991). By motivating and arousing students’ interest in the topic to be learned, video segments have been shown to make students more responsive to content-based instruction that follows (Keller and Suzuki, 1988). When used effectively, video segments increase both motivation and comprehension (Keys and Wolfe, 1988, Marx and Frost, 1998).

One video segment that has been shown to successfully introduce the concept of Spirituality at Work into the management classroom is the January 4, 2001 edition of ABC’s *Nightline*, which featured a New York pediatric surgeon, Dr. Fred Epstein (Marx, Manz, Manz, Cameron, 2003). Moderated by *Nightline* correspondent Ted Koppel, the segment depicts the transition of Epstein from his life-long attraction to high-tech surgical techniques through a paradigm shift that altered forever how he practiced medicine. As the thoughtful surgeon reads a poem he reviewed from a dying patient he stops at a line, “take my trembling hand and warm it with your touch”. With a tear in his eye he asks, “How many trembling hands have I not held?”

Without giving up his appreciation of technology, Epstein applies his new insights to completely revamp his practice, which now includes parents wearing scrubs and bringing their child into the operating room and even holding the anesthetic mask over the child’s face so that the last image seen before succumbing to the anesthetic slumber is the parents. Although the video only uses the word “spirit” occasionally, it is the expression of spirit which permeates the story. The learnings from “The Messenger” emphasize the ability of a technically driven professional to transcend the limitations of the mechanics of medicine and integrate it into a

creative, inspirational, and meaningful way of recognizing the humanity of his patients, his colleagues, and himself.

While this video uses the medical profession as its backdrop, it is the integration of technology and humanity that ties the segment more broadly to the business classroom. Even though systematic empirical research has not been undertaken regarding the specific effects of this segment on student performance outcomes (Marx, et al., 2003) numerous anecdotal reports of its successful use have been received.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the usefulness of this story in initiating productive discussions about spirit at work lies in the absence of a specific spiritual source. This avoids the problem of appearing to promote a particular religious or ethical perspective. While the boy's poem served as the inspiration to Dr. Fred Epstein, there is no advocacy of poetry as a tool that will necessarily move others in a similar way. Rather students' acceptance of a poem's message as a breakthrough for the surgeon gives class members permission to revisit their own breakthrough moments at school or work and examine how such insights might be used for their own personal growth and potential beneficial workplace outcomes.

"The Messenger" is used here as only one example of numerous other possible stories and videos, that can provide a potent concrete, classroom example of spiritual behavior at work. Such case examples can effectively initiate a discussion of the concept of spirituality at work and blend nicely with experiential activities and frameworks such as those discussed by Barnett, Krell and Sendry (2000,) Mitroff and Denton (1999), and Krishnakumar and Neck (2002). Concepts and case examples from the spirituality at work literature can be effective at the end of a discussion that is stimulated by videos or stories. Students can then be asked to identify specific actions that they might undertake to impact their own work situation in a similar manner.

Spiritual Virtues in the Workplace Exercise

This exercise begins with a set of virtues, which may be based on a number of sources. In addition to the virtues already mentioned by Mitroff and Denton (1999), Cameron (2003) suggests forgiveness, optimism, hope, compassion, and integrity, while Manz, Manz, Marx, & Neck (2001) add faith, courage, integrity, justice, and wisdom.

The procedure for the Spiritual Virtues in the Workplace exercise begins with the facilitator selecting a set of five virtues (i.e., integrity, compassion, courage, optimism, and wisdom).

Posters displaying a single word in large bold print corresponding with each of the 5 virtues are placed on the walls in separate locations around the room. Participants are asked to view the list of selected virtues and select one that has proved particularly problematic for them in their own workplace. Participants write about their situation on a large post-it note describing how the absence of this virtue impacted their own organization. When finished, everyone affixes their post-it note onto the poster displaying the name of their chosen virtue. Participants stand near the poster bearing the virtue of their choice, reading about the situations of others as they are posted. When all participants have completed their post-it stories and are standing beside the appropriate poster, everyone at each poster is asked to form a subgroup. Each “virtue group” is then given 30-45 minutes to meet (separate from the other groups) to share the examples/stories they listed on their post-its and to create a five minute role play which clearly depicts the conflict posed by the juxtaposition of a situation based on a business value and their chosen virtue. For example, participants in the “compassion” group frequently act out the downsizing

of a competent employee, while showing little regard for the impact of the action on the individual, but focusing on the fiscal savings to the firm that the firing will accomplish.

Role plays may be an amalgamation of several stories with a common theme or may be based largely on one participant's example. Following the role-play, the group is responsible for facilitating a discussion among all the remaining groups on what was observed in the role-play and how their conflict might realistically be reconciled in a more compassionate workplace. Using the feedback received and insights gained during this discussion the "Virtue Team" huddles briefly and performs a shortened, revised version of their role play which includes ways that an organization might embrace virtuous activity without sacrificing the bottom line. As each team presents their role plays, the concept of virtuous organizational activity can be elicited in an engaging way that offers several examples of organizational deficits in virtuousness and how these scenarios can be reasonably resolved.

When this exercise is combined with a video case that affords a positive example of spirituality at work, we have observed that participants feel grounded by the emerging examples of organizational virtuousness and lack thereof, and feel ready to examine their own possible personal spiritual sources. Rather than viewing spirituality at work as a completely religious or mystical concept, participants are primed to build on these activities, to explore from a common ground organizationally beneficial spiritual behaviors and to further examine their own spiritual roots and how they are manifested in their own behavior at work.

Private Sources of Spiritual Behavior at Work

After watching a video segment rich in examples of spirituality at work and then identifying and enacting organizational scenarios that depict a less than adequate implementation

of virtuousness at work, the stage is set to examine the more private spiritual worlds of class participants. Interesting questions arise. What is the diversity of sources that contribute to the individual's path that must ultimately merge with the sources of others to produce congruent beneficial outcomes for the organization? To what degree does religion connect with spirituality given the many religious and non-religious differences inherent in the participants in a classroom or organizational setting? What frameworks can be useful for helping participants examine their own spiritual roots and paths while remaining tolerant and inclusive to the plethora of perspectives that will be mentioned during these activities including those that base their organizational performance on ethical, scientific, legal, economic, and other "nonspiritual" sources.

Here we will share three experiential exercises that have been successfully used by management educators to help individuals explore this sector of their lives, not often tapped in the secular world of business or in business education settings.

Brainstorming the Relationship Between Spirituality and Religion.

This exercise begins by stating to the class that there is a lot of confusion about how to appropriately address spirituality in the workplace because some people are concerned that the topic implies a focus on religion. We then make it clear that we are not talking about religion and explain that it is important to understand the differences in terms. We write the word "Spirituality" on one blackboard or flip chart, and the word "Religion" on another. Then we brainstorm. Ample time is allowed for clarification.

As each person calls out a word or phrase, we ask them which column it goes in. At first the words are pretty clear, but pretty quickly we get into words that are not so

clearly delineated, like “community” or “love.” We encourage students to discuss and debate these words to find out what people mean, and usually someone says, “I think they go in both columns.” So then we create a third category of terms that fit both spirituality and religion. The discussion helps people to become aware of any biases or stereotypes that they might have in regards to either concept. By the end of this brainstorming exercise, people are more comfortable with the idea of spirituality, in part, because they have helped define it. Then we can begin a discussion of what spirituality in the workplace might mean, and what it might look like.

Spiritual Perception, Awareness and Practice Exercise

Barnett, Krell and Sundry (2000) bemoan the lack of available tools for business school faculty who wish to teach about spirituality. They have developed a framework that offers students a set of categories for examining their spiritual path including mystical, personal, ritual and a related continuum of public to private regarding how their chosen spiritual path is experienced. They also describe a three part experiential exercise, for introducing spirituality at work into the management classroom. The first part asks the participants to think about a time when they have been feeling particularly spiritual. This part is kept private. In part two, participants are asked to think about someone they know or have met whom they believe to be a very spiritual person, ... and why... This part is shared. The final part asks, how the approaches to spiritual development used by themselves and the person they identified in part two are different. The answer to this question is shared with the instructor in a journal entry.

Spiritual Lifeline Exercise

The final exercise in this sequence is one that should be used after the group has built a sense of trust, safety and connectedness. It is the most personal of all the exercises we have offered, but it is also the one that allows for the student or workshop participant to truly integrate his or her own spiritual journey with his or her career journey.

This exercise allows the student to reflect on significant events in his or her spiritual life and career life. Often we keep these two parts of our lives separate. By creating lifelines for one's spiritual path and for one's career path, participants can begin to examine how these parts of life may actually overlap.

Each person is asked to symbolically portray on a lifeline the "critical spiritual events" and the "critical work events" in their lives. They are instructed to not use words, only drawings or symbols. Artistic ability is actually a hindrance in this exercise, because artists spend too much time on the aesthetics instead of their own unfolding life story. Participants are told to keep the symbols simple, but make them identifiable enough so that they know what significant event they stand for. If there is time, the instructor may want to ask participants to portray where they think their spiritual path and their career path may be going in the future. (Note: this part of the exercise works best when people can go to someplace where they can be quietly reflective and alone, ideally in or near nature.) This takes about 20 minutes.

The next part of the exercise is to have participants share their lifelines with each other. If the group is small, have everyone share their drawings with the entire group. It helps to create an environment of deeply respectful listening. If the group is large, ask people to form groups of 2 - 3 people and allow them at least 20-25 minutes to share their drawings. At the end of this time, ask for 2 or 3 volunteers to share their drawings with the whole group.

We have used these exercises in undergraduate and graduate business classes, in church groups, at business conferences, and with executive groups at strategic planning retreats. It seems to work well with any group, although it is a little more difficult with those who have not had much life or work experience.

One caveat to be considered in all of these experiential exercises is the instructor's responsibility to maintain inclusivity of language such that each person's private terminology for describing sources of their inspiration to work for the common good through the expression of positive workplace outcomes (such as trust, creativity or courage) is honored. Manz, Marx, Neal, and Manz (forthcoming) discuss the necessity of including the nonspiritually based language of science, law, ethics, etc. for those who do not espouse spiritual sources for their workplace behavior, yet agree that a common set of beneficial "social betterment" outcomes for the organization is a worthwhile pursuit.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The interest in understanding how spirituality can enhance the workplace continues to grow (Roberson, 2004; Twigg, 2004; Fry, 2005; Manz, Marx, Neal and Manz (forthcoming)). Notably, the recent introduction of the discipline of Positive Organizational Scholarship (Cameron et al. 2003) provides theoretical and empirical work that attempts to understand and evaluate the importance of virtuousness and performance (Cameron, 2003), courageous principled action (Worline and Quinn, 2003) and fostering meaningfulness in working and at work (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). Positive Organizational Scholarship also offers organizational scholars who are trying to understand the concept of spirituality at work, a number of promising avenues for exploration.

In the meantime, proponents of spirit at work as a potentially powerful beneficial force in organizations have begun to include such concepts in the traditional business school curricula. While scholars have developed a number of provocative theories and some promising empirical findings, classroom instructors and organizational practitioners struggle to find experiential exercises that can impact modern students and business people while walking the treacherous borders between person and organization, public-private values, religious-spiritual language, and more.

In this paper we have introduced several classroom-tested activities, which might be used to accomplish this objective. While our support for the usefulness of these exercises is primarily anecdotal, we have found them to be consistently effective learning tools in a variety of management educational settings.

Similarly, the order of the exercises has yet to be evaluated as to whether the emphasis on organizational level considerations should precede a focus on personal individual considerations or vice versa. However, our experience tells us that it is easier to start with the more abstract organizational experiences and once trust and safety have been created people are more comfortable with exploring the more personal aspects of spirituality in the workplace. While we await careful, empirical analysis of these activities, participant feedback has been largely supportive.

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