

## SPIRITUALITY AT WORKPLACE: IS THERE A DARK FACE TOO?

Swaty Wadhwa<sup>1</sup> & Sonal Pahwa<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Management, Jagan Institute of Management Studies, New Delhi, India

<sup>2</sup> Department of Management, Jagannath Institute of Management Sciences, New Delhi, India

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### ABSTRACT

Workplace spirituality is gaining attention in recent times. Though the combination of workplace culture and spirituality is difficult to understand, still inter-play between them has fascinated both practitioners and academicians. Workplace spirituality provides benefit at two levels i.e. individual and organization. At the individual level, it improves the creativity, thinking capacity along with improving honesty making them more trustworthy. At the organization level, also, it improves overall organizational performance. Overall, the positive impact of spirituality is being taken into consideration but this paper also attempts to see the other dark facet of the workplace spirituality as this can't be overlooked and it has an impact on the actual organizational effectiveness.

**KEYWORDS:** Creative Employee, Ethical Beliefs, Wellbeing, Workplace Spirituality

### INTRODUCTION

Due to pressures created by extreme professionalism which is devoid of personal touch, employee productivity and commitment have dropped. Work-induced stress, poor physical, mental and emotional health is resulting into work- life imbalances. Hassled by unexpected changes, social distancing, and ever-growing insecurities, employees are continuously trying to find a purpose in their life. Employees are facing extreme stress levels and psychological problems leading to avoiding work which disturbs their work life immensely. Spirituality seems to be the answer to this personal and professional discomfort. An effective spiritual life can help employees find much sought after self-worth and a guiding objective in their lives and absorb profoundly treasured personal values.

Realizing the benefits of spirituality, new age workers are insisting that along with their intelligence and knowledge, the spiritual aspects of their personality should also be welcomed at the workplace. Employees are consciously looking forward to achieving more beyond materialistic components to enrich their lives. Spirituality is extremely important for instilling ethical behavior, Job satisfaction, productivity, employee commitment, and long-term competitive advantage. The benefits gained by organizations who have invested in workplace spirituality clearly justify the growing interest in the topic and how it can act as a catalyst in the betterment of workplace.

Workplace spirituality plays a key role in reducing anxiety, pressure, and exhaustion and hence leads to improved employee morale, commitment and productivity.

Employees are looking forward to experiencing better engagement, more significant self-expression, freedom, and creativity in decision making at the workplace. Spirituality also aims at providing a competitive advantage and intends to

utilize the full potential of the employees along with handling global competitiveness pressures. It ultimately provides enriched and fuller life experience for the individual employee, which then ultimately leads to improved culture, enhanced productivity and better organizational performance.

Likewise, there are two sides of a coin; we also can't ignore the negative aspects of workplace spirituality as without diminishing their negative effects, we can't feel the original worth of workplace spirituality.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Positive Effects of Workplace Spirituality**

Today, the world is highly affected by social, economic, and environment-related concerns which have resulted from unreasonable human greed and loss of love, kindness, and empathy. To counter these self-created problems, human beings are trying to walk a spiritual path in search of harmony and peace. (Cacioppe, 2000). The concept of spirituality acknowledges the holistic involvement of human heart and soul along with the body in accomplishing their work (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). Studies have proved that employee's commitment towards organization is positively correlated with their interpretation of purpose and meaning in their lives. (Milliman et al. 2003). Spirituality at work deals with activities linked with individual's own development, concern towards each aspect of work and colleagues, meaning and contentment at work, sincerity, job commitment, and physical, mental as well as the spiritual wellbeing of employees (Petchsawange & Duchan, 2012).

The senior corporate leaders believe that prayer and deliberations help in achieving the calmness required to listen effectively, to be innovative, calm and flexible and improves decision making in a crisis situation (Miller, 2000).

Research has proved that through workplace spirituality, it is possible to provide a fulfilling sense of purpose and connection among the workforce. (Brandt, 1996; Bolman & Deal, 1995; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). Organizations with the enhanced level of spirituality facilitate their employees to practice robust values and ethical beliefs in their work and empower employees to demonstrate more creativity and flexibility at work (Mitroff & Denton, 1999).

### **Negative Effects of Workplace Spirituality**

Brown (2003) was also of the view that spirituality can provide direction, connectedness, and wholeness and on the other hand considered it as the latest management fad (with sinister undertones) which, when unmasked, is likely to prove ineffective and ephemeral.

There are other researchers also who are of the view that the study of WS can alleviate problems such as humiliation, conflict, abrasion to an employee's mental health, and vassalage (Brown, 2003; Hancock, 1997; Rego & Cunha, 2008).

In nutshell, workplace spirituality has to do with the respect for employees' inner satisfaction with life, the exploration of meaningful contribution towards one's community, sense of belongingness that brings joy and a feeling of completeness and on the other hand is ineffective too but most of the literature is not backed up empirically.

## **OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH**

- To gain clarity about the concept of Workplace Spirituality
- To know about the dimensions of Workplace Spirituality.
- To discuss various negative outcomes of Workplace Spirituality and the ways to combat them.

## **DEMYSTIFYING THE CONCEPT: WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY**

Nowadays, the concept of workplace spirituality is gaining attention but what spirituality actually means is still a debatable issue. Before understanding the definition of spirituality which is difficult to define, we must be clear about that it is often talked in the religious sense but there is some difference between the two concepts. Spirituality is much broader than religion. Spirituality allows the individual to possess a sense of being sacred without the institutional norms that are associated with the traditional concept of religion. Spirituality is inclusive, non-denominational and is less encumbered with the ideological baggage. But religion is formal, denominational and exclusive. Spirituality is not formal, structured or organized. Spirituality is very difficult to define owing to its pluralistic nature and even if authors try, they fail to come up with a definitive meaning.

Many researchers (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Guillory, 2000; Mitroff and Denton, 1999) have opined spirituality at work to be an organization-wide culture sustained by the value driven vision and mission translating into socially responsible business processes. The acknowledgement of contributions made by employees encourages their spiritual, emotional and physical wellbeing.

Spirituality in the workplace refers to an organizational culture supported by mission statements, leadership and business practices that are socially responsible and value-driven, that acknowledges the contributions that employees make and that supports personal spiritual development and wellbeing (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Guillory, 2000; Mitroff and Denton, 1999).

From an individual perspective, spirituality at work can be defined as “the recognition that employees have an inner life that is nourished by meaningful work, which takes place in the context of community” (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000).

A careful analysis of these definitions reveals that the common thread of finding meaning and making a contribution through work, serving others, Connectedness and authenticity at work as a leitmotif of workplace spirituality.

In the workplace context, spirituality has been defined as our inner consciousness (Guillory, 2000), a specific form of work feelings that energizes action (Dehler & Welsh, 1994), access to the sacred force that implies life (Nash & McLennan, 2001) and the unique inner search for the fullest personal development through participation into transcendent musters (Delbecq, 1999).

Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) defined workplace spirituality as organizational values that promote employees experience of transcendence and facilitate their sense of being connected to others. They have done another remarkable work wherein they have given composite definitions according to different authors which are summarized as follows:

- Armstrong, 1995, p.3: Stressed on the relationship having higher power and how it influences the way in which one operates in the world.
- Emmons & Crumbler, 1999: The personal expression having the ultimate concern.
- Wong, 1998, p.364: Ultimate and personal truths are involved.
- Bregman & Thierman, 1995, p.149: Deals with the individual's response to the deepest truths of the universe which makes his life meaningful.
- Benner, 1989, p.20: Human being striving for self-transcendence.
- Shafranske & Gorsuch, 1984, p.231: Here the individual questions about the meaning of personal existence.
- McKnight, 1984, p.142: It inspires the person toward purposes which are beyond his control but giving meaning and direction to one's life.

A Representative Sampling of Definitions of Spirituality in the Literature (source: Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003)

They also suggested various dimensions of spirituality like Spiritual health, Spiritual intelligence, Spiritual wellness, Spiritual development etc and every dimension leads to the betterment of the individual.

Overall, there is a different perspective on spirituality according to different authors but the main aim is to make the human being understand about his existence in this universe and it is them to find out the reasons after unfolding various underlying truths thus making their life more meaningful.

## **DIMENSIONS OF WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY**

Spirituality at the workplace can be understood at three different levels. The first one being the "Personal / Individual level" is like a first stage where a person feels empowered by experiencing the heightened sense of meaningfulness and purpose in life. This stage is followed by "Group/team level" which focuses on better connections at the workplace which result into a feeling of belongingness towards teammates and the organization. The third stage operates at "organizational level" wherein employee feels a strong association with organizational values and in turn performs at the best of his/her capabilities.

### **PERSONAL / INDIVIDUAL LEVEL**

**Meaningful Work:** An elementary attribute of workplace spirituality is about a profound sense of meaning and purpose in one's work. This dimension of spirituality symbolizes how employees feel about their jobs at an individual level. This also accounts for the unique personal desires and motivations which each individual experiences about his / her work as it yields a greater meaning to one's life and also the contributions to other's lives. (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Hawley, 1993).

Mankind has always been fascinated with the idea of finding a deeper purpose for life. Spirituality at the workplace is not merely about interesting and challenging work assignments, rather it focuses on aspects such as exploring deeper meaning and purpose, living one's aspirations, identifying and experiencing one's inner life needs by proactively seeking meaningful work, and contributing to other's wellbeing too. (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Fox, 1994; Neal, 1998).

This can be understood as a state of mind when one is really enjoying his/her work and looks forward to each day with enthusiasm and energy. The natural outcomes are positivity, happiness and better efficiency at the individual level which surely flows towards betterment of others and the organization.

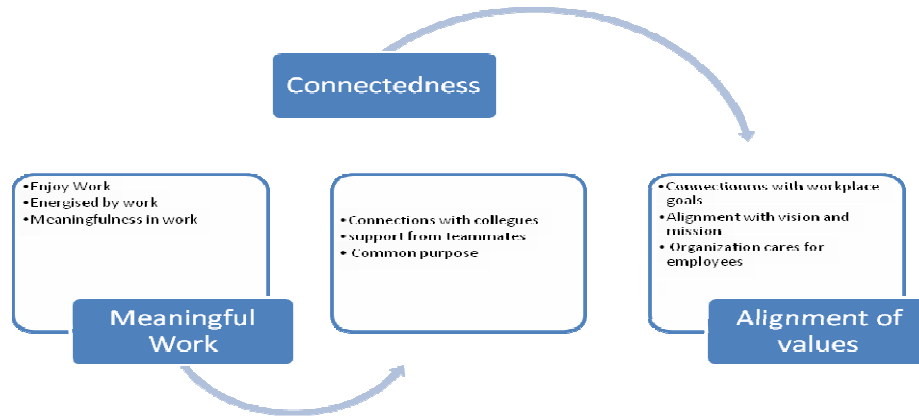
## **GROUP / TEAM LEVEL**

**Sense of Community and Connectedness:** Another vital dimension of workplace spirituality involves having a profound association, or relationship with, others, which is expressed as a sense of community (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000). This dimension operates at the group level of human behavior and involves interface among co-workers. A community at work is based on the principle that people feel associated with each other and that there is some sort of connection among an individual's inner character and the inner personality of others. (Maynard, 1992; Miller, 1992).

A sense of community at the workplace is all about the experience of belongingness and relatedness between colleagues. A better-connected workforce is more likely to benefit from each other by learning together, sharing and combining their views and thoughts without restraint. Connectedness at work makes employees feel more valued and associated with the workplace. There is empirical evidence that supports the belief that a socially connected team not only makes happier employees but also leads to a competitive edge for the organization. Neal and Bennett (2000) note that this facet of workplace spirituality implies the mental, emotional, and spiritual relationships among peers. The spirit of community is that it is about a deeper feeling of connectedness among employees, comprising a compassionate behavior, strong support system, liberty of expression, and genuine caring for teammates.

## **ORGANIZATION LEVEL**

**Alignment with Organizational Values:** A higher level of workplace spirituality is when employee's personal values find a strong sense of alignment with the organization's mission and purpose. This particular component of spirituality is usually witnessed when employees truly associate their thought processes with the larger organizational purpose (Mitroff and Denton, 1999). An important aspect of this type of alignment also signifies the belief that managers and teammates have similar values and display a strong conscience, and they care about the welfare of its employees and community (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000). Alignment with organizational values supports the view that people aspire to work for such organizations whose goal is to not just follow right business rules but to make a larger contribution to all, employees, customers, and society. This is a stage where one can expect the employees to put their heart and soul in their work rather than only hands and minds.



**Figure 1: Dimensions of Workplace Spirituality**

**Source:** John Milliman, Andrew J. Czaplewski and Jeffery Ferguson. Workplace Spirituality and Employee Work Attitudes: An Exploratory Empirical Assessment.

## NEGATIVE OUTCOMES OF WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY

**Religious Conflicts** – Considering the overall benefits, every corporate is encouraging spirituality oriented welfare programs. But sometimes this can lead to religious conflicts between people. People may also feel frustrated and dissatisfied as they don't feel comfortable regarding expressing their own ideologies. They may also have feelings that their diversity is being disrespected. (Krishnakumar and Neck, 2002; Cavanagh, 1999; Milliman et al. 2003; Brown, 2003). Moreover, implementing religion based spiritual principles may also result in alienated, isolated or threatened people (Mirvis, 1997; Krishnakumar and Neck, 2002). There is another pitfall when a specific employee group starts dictating their own agenda. (Cavanagh and Bandsuch, 2002). Religious sentiments are very sensitive and they can have a disruptive and damaging impact if there is no mutual respect for diversity. (Krishnakumar and Neck, 2002) If not managed properly such practices can lead to conflicts in work-related matters. There should be a clear-cut HR policy so that spiritual activities don't interfere with working hours and official issues.

**Compatibility Issues** – Corporate culture associates itself with materialist and competitive traits, which is in essence, adverse to spiritual philosophy. Success in a corporate world heavily depends on the focus on individual growth rather than universal brotherhood. The basic foundation structure of corporate culture makes it difficult to express the spiritual aspects in many organizations. (p. 203; Mirvis, 1997). Integrating spirituality at the workplace may sometimes bother professionals who are trying to guard their authority and status quo. Some of the employees may also look at spiritual beliefs conversations as something "too personal". They may also feel threatened and pressurized. (Mirvis, 1997; Cavanagh, 1999). This may result in compatibility issues at work. In such scenarios, the employees are not able to perform as per their best capabilities and organizations become less productive.

**Spirituality as a Manipulative Tool** - Another problem with workplace spirituality can be that it may become a fad or used as a management tool to manipulate employees. The danger in this scenario is that spirituality may lose all its spirit and legitimacy if it is misused by management as a marketing device (Mirvis, 1997; Fernando, 2005; Gibbons, 2000). Such kind of initiatives will only have a temporary life and seem unauthentic if they are adopted as management fads or programs. (Cavanagh and Bandsuch, 2002; Mirvis, 1997). Instead of increasing productivity, this may have the damaging

effect on organizational performance. Lack of sincerity and dedication towards implementing a spirituality program, this may turn into just another management fad, with disturbing undertones, which, when evident, is likely to prove unproductive, detrimental and momentary (p. 396; Brown, 2003).

**Gap in Theory and Practice** – Since it is not a well-established field, workplace spirituality is still an emerging field in scientific research and professional settings. (Giacalone, Jurkiewicz and Fry, 2005; Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003a and 2003b). The concept, meaning, understanding and implementation of spirituality are still very vague and confusing (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003a; Hicks, 2003; Ashmos and Duchon, 2004). There is no clarity regarding methodology, validity, rigor, and measurement of spirituality at work (Kinjierski and Skrypnek, 2004; Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003a). The growing body of literature on workplace spirituality has been criticized for being hypothetical and baseless. (Lund Dean, Fornaciari and McGee 2003), as well as lacking rigor (Gibbons, 2000), and enough theory (Dent et al. 2005). There seems to be no consensus among researchers regarding the concept and its outcomes. Another criticism to spirituality research is its “artificiality” which comes from the lack of integration with established world religions and traditions (Gibbons, 2000).

From the above discussion, it is clear that there are both positives and negatives about workplace spirituality and the negative impact has to be taken care of in order to implement it in the organization for a blessed environment.

## CONCLUSIONS

Organizational spirituality is very crucial in managing the organization as it motivates the employees towards attaining organizational objective and mission, keeping the values intact and making those more committed. When organizations are faced with complex conditions like severe competition and is undergoing some transformation, the need becomes more prevalent.

It is based on the principle of “whole” person wherein every aspect of the employees is taken into consideration as they can add to encouraging and creative behaviors in the organization culture itself. It can also bring new ways to approach the functions of recruitment, selection, training, career development, performance evaluation etc which in turn would be rewarding both to the employees as well as to the organization as a whole. On the other hand, it is also advised to implement spirituality programs carefully as it is having negative outcomes too. There is a need to educate employees and use different approaches to implement spirituality inculcating humanistic and spiritual values into workplaces enabling human hearts and souls to grow and flourish within the organization.

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