

Workplace Spirituality: Exploring the Meaning and Purpose of Life Through Work

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ABSTRACT

There is enormous literature citing the importance of workplace spirituality. This article focuses on the concept of spirituality and to understand its role in workplace using narrative review methodology. A few definitions of spirituality and workplace spirituality are examined and common features in those definitions are identified. Existing literature on why spirituality at workplace is vital is reviewed. The arguments against and for the workplace spirituality are expressed. The core purpose of the paper is to understand the concept of spirituality and how it manifests at the workspace, whether it should be nurtured or discouraged with respect to its impact on the employee and the organisation (consequentialist framework) or because of the individuals search for meaning, purpose, transcendence and divinity (spiritual-philosophical framework). The result indicate that spiritual-philosophical framework should be the primary reason for organisations to promote workplace spirituality. The reasons for, and implications of the same are discussed.

1. Meaning of Spirituality

Before attempting to understand workplace spirituality, it is required to have an understanding of the notion of spirituality itself. There is a vast sphere of literature in the field of spirituality, extending over four thousand years of both textual sources, and verbal tradition originating from sources across ethnic groups, nations and languages (Pesut et al., 2009).

Spirituality is defined in a variety of ways by literature, but there is no universally accepted definition. Some common features can help us understand its nature. William James (1902) and Karakas (2010) state that religion has two forms; one is institutional and the other is personal. It is this personal religion that is spirituality. According to James (1902), the religious field is divided by a great partition. On one side lies institutional religion, on the other personal religion.

James (1902, pp. 36-37) defines spirituality as 'the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.' There is a key distinction which needs to be made between the religious and the spiritual.

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Karakas (2010, p.8) defines spirituality as ‘the journey to find a sustainable, authentic, meaningful, holistic and profound understanding of the existential self and its relationship/interconnectedness with the sacred and the transcendent. Spirituality is distinguished from institutionalized religion by being characterized as a private, inclusive, non-denominational, universal human feeling; rather than an adherence to the beliefs, rituals, or practices of a specific organized religious institution or tradition.’ According to Buck (2006, pp. 289-90), spirituality is ‘. . . that most human of experiences that seeks to transcend self and find meaning and purpose through connection with others, nature and/or a Supreme Being, which may or may not involve religious structures or traditions.’ For Tepper (2003), spirituality implies a person's motivation for finding a sacred purpose and meaning in his or her existence. These definitions of spirituality consider:

1. Spirituality as a deep understanding of our own selves and our relationship with a sacred transcendent power which gives life its meaning, purpose and direction.
2. Spirituality as the connecting force, or integrating power, that unifies all of life which pervades throughout the universe, in all the things and in all beings.
3. According to Gotsis and Kortezi (2007), spirituality surrounds us, it is intrinsically grained into our existence and goes beyond any micro level religion identification.

2. Workplace Spirituality

There is divergence of views concerning spirituality in the workplace to the extent that Ashforth and Pratt (2003) point out that it is not easy to identify a comprehensive and universally accepted definition of spirituality at the workplace in literature.

Workplace spirituality denotes the pursuit of personal fulfilment and spiritual growth at work (Graber & Johnson, 2001) and the desire to search for meaning, purpose and develop our capabilities (Howard, 2002). According to de Klerk (2005), we can understand workplace spirituality in a better way if make use of one of the main components, meaning in life, which in turn influences psychological well-being. According to Adams and Csiernik (2002), workplace spirituality fosters innovation and self-actualisation by recognising and appreciating employee skills within an environment that is focussed and aspiring. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003, p. 13) define workplace spirituality as ‘a framework of organisational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employees experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provided feelings of completeness and joy.’ According to Milliman et al. (2003) there are two factors due to which there is a variation of definitions – one is that workplace spirituality is a complex and multifaceted construct and the other is that the concept is highly personal and abstract.

According to Ashmos and Duchon (2000, p. 137) ‘a workplace can be considered to be spiritual when it recognizes that employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community.’ Pawar (2009a,) has termed spirituality as employees' workplace experience that encompasses a sense of meaning, community, and transcendence. Mitroff and Denton (1999) noted that spirituality is the fundamental desire to live an integrated life and to discover what eventually is the meaning and purpose of life.

A consideration of the above definitions throws light on the important aspects of the concept of workplace spirituality which include positive and earnest behaviour leading to meaningful work and personal fulfilment. Employees experience of transcendence through their work which makes possible interconnectedness with fellow workers resulting in a feeling of absoluteness and bliss, their psychological well-being.

In her 4-fold model of a spiritually inspired workplace service, Kurth (2003) summarizes the key dimensions of workplace spirituality. First, the transcendental dimension involves being aware of one's connection to the divine. The second dimension entails a commitment to spiritual growth, as well as working with integrity. Third, the relational dimension focuses on integrating and maintaining caring relationships with others in the workplace. Lastly, the communal dimension involves fostering a sense of community, harmony, and sharing within an organization.

Ashmos and Duchon (2000) also discuss the components of a spiritual workplace continuing the theme of meaning and belonging. These correspond to fourfold model of spirituality (Kurth, 2003). They are Inner life, Meaning at work and Interconnectedness/ community:

Inner life- Workplace spirituality refers to acceptance that employees are spiritual persons. They have their own internal need for purpose and will try to fulfil that need. The requirement of purpose is hence aimed within this internal or inner life. It is described as a dimension in human experience discovered when one questions existence and tries to put oneself in a broader context. This is the recognition that all humans possess a soul, a spirit and a recognition of a power greater than his or her physical self. Increasingly, we see people bring their whole selves to work, which includes their spiritual selves. Dehler and Welsh (2003) discuss how the dynamic the modern workplace involves working with a passion, with more and more employees pouring their blood, sweat and tears into doing their job passionately. Vaill (1998, p.218) refers to inner life it as 'the feeling individuals have about the fundamental meaning of who they are, what they are doing, and the contributions they are making.' The idea that employees have spiritual needs (i.e., an inner life) is therefore an important aspect of spirituality at work. Moreover, Duchon and Plowman (2005) noted that when employees are able to express their inner lives, the workplace can be valuable for them.

Meaning at work - Meaningful work can serve people's need for meaning in life. Meaning at work is experiencing work as a spiritual calling, with a special meaning and purpose, in which work is a means to an end or the end as a whole. A sense of purpose in life is the essence of meaning at work. (Fry 2003). Workplace spirituality embodies the idea that people seek meaning at work that a person's work is far more meaningful than its material rewards. The literature also suggests that employees prefer occupations and jobs that are perceived to be part of something bigger than their individual self (Learner, 1996). As Pfeffer (2003, p. 6) puts it, 'Many people seek not only competence and mastery in their work but also to do work that has some social meaning or social value.' This social value of work, according to Fry (2003) fulfils sense of divine calling in people.

Workplace spirituality and meaningful work are linked by the connection of people finding meaning in their jobs and this search for meaning identifies people as spiritual beings. For example, theologian Matthew Fox (1994, p. 2) writes about the spirituality of work: 'Spirit means life, and both life and livelihood are about living in depth, living with meaning, purpose, joy and a sense of contributing to the greater community. A spirituality of work is about bringing life and livelihood back together again.' The concept of spirituality at work, therefore, must include both the recognition that individuals have inner lives that drive them to seek meaning, as well as the realization that meaningful work contributes to the fulfilment of that search.

Interconnectedness or belonging to a community- Being spiritual beings, people are connected to one another. There is some kind of connection between one's inner self and that of others. According to Duchon and Plowman (2005), the principles of sharing, cooperation and commitment are what bind people together, and that the bonds within a community should be invigorating and not impoverishing. A workplace with shared values and a sense of purpose

can lead to a strong sense of connection among employees. According to Mitroff and Denton (1999) the concept of spirituality involves feeling connected to one's own self, to others, and to the universe as a whole. Mirvis (1997, p. 193) writes, 'Work itself is being re-discovered as a source of spiritual growth and connection to others.' Pfeffer (2003) notes that having a sense of belonging to a larger community or being interconnected is an important aspect of people's work lives. As a result, belonging, or being a member of a community, is now considered a requirement of a spirit-friendly workplace.

Keeping these elements in mind, workplaces aspiring to engage in spirituality should foster an environment for authentic and meaningful interpersonal relationships. Employees should be able to engage in open communication in such an organization. Ensuring employees' full potential is essential to promoting spirituality in practice. Moreover, it is considered essential for employees to be given the right and opportunity to fully express their true self at work. The concept of workplace spirituality can be summarized as an experience of transcendence, interconnectedness, personal completeness and joy, Businesses and organizations that promote workplace spirituality should be socially responsible and value-driven. Employees' contributions to the workplace should be acknowledged and their spiritual development and well-being should be promoted.

3. The Importance of Workplace Spirituality

Spiritual dimension is one of the core dimensions of human beings. We are not just material beings. When we look at Indian philosophical traditions, we realize that almost all of them hold the spiritual element sacred and are concerned with its emancipation from the physical. Moreover, the spiritual pervades the physical and integrates all dimension of human personality. A person's spirituality may be understood as a way of life, an identity, a pursuit of meaning, purpose and transcendence, and a relationship with others and with the divine on all levels and thus work is an important component of it. But in the contemporary era we seem to have lost sight of this fact. We compartmentalize our life and consider our work, our personal life and our spiritual life as separate sections. But for our well-being we must integrate these and focus on the unifying principle of spirituality which can help putting these into a whole. Workplace spirituality can help us here as work is an extension of our personality and so the spiritual dimension of work or job can satisfy the yearning of a meaningful life, of the interconnectedness with others and it nourishes the feeling that we are a just part of something greater than ourselves. At work, spirituality manifests when employees find meaning and feel called by the work they do (Molloy & Foust, 2016).

Besides this, with its ability to activate new mysterious resources within organizational members, workplace spirituality has become a new theme for social scientists (Kamoche & Pinnington, 2012). Even though the nature of the work they do impacts employees, they are also affected by their perception of their work and how they carry it on.

Also, as seen in the various definition the element of transcendence of self is emphasized. Workplace spirituality is a framework which enables exactly that. It makes employees and leaders feel that they are part of something bigger - and something that matters. But whether workplace spirituality effects the performance is not a simple issue. There are both arguments for and against the practice of spiritual activities in an organization.

4. Arguments Against Workplace Spirituality

1. *Spirituality is anti-materialistic and anti-positivist* so leads to problem in research and practice.

Researchers argue that since spirituality is anti-materialistic and anti-positivist so scientific investigation of its connection to financial performance is a challenge and the application of positive research methods on this relationship is also problematic. Research question on the relationship between spirituality and performance and productivity raise many ethical issues and moral concerns and likewise raise doubts on positive research methods on spirituality. (Lund Dean et al., 2003) It is further pointed out by researchers that since spirituality at workplace is still a developing area of study so there is vagueness surrounding its concept, definition, meaning, methodology and measurement (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). It is suggested that the concept must be rigorously defined so as to prevent 'conceptual fog' (Bateson, 1972).

2. *Spirituality should not be used as means*

Some researchers are of the opinion that spirituality should be seen as an end in itself rather than used as a managerial instrument to influence employee's performance. (Brown, 2003; Fernando, 2005). Spirituality is a lifetime/eternal goal. To pursue spirituality for its own sake is an end in itself. If it is used as a training programme or as corporate practice to increase employee's productivity and company's profitability then it loses its essence and meaning as it is then short-lived and would not lead to intended results (Fernando, 2005; Mirvis, 1997). Programs of spirituality may turn into just 'management fad, with sinister undertones, which, when unmasked, is likely to prove ineffective and ephemeral.' (Brown, 2003, p. 396)

3. *Spirituality can be misused at workplace*

Some scholars point out to the possibility of misuse of spirituality at workplace (Brown, 2003; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). One main problem recognized is the risk of an attempt to convert other people from different religions and belief systems (Mirvis, 1997; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Inclusion is undermined by preaching about religion or using spiritual beliefs to exclude others (Mirvis, 1997). Because the employees are unable to express their preferred spirituality practices, they often feel frustrated and dissatisfied. Disrespect for diversity leads to feeling of alienation and coercion (Brown, 2003; Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002). Further, if religious diversity is not respected then spirituality issues, especially religious issues, can result in all sorts of human rights and equality issues like favouritism, discrimination, intolerance etc. (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002; Milliman et al., 2003; Mirvis, 1997).

5. Arguments for Workplace Spirituality

1. *There is a positive influence of spirituality at workplace*

Researchers suggest spirituality at workplace can enhance the performance of organization in terms of its productivity and profitability (Biberman & Whitty, 1997; Neck & Milliman, 1994). According to Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003), spirituality can enhance work engagement, satisfaction, and productivity. According to them those employees who see their work as a means to advance spiritually will put forth greater efforts than those who see it only as a means to gain a pay-check. Organizations are more effective when leaders view their work as a means of spiritual advancement (Himmelfarb 1994).

2. Karakas (2010) talks about three perspectives or viewpoints on how spirituality affects an organization positively and is beneficial to both-the employee and the organization.
 - a. From the viewpoint of the employees' wellness and improved quality of life
Many studies show that including spiritual practices at workplace leads to an

increase in employee's confidence and self-esteem (Crawford et al., 2008), organizational dedication and efficiency; (Malik & Naeem, 2011), quality of life and employee wellbeing (Karakas, 2010), and job satisfaction (Noor & Arif, 2011), while decreasing their stress and exhaustion at work. An employee feels complete and more satisfied if free expression of spirituality is allowed at workplace (Burack, 1999). The positivity in his personality in turn results in better performance at work. (Turner, 1999). Further studies suggest that those employees who are spiritually enabled (Bento, 1994) are found to be more truthful, fearless and kind people and these characteristics are exhibited in their work. (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002) Studies suggest that spirituality increases commitment by creating an environment of trust in the workplace (Burack, 1999). Trust is hence another critical element in an organisation and provides a solid foundation for motivation, hard work and effort of employees (Kriger & Hanson, 1999). Employee satisfaction is higher in companies where spirituality is encourages, recognised and valued, as suggested by Pawar (2009b) and Chawla and Guda (2010). When employees feel deeply connected to their workplace, and perceive significance in their daily work, they perform better and beyond their duties. (van Dyne et al., 1994).

- b. From the viewpoint of search for meaningfulness and purpose at employee's place of work The organizations today aim at economic goals. Material wealth, financial matters, profit, cashflow take precedence over social, interpersonal and spiritual goals. Thus, workplaces have become devoid of emotions, interconnectivity and deeper meaning of life (Gull & Doh, 2004; Walsh et al., 2003). At the same time, trends show that people are now looking for a more meaningful and qualitative life at work. rather than looking at material wealth for satisfaction and fulfilment (Gull & Doh, 2004; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). They ponder upon the questions like the meaning of the work they are doing, the reason for their existence in the organization, their passion and the purpose of their life (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). As this search for meaning and purpose in their work life deepens, responding to it has become a key factor in the success of any organization. When work is seen through spiritual dimension (Reave, 2005), that is, if the employees view their work as a sacred duty, as an opportunity to serve or a way to serve God, the work acquires immense significance leading to greater productivity and commitment on the part of the employee. There is a lot of research which supports the view that deeper meaning of work not only leads to enhanced productivity and performance but also provides the employee a sense of meaning and purpose and employees are filled with a sense of happiness and joy at their work. The satisfaction of employee's spiritual needs through spirituality aspects of a workplace brings about a more favourable employee affective response (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Fry, 2003). Workplace spirituality generally has a positive impact on job satisfaction.
- c. From the viewpoint of belongingness and association with a community. This perspective identifies two important elements associated with workplace spirituality-community feeling and sharing a common purpose that extends to something larger than oneself. It emphasizes that organizations should not just be focussed on profit and productivity but also be considered a form of community that encourage gratifying and significant life experiences of its employees. A workplace should provide the employee a sense of community and interconnectedness. This has become necessary because of the ethical

wrongdoings, and organizational crimes happening in an organization. Scandals resulting from greed, selfishness and egoism can have deep negative effects like loss of trust and sense of community as it reflects lack of caring for others (Gull & Doh, 2004). This leads to an employee looking for community interconnectedness and compassion at the workplace (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Due to long working hours, there is a decrease in interaction with local communities and social groups. For many people then the major source of community is the workplace. Also, challenging, uncertain and unhappy times such as death, stress, ailment makes them seek the cooperation of their workplace community for support, counsel, and assistance. Thus, the features of community and connectedness in spirituality experiences is extremely significant in today's workplace.

In other words, workplace spirituality brings about the following positive outcomes:

- A greater sense of satisfaction at work.
- Fulfilment and growth of the individual
- Work becomes meaningful and valuable
- Psychological safety is enhanced by values of collaboration and understanding
- The ability to be creative is enhanced.

6. Conclusion

As per the empirical studies on workplace spirituality it is found that in the organizations where workplace spirituality is nurtured employees are more satisfied and happier resulting in better productivity and profits for the company. But spirituality must not be exploited for instrumental gains (Drive, 2007). The more profound reason to have spirituality at workplace is because it is through work that people find meaning in life. In most people's lives and often, their identity is built around their employment. Individuals define themselves through their work. According to Beyer (1999), meaning and belonging are the two main components of spirituality: humans seek meaningfulness in their lives; therefore, they look for purpose in their work. Being social, they also seek being a part of a social group where they are accepted, understood and supported. Meaning and belonging are two intangibles that improve people's inner lives and provide their work the needed spiritual component.

A person's individual spirituality refers to his search for meaning, purpose, transcendence, and divinity. As well as its fruits, such as inner peace, fulfilment, belonging, and connectedness (Crossman, 2016; Pawar, 2017). Thus, the values and habits of an individual seeking inner improvement represent their individual spirituality.

This philosophical framework should be the reason to have workplace spirituality rather than the other consequentialist framework where the rationale for spirituality is founded on the positive outcomes-the expected beneficial consequences, both for the organization and the individual. The reason for this is that if one gives priority to ethical values, seeking truth, exploring the inner life and aligning the spiritual values with the work it would lead to more confident and successful people which would be an asset to any organization.

‘Spirituality at work is about employees who understand themselves as spiritual beings whose souls need nourishment at work.’ (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000, p. 135)

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