

## Defining Spirituality in the Workplace

By Tom Egan

While I bring an academic perspective to the problem of defining Spirituality in the workplace (I'm an adjunct faculty member in Moravian College's evening MBA program) the real roots of the views set out below is the experiences I have had in over 30 years in the high tech middle management arena. These experiences included all the multiple job rotations, layoffs, divorces and the economic boom and bust lifestyle that is often associated with the high tech career path. My goal after all this is to find an answer to the question of how the increasingly global and fast technology pace of today's business environment can become a more spiritual (i.e. loving and nourishing) while still retaining its highly innovative, job growth and consumer value creating characteristics.

My comments on spirituality in the work place emphasize the manager/subordinate relationship because I believe that this is where the primary focus must be if the modern corporation is to spiritually evolve. This does not mean that macro questions such as the way society capitalizes corporations and shares the wealth they produce aren't also important determinants of the spirituality of modern corporations and the world in general. However, these macro issues don't touch the level of the individual's consciousness where Neale Walsch and other tell us we need to focus first.

### SEMANTIC ISSUES

In my view, the word "spirituality" itself frequently carries negative connotations in the business environment that often puts people off or at least on guard when it is used in the workplace setting. Thus, I prefer to avoid the using the word "spirituality", at least when actually in the office.

I have seen managers from the evangelical right, Mormons and occasionally even Catholics try to proselytize and unduly influence the behavior of subordinates, based on their particular religious or "spiritual" or worse, "moral" convictions. In such cases, the "spirituality" should really be called "spiritual harassment". Unfortunately former victims of this sort of thing and their co-workers can develop high defenses against "spiritual" overtures of any sort after such experiences.

On the other side of the coin, managers proselytizing so called "new age" spirituality ideas, even subtly, can put people off because they can easily be perceived as impractical "air heads" unless they are really sensitive to the religious background and convictions of individuals they interact with frequently. Furthermore, corporate mission and vision statements risk being derided if they come across as too "spiritual", particularly in a new age sense, unless such mission and vision statements evolve through the lengthy development and "buy in" process that companies like Tom's of Maine went through.

Given this sensitivity, a better place to start defining "spirituality in the workplace" may be to try to define the qualities of a "spiritual manager" and assume that the "spiritual organization" is one in which "spiritual management practices" are explicitly prioritized, taught and rewarded. However, rather than "spiritual" I'm going to substitute the phrase "good" (in the sense of loving) or perhaps "supporting and effective" because I believe that this phrasing lowers the risk of offending in the increasingly diverse (in a religious background sense) workplaces many experience in high tech and other global corporations. The phrase "good and effective manager" or "supporting and effective manager" also moves our semantics closer to modern HR jargon without any important loss of content or direction.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF "GOOD AND EFFECTIVE" (I.E. "SPIRITUAL") MANAGERS

1) Good and effective managers can be trusted. Trust is the foundation. Unless a manager is trusted, he or she can not be "good and effective" in a spiritual sense, nor can they be productive and efficient in a traditional sense - unless they use fear as their primary motivation tool. Despite its importance, trust is difficult to establish and maintain for any manager. I have seen many instances where managers assumed they were trusted and were not. One mistake and the "grapevine" kills trust forever (i.e. for the manager's tenure in a particular company or Business Unit).

Some of my favorite and fatal 'trustbusters' include the following:

Taking credit for work subordinates did.

Not delivering on commitments to promote or otherwise advance subordinates,

Displaying fear and insecurity when departmental results are reviewed at higher corporate levels.

Letting subordinates be blamed or not defending employee performance rather than taking full responsibility yourself .

Publicly criticizing the performance or personal characteristics of any individual.

Not being clear about the conditions shaping employee tenure or growth path options.

- 2) Good and effective managers are perceived as competent. Competence means "can it do himself or herself" or "smart enough to hire the right expertise"
- 3) Good and effective managers prioritize the growth of their subordinates as people first and as employees, a close second. This requires a high tolerance for "trial and error learning"
- 4) Good and effective managers teach and reward cooperation (teaming) and discourage competition, particularly political competition.
- 5) Good and effective managers always negotiate "win win" and teach subordinates to do likewise'
- 6) Good and effective managers always focus on delivering quality and value to all customers, internal and external.
- 7) Good and effective managers strenuously resist environmental unfriendly solutions.

This list could be longer, but I assume you get my drift.

## CONCLUSION

My main points here is that any organization is only as "spiritual" or as "good and effective" or "supporting and productive", etc. as its managers are. Thus, the spiritual workplace" is an organizational setting that prioritizes the training and rewarding or "good and effective" managers.

Thank you for considering my views.

Comments are most welcome.

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