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Organisational spirituality – away with the fairies?

Eve Poole suggests how the concept of organisational spirituality may help organisations to achieve some breakthrough in the intractable problems associated with employee motivation, engagement and well-being.

Does the notion of 'organisational spirituality' have any relevance outside the ivory towers of academia? The topic has now become an accepted focus for academic research, with dedicated issues appearing in peer-reviewed journals such as the *Journal of Organisational Change Management* and *The Leadership Quarterly*. Even the venerable American Academy of Management has had a special interest group for Management Spirituality and Religion since 2001. But is this a manufactured fad designed merely to feed a publish-or-perish culture, or is there something in this field that might be of help to organisations in a more practical way? In the same way that *The Da Vinci Code* sparked off a flurry of imitations and parodies, the emergence of the spirit at work phenomenon has generated a vast array of rather patchy material. This article sifts through the emerging literature to extract some nuggets for organisations.

A meaning-making construct

First, it is useful to examine the way in which this particular piece of jargon is used. In general, a distinction is usually drawn between spirituality and religion, where the former is perceived to be more inclusive and less encumbered with ideological baggage than the latter. Apart from being 'not religion', spirituality in the workplace is generally taken to encompass a basket of related concepts:

meaning, wholeness, integrity, inter-connectedness, creativity, ethics and transformation. While it would be neat to find one concrete definition, the ephemeral nature of the concept of spirituality, and its very personal interpretation, suggests that to seek too much clarity might rob the concept of its meaning. However, the general message behind the search for a definition is that spirituality is generally perceived to be a meaning-making construct. When people are asked about their spirituality – whether they express it as religious belief or more generally – they tend to explain it in terms of giving their lives purpose, and this is what makes it so attractive in an organisational context.

The benefits

There are a number of both 'hard' and 'soft' reasons why organisations might want to take this concept seriously.

The 'hard' benefits

Fulfilling obligations

One 'hard' reason is the need for employers, in an increasingly multi-cultural environment, to show that they are allowing their staff the right to free expression of their beliefs, as enshrined in Human Rights and anti-discrimination legislation. Court cases within Europe about religious dress in schools – as well as an increasing number of US workplace cases – may be the tip of a much larger iceberg, so there is a corporate risk issue about the extent to which expression of either religion in particular or spirituality in general in the workplace needs to be formalised as company policy, and how defensible any policy is in law.

Improving performance

A second 'hard' reason relates to the bottom line. Several famous studies have looked at what differentiates leading companies from their competitors. These studies have universally found that organisations that are able to inspire employee loyalty to a higher 'cause' substantially out-perform their peers, because of the increase in motivation and commitment this tends to generate[1]. Their findings suggest that where companies are able to understand the spiritual yearnings of their staff and are able to help them to find ways to address these through the work of the organisation, they gain their deeper allegiance and increased discretionary effort. They have also found that, where levels of employee motivation are low, any percentile increase in employee engagement increases organisational output and therefore profits. Where people are encouraged to flourish, organisational performance improves, so spirituality initiatives tend to produce a demonstrable financial return.

For instance, research carried out by Georgeanne Lamont in the UK amongst 'soul-friendly' companies such as Happy Computers, Bayer UK, NatWest, IMG, Microsoft UK, Scott Bader and Peach Personnel showed that these had universally lower-than-average rates of absenteeism, sickness and staff turnover, which saved them significant sums of money[2]. One UK company, Broadway Tyres, had absenteeism rates of 25-30% which, after they introduced spiritual practices, dropped to a steady 2%[3]. Other research carried out under the auspices of the 100 Best Companies to Work For project showed that the stock of the best companies – where criteria for inclusion include high ratings for employee communication, respect, fairness, diversity and philanthropy – outperforms the stock of their competitors by over 100%. While these findings could suggest merely a correlation, the direction of causality is suggested by what happens to companies who 'fall from grace' on these measures, and their inability to sustain performance in the medium to long term.

The 'soft' benefits

Winning the war for talent

While there may be an ethical issue about the probity of this rather instrumental 'business case', if it is experienced by staff as coercion, there are some 'soft' reasons to pursue organisational spirituality too. The first is the famous 'war for talent.' In a sellers' market, talented individuals can pick and choose between a variety of lucrative opportunities in an increasingly commoditised employment market. When an organisation has raised its offer to include Michelin-starred cafeteria-style benefits, platinum handcuffs and parachutes, and flexible multi-media working, what else can it offer that might help to differentiate it from its rivals? In the highly competitive graduate recruitment market, companies such as Ernst & Young attract spirited students by offering them a competitive package and the opportunity to be supported in volunteering and fundraising for their favourite charities.

Releasing creative potential

A second 'soft' reason relates to the release of human potential in the workplace. Over the last century, organisations have been learning that the suppression of elements of the person at work leads to a homogeneity that is neither ethical nor useful. While much of this learning has been centred on issues of gender, ethnicity or orientation, increased understanding of workplace-related stress and the recent popularity of emotional intelligence suggest that the issue is much wider. Organisations are increasingly interested in how they can offer opportunities for staff to bring their 'whole person' to work and, because it is widely assumed that this 'whole person' includes body, mind and spirit, many of them are trying to ensure that they do not create working conditions that cause either physical, mental or spiritual stress. Because the concept of spirituality is linked with creativity and ethics, organisations are increasingly looking at organisational spirituality as a way of fostering more innate creativity and a more natural ethical consciousness by enabling staff to access their own spiritual resources instead of relying on intellectual reasoning alone. This is also linked to the dilemma many organisations face about how to bring to life corporate policies relating to ethics, values and corporate responsibility. Most organisations genuinely intend these policies to be reflected in uncoerced organisational behaviour, but often they have become words preserved in aspic for the annual report and the website. Helping staff to access their own spirituality and meaning-making resources can transform such initiatives so that they become a more natural part of the organisation's consciousness and dialogue.

Enhancing a service culture

Building on this link to a more embedded culture of creativity and ethics, a third 'soft' reason arises from the traditional links between spirituality and notions of service. This ancient wisdom from a variety of global traditions also surfaces in research on emotional intelligence, and is further supported by research in game theory and evolutionary biology. This element is of particular interest to those countries that are increasingly evolving into service-based economies. Where services are increasingly differentiated through brand, the best organisations align their external brand values with their internal cultural values – inside-out branding – to avoid the expenditure necessary to repair breaches in congruence between advertised messages and the customer service experience. Instead of assuming the flawed agency model from traditional economics - which holds that the interests of employers and employees are not naturally aligned – organisational spirituality offers an opportunity for an organisation's vision to be re-framed in terms of service, which offers opportunities for vocation not usually harnessed outside the traditional fields of medicine, teaching and religion.

Of course, all of these 'soft' reasons can also be expressed in tangible terms. However, both the hard and soft arguments need to be

seen more as indications of likely fringe benefits than as concrete motivations for action. Were an organisation to appear to be manipulating this most sensitive of human aspects for financial gain, the abuse would likely backfire. Therefore, organisations seeking to take spirit at work into account need to see their work as fundamentally enabling rather than prescriptive.

First steps on the journey to organisational spirituality

So what could a manager do to take more seriously the place of spirit at work?

Start with what you have

The first step, as ever, is to stop and think. As a starting point, it is a good idea to conduct an audit of existing practices that may fit into this category, because many enlightened HR strategies already promote human flourishing. One tool that can be used for this analysis is Marjo Lips-Wiersma's Holistic Development Model[4] (**Figure 1**).

Her model uses the axes of self/other and being/doing that are often used in emotional intelligence models, but she applies them in the specific context of spirituality in the workplace. Thus her self/being quadrant – developing and becoming self – suggests an audit of organisational policy, procedures and culture in support of personal growth, self-knowledge and maintaining integrity. This emphasis is supported by the emotional intelligence research base, which suggests that self-awareness drives increased emotional intelligence, with the benefits this brings in terms of attracting discretionary effort from colleagues. Her self/doing quadrant – expressing full potential – asks organisations to what extent they allow staff to create, achieve and influence. This resonates with the famous Gallup research linking good management to explicit financial outcomes through 12 crucial questions, one of which asks whether employees are given the opportunity to do what they do

best every day[5]. Her other/being quadrant – unity with others – assesses the extent to which employees are encouraged to form supportive relationships, and whether the organisation has shared values which generate a sense of belonging. The other/doing quadrant – serving others – asks whether or not the organisation helps staff to make a difference in the world. Both of these 'other' quadrants resonate with the second of the 'hard' reasons given above, that organisations able to offer alignment to staff between their own values and the mission of the organisation will outperform those that cannot.

Figure 1.

BEING

Developing and becoming self	Unity with others
Expressing full potential	Serving others

SELF

OTHER

DOING

Tread softly

Furnished with this information, the second step in the journey is to proceed with caution, taking seriously existing sensitivities in this area. Will it be culturally more appropriate to start with a focus on the spiritual notions of contemplation and reflection, rather than moving wholesale into the organisational spirituality arena? As the poet Yeats advises: "Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams." Is there any indication from staff surveys, exit interviews, etc. that staff would welcome positive action in this arena, or are feeling constrained in any way? Is it worth holding some optional workshops to test the organisation's readiness and willingness to take this further? As a rule of thumb, research in both the US and the UK shows that staff are more willing to bring their souls to work when they feel they are encouraged to do so, so you are likely to be pushing at an open door.

Introduce reflective practices

If the indications are favourable and you are able to progress, you may already have some gaps from your audit you would like to fill, and you may want to liaise with your legal department to ensure that none of your policies or intentions contravene any of the legislation in this sphere. You may also want to introduce some traditional spiritual practices, such as Georgeanne Lamont's eight tools of reflection to create space for spirit. These are: stillness, listening, story, encounter, celebration, grieving, visioning, and journalling[6].

Figure 2.

The eight tools of reflection

- Stillness
- Listening
- Journalling
- Story
- Visioning
- Encounter
- Grieving
- Celebration

Her first tool, stillness, resonates with Maia Duerr's model for a contemplative organisation. She suggests the use in meetings of silent openings, talking circles and reflective dialogue, as well as active discussion of organisational values[7]. The tools relating to the use of story-telling and visioning are already in regular use in many organisations, as is the use of celebration. Encounter relates to openness between people, and many organisations have begun work in this through the flattening of hierarchies and work on values, often bolstered by the careful use of off-sites and development activities to build relationships. The suggestion that organisations should do more grieving to mark the passing of old ways is less popular, but is supported by William Bridges' research into managing transitions and the importance of organisational rites of passage[8]. The final reflection tool, journalling, suggests that organisations should encourage staff to keep a private journal for their reflections. While this is unusual, journalling is widely used in therapeutic circles, and use of this kind of tool ensures that the crucial Reflective Observation element of David Kolb's learning cycle is not neglected in favour of the busy-ness that is most often rewarded[9].

There are a number of ways into this field, and some suggestions for further reading are included below. This article began with the premise that embracing organisational spirituality might achieve some breakthrough in the intractable problems associated with employee motivation, engagement and well-being. A famous story can be used to illustrate how spirituality in the workplace can impact on these issues.

A man is walking along a road and sees a stonemason working. He stops to admire the smooth blocks of stone, and the stonemason stops working to have a break and pass the time of day. The man asks: "What are you doing?" The stonemason answers: "I come here every morning and work until nightfall cutting stones for my master. It pays the bills. I can't complain." The man bids him farewell and continues his journey. Further along the road, he meets another stonemason. This one is working flat out, and has a much larger pile of stones beside him. The man asks: "What are you doing?" The stonemason answers: "Sorry, I can't stop to talk. I'm paid according to the number of stones I cut each day, so I must get on." The man bids him farewell and continues his journey. Further along the road, he meets a third stonemason, who has an even larger and very well cut pile of stones beside him. The man asks: "What are you doing?" The stonemason answers: "If you look behind you, you can see the foundations of the cathedral we're building. I'm responsible for the stones in the arch above the west door. I want my grandchildren's grandchildren to be able to look up and see what I have made, so I have to make sure every stone is worthy of posterity."

We are all building cathedrals, we just need to find them in the daily work that we do. Organisational spirituality offers one way of starting this journey.

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