Spirituality in the Workplace

Although not easily defined, the spirituality in the workplace movement is about “acknowledging that people come to work with more than their bodies and minds; they bring individual talents and unique spirits” (Leigh 1997, p. 26). The movement serves a range of interests including personal fulfillment on the job, a growing need to reconcile personal values with those of the corporation, and corporate desires to help individuals achieve more balanced lives (Laabs 1995; Leigh 1997; McLaughlin 1998). One evidence of this trend is the growing number of Bible study and prayer groups like the one that meets every Thursday at noon at the Penn National Insurance Company in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. According to some estimates, in the past 10 years, groups like these have doubled to 10,000 (McLaughlin 1998).

The emergence of spirituality in the workplace as a trend has been noted in a wide variety of publications, including the Christian Science Monitor (McLaughlin 1998), Mother Jones (Moskowitz 1997), Training and Development (Leigh 1997), and HR Magazine (Brandt 1996). Not only is spirituality in the workplace a theme at a growing number of conferences, it has also spawned online computer discussions and is the subject of numerous books (Brandt 1996; Kahnweiler and Otte 1997; McLaughlin 1998). This Alert reviews reasons behind the trend and highlights some of the issues that surround it.

A number of factors have converged to create the spirituality in the workplace trend including the following:

- Corporate layoffs and downsizing. The recent “right sizing” of many corporations has created uncertainty and made many people feel vulnerable about losing their jobs. Fewer support staff and the need to master new technology have created additional stress. As a result, many are asking questions about the value of their work and are seeking strength and solace in spirituality (Brandt 1996; Leigh 1997; McLaughlin 1998).
- The aging of the work force. Many employees have reached a level of affluence that permits them the luxury of seeking more meaning in their lives, including in their work (Brandt 1996; McLaughlin 1998). Although baby boomers are frequently credited for the connection between spirituality and work, the search for meaningful work spans all generations (Leigh 1997).
- The decline of traditional support networks. Several traditional sources of spiritual support such as churches, civic groups, and extended family now have less influence. Many individuals look to their workplace as a communal center to provide the basic human needs of connection and contribution (Brandt 1996; Mirvis 1997).
- Changes in organizational structures. Changes in how businesses are structured and run have also contributed to this trend. The quality movement, learning organizations, and other innovations have all fostered employee input and encouraged team building. As a result, many employees have experienced work environments that are more congruent with their personal values and have found new meaning in their work (Gozdz 1995a; Laabs 1995; Mirvis 1997).

Several issues are associated with the growing movement of spirituality in the workplace. The first and most prevalent has to do with whether it is compatible with the profit motive that is the goal of most businesses and what happens when the two conflict. In some companies, emphasizing values has proven profitable in measurable ways (Leigh 1997), but Moskowitz (1997) believes that the movement is more about personal than corporate transformation and suggests that, in the end, the profit motive will prevail.

The relationship between spirituality and religion is another issue. Many managers are leery of the trend toward spirituality in the workplace because they see it as connected to organized religion and fear that it may lead to legal difficulties. People don’t want to be forced into any particular belief system (Brandt 1996; Laabs 1995). Mirvis (1997, p. 197) points out, however, that “religion is about answers [and] spirituality is about questions,” thus supporting the idea that the spirituality in the workplace movement is not about any particular belief or religious system (Laabs 1995) but about creating a different kind of workplace.

The trend of spirituality in the workplace will likely continue as “the challenge for corporations in the 21st century is to create a nurturing environment that invites people to tap their creativity and productivity and find personal fulfillment through their work” (Barrett 1997, p. 3). Career educators and career development specialists will need to prepare people for a workplace that includes a spiritual dimension. The integrated life planning model (Hansen 1997) and the relational approach to careers (Hall et al. 1996) are examples of how this can be accomplished.

Resources


Describes the shift that is taking place in the underlying values and assumptions that govern society and how it is affecting corporate leadership. Corporate leaders are now responsible for establishing a values-drive culture that will create a nurturing environment. A list of seven evolutionary behaviors of successful corporate culture is included.


A holistic approach to individual development within the context of a learning organization produces well-informed, knowledgeable, critically-thinking adults whose decisions contribute to organizational prosperity.


Organized around conversations between a beleaguered company leader and a wise sage, this book tells a story about making sense of confusing riddles that technical knowledge cannot solve.


Examines the movement to make corporations a friendlier, more creative environment by tapping into the spiritual side of employees and the trends leading up to it.
The question, “How organizations can better reflect the whole human being?” forms the basis for this book that examines how work and people have been fragmented from the soul (defined by the author as multiplicity of selves within each individual). The three parts of the book explore the idea of soul, address the challenges to the soul in past organizational practices and in today’s workplace, and explore a new way of looking at organizational role.


This collection of essays represents a variety of perspectives on what it will take to renew a sense of community with each other. Starting with the global context, the book shifts to the corporate community. Included are skills and practices for developing community, the interpersonal dimensions, modern technology and its usefulness, and case histories where benefits of community have been realized.


Examines core competencies in building learning communities and discusses the connection between learning, community, and spirituality. Asserts that learning, community building, and spiritual growth are interdependent.


This book contains 14 research-based chapters on adult career development in the age of downsizing, outsourcing, and new career paths based. The relational approach to careers, which is the recognition that career development and growth take place in a context of interdependence and mutuality, forms the basis for the book.


This book presents an integrative life planning (ILP) model for career professionals/counselors to use in helping their clients develop career and life pathways responsive to their own economic, family, spiritual, and cultural needs and also to community needs. The six critical tasks that constitute the ILP model’s framework are finding work that needs doing in changing global contexts; weaving one’s life into a meaningful whole; connecting family and work; valuing pluralism and inclusivity; exploring spirituality and life purpose; and managing personal transitions and organizational change.


For at least a decade, human resource development (HRD) journals and professional convention programs have discussed spirituality in the workplace, but the field of HRD does not seem to be fully aware of foundational theories nor has it developed many explicit prescriptive theories to guide practice. Authors suggest that further discussion in these areas, theory development and research on such theories are needed.


Reviews the emergence of the spirituality-at-work trend and describes how it is finding a place in workgroups.


Reviews the new connection happening in many organizations and management that is resulting in a happier work force and real improvements in business goals. Examines how and why organizations creating a culture that holds meaning and purpose for their employees and the benefits.


Examines the movement toward spirituality in the workplace and the range of interests it serves.


The author uses his experience in a community building workshop to examine how community and spirituality are making their way into organizational life. How work is being rediscovered as a source of spiritual growth and connection to others is reviewed.


Moskowitz examines the issue of social responsibility in the workplace and suggests that soul is only the language of business when things are going well.


Appreciative inquiry is a management strategy that can be used by business leaders to nurture and develop human values in organizations. This book explores how the technique can be used to stimulate cooperation and foster creativity in working toward common organizational goals.

Organizational and Electronic Resources


Spirituality in the Workplace List: http://www.itstime.com/workplace.htm

Work’s AliVe: http://www.worksalive.com/

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