

Spirituality at work: danger, luxury or necessity?

The idea of spirituality at work has increasingly become a focus of attention. Calls for introducing this dimension of our lives into the workplace have major implications for business leaders. How might business leaders face up to this challenge, and what are the implications if they ignore it?

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The call for spirituality

The calls for spirituality at work – whether explicit or embedded in issues such as sustainability, meaning and ethical business practice – are coming from all quarters in many different ways: from employees, external stakeholders, and even customers.

Research quite clearly shows that employees are sensing something is missing from their work life: employees want to bring their whole selves to work. They are increasingly being driven by more than just doing a job to make money and want to do something that matters. They want to do something that lifts them, enables them to connect to their highest selves. Some might argue that these issues have been around since the work of Maslow on self-actualisation, or in the work of writers on motivation which are still staples of the business school. However, these calls are becoming more vociferous, more urgent. This increasing clamour demonstrates the theme of *Interconnections* – whilst there is something there in theory, it has never actually reached the practice of managers and leaders.

Talented employees too are voting with their feet. Those seeking more meaning in their work life are attracted to those organisations who make efforts to dovetail individuals' values and sense of meaning with those of the organisation. Our experience with international business students too demonstrates this growing concern with well-being at work, ethical issues, and sustainability. It would seem that business leaders would be unwise indeed not to give these issues serious consideration, if they wish to recruit gifted people to their ranks.

External stakeholders form part of this call. Customers and suppliers are increasingly placing demands on the way organisations operate, and may only be willing to purchase from or supply to those organisations who operate in ethically, environmentally sustainable ways: ways which demonstrate a commitment to nur-

turing the well-being of employees in every way, including their spirituality. Some investors only purchase shares in organisations who demonstrate they are operating to these principles, and this may increase as the calls grow. Again, this is not new. The Body Shop operated from this principle for over 2 decades, both in management practice and in its product development, but the predominant view that profit has to be the first consideration has meant that companies such as these are in the minority. However, things in the world are changing. Businesses can no longer ignore these issues.

A business case for spirituality

In addition to research that shows the urgent call from employees and external stakeholders, researchers are increasingly identifying a business case for taking the spiritual dimension into account. Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) for example, identify enhanced creativity, increased honesty and trust within the organisation, an enhanced sense of personal fulfilment of employees, and increased commitment to organisational goals. Lips-Wiersma and Mills (2002) highlight increased creativity and intuition, improved ethical behaviour, increased empowerment and concern for the environment, stronger more cohesive vision and purpose, and enhanced team and community building.

So, in addition to the calls from employees and external stakeholders, it would seem that a business case may be emerging for responding to the call to operate in more sustainable and ethical ways, and consider the spiritual needs of employees.

What are the dangers?

One of the major risks of introducing the notion of spirituality into our organisations comes from the lack of definition and practice around this notion. The word 'spirituality' is not a familiar business term, means different things to different people, and can have some negative connotations attached to it. Spirituality is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon and although people have made attempts to define it, no definition will convey the complete essence of spirituality. Further, in these days of polarised fundamentalist beliefs being played out in the 'war on terror', organised religion – which many associate as 'spirituality' – carries an emotional charge. Because of these many different interpretations, assumptions and emotional responses, leaders run the risk

of either alienating some employees and/or discrimination. The controversy over headwear for women and necklace crosses for aircraft employees highlight these potential dangers.

A further danger for both researchers and business leaders is to see the spiritual dimension as an 'it' – as something that can easily be implemented or managed. Some leaders will be tempted to use techniques of implementation they have used with other initiatives, simply because they are familiar with them. There is a danger that the idea will be appropriated and manipulated for the creation of profit rather than as an end in itself.

New ways of being and thinking

So, if tinkering will not work, then to embrace the notion of spirituality in organisations, business leaders will need to make radical change – both in their own thinking, in their understanding of spirituality, and in the organisations in which they work. By its nature, spirituality cannot be an add-on. If it means people bringing their whole selves to the workplace, then the whole culture and style of leadership will need to change. Covey (1999) shows quite clearly that business leaders will need to see that working effectively with this dimension requires a whole new way of thinking about the nature of business. And this quite clearly sets up some personal challenges for business leaders. Research shows that if a leader is to successfully nurture the spiritual dimension in the workplace then it is important that they recognise the spiritual dimension in their own lives.

Whilst we are not suggesting that the leader needs to be a spiritual leader or teacher, they need truly to understand the spiritual dimension, role model appropriate behaviours, and value their employees at a spiritual level. In short, they need to demonstrate commitment, congruence, and humility. By so doing, they may succeed in creating the new paradigm for business required in order for spirituality truly to take hold. A new paradigm that thinks beyond a profit motive, truly recognises the importance of people, communities and the environment to businesses, and moves beyond measuring benefits in purely quantitative ways.

The leader who achieves this will be at once courageous, pioneering and spiritually gifted. This is what will be required if the clamour for the spiritual dimension is to be met ethically and harmoniously.

References

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