

BRIGHT LIGHTS

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By TARA WOHLBERG
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VANCOUVER -- Life's toughest questions are the simplest, like the five-year-old's why-is-the-sky-blue variety. So, does your work matter?

If you answered Yes, chances are you are a spiritually nourished worker.

"Spirit at work is about making a difference, a contribution," says consultant Val Kinjerski of Edmonton's Kaizen Solutions for Human Services.

"It means having meaningful and purposeful work."

It isn't spirit in the sense of a cheerleader's chant or formal religious practices. Instead, it is our core value system, the inner wisdom that allows us to act with passion, understanding and intuition, all in alignment with a greater good.

As the experts define it, employees and employers with spirit are comfortable expressing themselves and their values in an honest and authentic way. You are who you say you are; your organization lives its mission statement. Indeed, they say, high-performing employees require organizational cultures that integrate humanistic core values with core business policies, or they will express "their authentic selves" with the competi- tion.

Ms. Kinjerski, who is completing her PhD in the University of Alberta's human ecology program on the subject of spirit in the workplace, explains that, "part of being authentic is an awareness and acceptance of our intuition. Integration of our spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical dimensions opens the doors to intuition as a way of knowing."

And in our knowledge-based economy, those in the know are the most valuable with creativity at a premium after a decade of downsizing.

In her attempt to decode the esprit de corps feeling workers have when they achieve their goal -- those transcendental "eureka" peak moments of performance -- she sees organizations looking to the human side to increase productivity.

During her research, Ms. Kinjerski found "pockets of people who were bright lights, people who were passionate and energetic. They have a personal and professional commitment to their work and colleagues. Their loyalty and honest respect for one another spills over into creativity and innovation. You can't be

creative in a environment where you feel that you can't take a risk. . . . People with spirit have an alignment between their work and what gives their life meaning."

That led her to define spirit at work in part as, "a distinct state that has physical, cognitive, spiritual and mystical dimensions which involve a sense of connection to others, a common purpose and connection to something larger than self." She laughs. "It is difficult to talk about these issues without sounding flaky."

High absenteeism, high turnover, low morale, fraud and sexual harassment are signs of a toxic, spiritually starved workplace.

"You have to see that you're making a difference, making a connection," Ms. Kinjerski says. "It's like my background. What career has more potential for spirit at work than a social worker? You're out there helping people, making a difference, right? But it is easy to forget that -- your gift for helping people -- as you scramble around to go to another court hearing."

The right work, she says, often doesn't feel like "work" because it satisfies our emotional, mental and spiritual needs, and, in the end, nourishes our soul. So how does Tanis Helliwell, author of *Take Your Soul to Work*, a spiritual sequel to Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, explain "soul" to a navy-suited financial officer with a straight face?

"The more radical my message, the more conservatively I dress," laughs the elfin Ms. Helliwell from her Vancouver home, where she is an organizational consultant who creates healthier workplaces for the likes of IBM and the Banff Centre for Management.

As founder of the International Institute for Transformation, Ms. Helliwell believes that what many of today's organizations lack is meaning and purpose. Her myriad clients include mental health professionals, accountants and high-tech executives around the world, most of whom are achievers who appear to "have it all," yet remain unfulfilled.

Ms. Helliwell, a psychologist, explains: "People are working harder and longer while feeling less good about their work. They don't feel a moral good about their contribution to the world. Their work doesn't matter. They haven't found their soul's work."

A recent University of Western Ontario study reports that 38 per cent of employed people describe themselves as depressed. So what has created this malaise that a 40-per-cent increase in the use of antidepressants in Canada since 1997 can't seem to cure?

"Spirituality is about the search for meaning, it is how you carry yourself through

your life day to day," says David Cornfield of Toronto's Creative Edge Counselling, "and we focus on the word meaning. How do people find meaning in their lives? This is the central question."

A decade ago, Mr. Cornfield, a psychologist and lawyer, felt drawn to work with the over-35 crowd as they prepared to face midlife.

He credits the "boomer bulge" with pushing this issue into Canadian boardrooms. True to the cliché of ourselves as a nation of navel gazers, Mr. Cornfield reports, "the centre of this activity is right here in Canada. Canada has more conferences on spirituality at work per capita than any other country."

"You have to invite people into the process," adds author and consultant Ann Coombs, who divides her time between Toronto and Vancouver. "I see people with very successful 'outer' biographies, like VPs of blue-chip companies, who are struggling with their 'inner' biography -- what is my legacy, what has my soul achieved beyond materialism, which, we know at the end of the day, is empty."

She has worked with Ford Motor Co., Campbell Soup Co. and Bank of Montreal. "Much of our work force has reached a stage of life where they should be experiencing self-understanding and calmness, but they are instead struggling with chaos and stress. We need workers to see that they are making a difference, that the company really does live and work by its mission statement."

In her book *The Living Workplace: Soul, Spirit and Success in the 21st Century*, Ms. Coombs rejigs the old model of evaluating the workplace in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. By focusing instead on spirit, wisdom, openness and thoughtfulness, she constructs a framework for employees and managers to view the soul of their organization.

"Truth is a hot topic right now, just look at Enron or Iraq and all those reality TV shows. Why are 13 million [people] watching *Meet the Folks*? We want to know who is telling the truth."

She explains that truth or honesty is at the core of any spiritually satisfying environment.

How did she react when she found out that the married CEO of a company she was working with was having an affair with an assistant -- and that the entire company knew about it? "I said we had a problem. You want total commitment based on loyalty, values and ethics, but you are apparently well known for having an affair." The CEO replied that he hadn't asked for advice on how to run his personal life, he just wanted Ms. Coombs to fix the problems of his company.

"We forget that when we change, we change everyone around us," Ms. Helliwell says. "It can be as simple as changing our attitude."

The idea of interconnectedness leads to an alignment of values and actions, which then become contagious -- like a smile or the Norwalk virus.

"You have to figure out what moves you, get clarity on that and do the work that you care about," Ms. Kinjerski adds.

But where does that leave the worker bees? We can't all be transformational CEOs blazing a trail of innovation.

Ms. Kinjerski illustrates the point: "I knew a woman who was working at a hospital, washing the carts that carry the food trays to the patients. She described her job as perhaps the most menial you could have.

"But when she stepped back to look at what was important about her job, she realized it really was important. In a hospital there are a lot of germs, for the health and safety of everyone there, her job must be done well. She realized she wasn't just washing the carts; she was contributing to the greater good. As human beings we crave this sense of purpose."

globecareers@globeandmail.ca

Enlightened work

Although most work environments have yet to reach enlightenment, here are some steps Edmonton consultant Val Kinjerski suggests to create spirit in your office:

Create a vision around what could be. Gain clarity about how your organization contributes to society. What is your organization's purpose?

Align the work with the vision. Put voice to that vision and mission. How does the work that you are going to do fit in with what your organization stands for? Reward congruency between goals, give bonuses for work that is based on achievement of the mission and vision.

Ground organizations in creativity and initiative. Give staff responsibility and the ability to make decisions, which will facilitate autonomy and freedom. Be open to new outcomes, which lead to transformations.

Create a place where people are valued and can see the contribution of their work. Be inclusive, truly listen, acknowledge each person's unique gifts.

Build a sense of community. Move from a competitive to a contributive environment. That means, create an environment of individual interconnectedness, celebrate successes, elevate levels of "fun" and "play," practice "checking-in" on a personal and professional level.

So how do you know when someone has spirit at work? According to Ms.

Kinjerski's research, they are:

passionate

committed

productive

creative

loyal

respectful

authentic

inclusive

energetic