

Can you Create Spirit in your Workplace?

By Dennis Jaffe, Ph.D.

As we see post-911 layoffs and job disruption caused by the business slowdown, mergers and consolidation, the very concept of loyalty and commitment to an employer is under question. At the same time, whenever someone holds a workshop on Spirituality at Work, there are standing room only crowds. Is this nostalgia for a lost but not forgotten experience, or are there genuine and important factors that are leading some organizations to reconsider the ways that they build bonds of commitment, connection and community with their employees?

I have worked for more than 30 years to help workplaces become more human, and to utilize not just the bodies, but the minds and yes, even the hearts, of their employees. While many people feel instinctively that it is “right” for workplaces to respect their employees, there is dispute about whether there are business reasons to do this, and how one should go about building these bonds in an organization that does so less than it could. In this article I will outline the major areas where there seems to be justification for practices that increase the “spirit” of the workplace.

People doubt that an organization can support people’s spirit. Most of you own or work for smaller businesses, often run by family members. Such companies can be more informal, and more supportive of individuals, but they can also be more chaotic, disorganized and unfair. This article will suggest that, as a leader of a small furniture manufacturing or retailer, you can begin to initiate activities that can retain your employee’s loyalty and commitment by supporting people’s spirit in concrete ways. It is more than making speeches and proclaiming your respect for people; creating spirit is about action rather than intention.

After downsizing, mergers, restructuring and other changes, the people who are left are often shell-shocked, anxious, uncertain and disconnected from the organization. As every business is challenged, people are expected to do more and more to preserve their jobs and the company, even though sometimes the company can’t afford to pay them any more. Employees are disillusioned, and feel acutely the lack of stability and predictability of the past, which they tend to idealize. They find it hard to recommit themselves to the organization, to want to do their best, or even to know how to put

forth their best efforts in a turbulent, uncertain workplace. This disconnection between the person and the organization has been characterized as diminished loyalty, trust, commitment and willingness to identify and put forth extra effort for the organization. It is not helpful to blame the organization or the individual for this state of affairs. Rather, the organization must take the problem seriously, and consider ways to reconnect with the employees that are still there, the ones they want to retain.

Spirit represents a connection to something deep and important, contacting an inner resource that contains energy, intelligence, and can help keep a person, or a community, on course. It represents a pathway to a deep, rejuvenating capability to get desired results in a way that respects and enhances the wellbeing of the people who are part of it. People want to get in touch with spirit for many reasons. First, it makes work meaningful, because people see the connection between what they do and something important. Second, spirit helps people get aligned so that they are all working in the same direction. Third, spirit motivates people to higher levels of effort and performance. Fourth, spirit helps people trust and respect each other, leading to more open, sensitive and supportive relationships. And finally, spirit helps workplaces connect to a higher purpose that goes beyond the work itself, to link the organization with issues in the environment, of social responsibility, and to its impact on the environment. Clearly, if spirit can do all these things, a company would want to provide as much of it as possible.

Yet, workplaces either give lip service to the resources of the spirit, or act as if they feel that spirit will cause the organization to lose its ability to do its best work. Approaches to motivation that are based in external rewards, fear of losing one's job, highly heroic and individual efforts and competitiveness, and conformity to one's bosses or procedures, are presented as the ways to get things done. Anyone who disagrees is disregarded as naïve or unrealistic.

Spirituality in the workplace has been mistakenly seen, by both advocates and critics, as meaning religion in the workplace. In that many elements of religion are spiritual, spiritual practices in organizations often take on some qualities of religious practices. For example, looking at personal values, using techniques like meditation and inner reflection, values about respect and concern for other people, all have their roots in religious traditions. Yet spirituality in the workplace is not about having Bible study groups at lunch.

Rather it is about practices that span individual religious traditions and focus on values and insights that are common to all or most of them. Most workplaces are sensitive to not offending or promoting any religious group when they do things that are seen as “spiritual,” though any work practice has at least the potential to offend or put off some religious group.

Developing spirit in an organization is really based on some particular values about how people work together, that contrasts with the traditional values that do not trust people to contribute unless forced to. For people to feel in touch with the spirit of their organization, they need to feel that

- they are valued as people by the organization and the people around them,
- they are told the truth about what is happening,
- that are asked to participate in helping the organization to achieve success,
- they share fairly in the rewards for good work,
- they can get the resources they need to do their job,
- they can ask questions and suggest relevant changes and improvements, and
- the organization will use some of its resources to support their individual lives and futures.

Several common practices are used to develop this spirit. They all have in common that they empower individuals to use more of themselves. No single activity is “the answer.” Rather, organizations that allow several of these practices to take root, and develop programs and values that support their emergence, sometimes spontaneously, become regarded as “great places to work.”

1) Help people find their inner purpose and mission.

When there has been change, and when a new team must come together, one way for people to come together as a group, and to look at how they will work together, is to start with each person. Looking at deep purpose, asking yourself why you do the work you do, what is important to you about it, and how you want to do your work, represents an awakening of spirit that serves two functions. First, it enables people to look at themselves, and instead of trying to figure out what the organization, or others want, to ask themselves. This is deeply stimulating, as people come up with ways that they can do something special at work. The personal purposes that emerge focus on issues like respecting other people, creating a place where people can do

their best work, completing a special project or piece of work, or helping their group achieve a goal. These personal missions are clearly helpful to the organization as well as renewing for individuals.

The second effect of focus on personal mission is to help the team get to know each other in another way, and to learn something about how each person wants to be recognized, something about what matters to them about their work. The effect of focus on personal mission is to help people feel more in touch and linked to each other, and more caring, trusting and supportive as a team.

2) Collaborate to define the organization's deep vision.

As the organization gets more complex, and demands from customers, competitors and the environment shift constantly, employees get confused about what they are supposed to be doing, or how their work can really make a difference in the whole organization. It is well known that a person is more effective if they understand how their work fits in with the big picture. When an organization is changing, what is consistent that allows people to know what the organization is supposed to be doing?

Organizations are finding that they can align the efforts of many, sometimes many thousand in many countries, doing many tasks, around a set of values, principles and pictures of what is important. This is the vision of where the organization is going. The vision is not static. While it has many continuing elements, it must also be up-dated and re-defined as time goes on. For example, the vast changes at large organizations like Sears and IBM involved not just the whole organization, but each part rethinking their vision, and how they would reach it.

In a spirited organization, the vision is not just a top-down effort. The top leadership, the founders, and sometimes the owners, set a stake in the ground. But to tap into spirit, employees throughout the organization have to link the vision to their own work, and define it in relation to their own environment. The work of developing a vision in a deep, spiritual way, involves taking a big picture vision, and having exchange in many parts of the organization, including all levels, about what it means and how they see it. Then, their experiences and ideas are collected and used to revise and develop the vision further. Finally, the vision is something that many people have touched, feel part of, and hold within them as they work. If people feel that what they do matters, that what the organization is doing or how it does

it, they feel they can take initiative, and act appropriately. This feeling is passed on to other employees, and to customers.

3) Create and live by a set of values about people and working together.

Related to the work on personal purpose and organizational vision, the organization, and the work team, can clarify its values about doing work. Values and spirit are almost synonymous, in that a value is a deep enduring guide to action that is considered good in itself. While an organization can do many things, it also embodies values such as treating customers and employees with respect, helping other people to their job, and looking for creative new ideas. We all know that an organization can also embody more sinister values—such as competing for every job, the primacy of individual results, treating people lower in the organization as inferior, not listening or respecting new ideas, pleasing the boss, and other signs of a workplace that values fear, power and conformity.

The path to shifting toward values that embody respect for the employee and the capability of each person is a spiritual principle that is rooted in psychology of motivation. Thousands of research studies continually demonstrate that people work better when they feel valued, when they are praised, when they get feedback, and in the absence of fear and intimidation. Yet, many workplaces either ignore this, or feel that people work better through fear.

The focus on desired values, and how the team or organization does or does not live up to them, is an important activity in developing a team, and releasing the spirit of a workplace. It enables people to discuss how they want to do things, and go beyond getting tasks completed to look at how the deeper levels of their work.

4) Practices that tap inner creativity and wisdom.

Workplaces have found that they ask people to offer commitment of time and task, but they rarely have ways to tap into the deeper levels of personal creativity and wisdom of many of their employees. The old assumption was that a few people at the top, or in strategic planning and R & D would be the creators, and the rest of the people would follow along. Today, many organizations find that many, if not all, of their employees must exercise judgment and creativity daily in working with customers, in rethinking products or services, or in looking for opportunities or ways to leverage what they have. The term knowledge workers, and the concept of Intellectual

Capital, to refer to the knowledge that is carried within the people of the organization, who can leave at any time, is becoming more common. Organizations find that the way that they involve their people relates to how much of themselves they are willing to share.

Unfortunately, many of the processes of work serve not only to turn the organization off to potential gifts of individuals, but also to stop people from even listening to themselves. The phrase “why bother” crops up all too often when people know something that could be done and don’t feel that they can have any impact.

The quality movement was early in seeing that an organization grew in value when it tapped the thousands of small innovations of its employees. Today, the focus on knowledge management, which is seen as a technical task of having appropriate information systems, has a spiritual dimension when it looks for ways to help employees listen to themselves, and cultivate processes that liberate creativity, and apply it to the key business problems of the organization. Practices that build creative exchange in groups and teams increasingly have a spiritual edge—in that they incorporate techniques of meditation, deep reflection and looking inward that are part of many cultural traditions.

5) Increase emotional intelligence in work relationships.

It may seem that emotional intelligence was discovered only recently. Yet the traditions of humanistic psychology and the human potential movement of the 60s, despite their excesses, were based on some of the same concepts, as are the management theories of Deming (drive fear out of the workplace, encourage participation), Tom Peters, Ed Schein, Chris Argyris, Rosabeth Kanter, John Kotter, Jeffrey Pfeffer, Ed Lawler and many of the conventional models of workplace participation and involvement. They are also backed by health research that suggests that support, self-expression and respect create greater physical health.

Emotional intelligence is the resource of supporting people who are able to listen to others, respect their points of view, and move ahead with sensitivity to involving others rather than intimidating them. Processes which cultivate and value sensitivity to others, and build trust and fairness at work are fundamental to any workplace, and so it may be a stretch to call them spiritual. The new focus emphasizes building these principles into the process of management and supervision, such that managers learn to work

not by traditional power of their authority, but by building consensus, inviting participation, and allowing people to put their own stamp on the workplace.

6) Create a climate of dialogue and discovery.

Dialogue has a long history in philosophy, and a more recent history in the work of physicist/philosopher David Bohm, made popular in management by the work of Peter Senge and David Isaacs. Echoing the principles of emotional intelligence, the practice of dialogue combines many of the processes above. Dialogue is a way of allowing a conversation to flow and develop by combining the ability to listen to oneself, and to look at one's assumptions and personal response to others, and to listen and be open to the ideas and experience of others. In dialogue, people are learning from each other and themselves, and building a shared reality that can be applied to resolving a business problem, developing a team, resolving a deep conflict between members of a group, or developing a strategy or plan for implementation. Dialogue is a specific set of skills that a group can use for some part of its work together. In a dialogue process, you are less concerned with advocating your own views, although that happens, than with inquiring into how they came to be, and testing them in light of the reactions to others.

7) Develop managers' skills as facilitators and mentors.

The final area of spirit at work involves teaching and developing managers in the skills of leading by involvement, emotional intelligence, dialogue and discovery. This is not an easy task, and many managers may say they want to act this way, but either through not having good models, not getting feedback about their behavior and their effect on the people around them, by not having the skill to operate in this way, or by not being able to deal with the emotional feelings of loss of control and uncertainty, they are not able to put them into practice.

To develop spirit in the workplace, you need not just to tell managers how good it will be, but you need to train them, and support them, in some very new and different skills and practices. When the top leadership has developed a deep and genuine commitment to these new ways of work, it can be undone, or be dead on arrival, if the managers are not taught and supported to work in a new way. Often performance evaluation, and other systems, need to be redefined to support the new values that the workplace and the leadership desire.

Conclusion

It is not enough for a leader to decide that he or she wants to develop a spiritual perspective, or practice, in their company. In fact, when a leader gets excited about these ideas they are often dismissed and ignored in the organization not because people are opposed to them, but because they are not clear how to make them real. Spiritual values about people and work need to be linked to workplace practices, which begin with learning how to do them. They need to be supported by the actions of people in all levels of the organization, and rewarded. If an organization want to embark on this path, they need to develop learning processes that teach people new ways, and help them begin to practice them. They can make a great difference in the organization, but it must be remembered that they entail a major commitment, and incur a start-up cost for time and learning. How the internal leader can do this is the subject of another paper.

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