Towards a holistic framework in fostering spirituality at work

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Abstract
Management theories are shaped by the assumptions of man. The Scientific and Administrative School of Thoughts adopt a mechanistic view of human. The Human Relations School views humans as social beings. Spirituality at work looks at the spiritual side of the organization and views man as a spiritual being. This paper proposes a holistic framework to spirituality at work. Taking a systems approach the framework discusses how training, cultural and structural interventions directed the four sub-systems of the organization, namely, culture, leadership, structure and people, help to promote spirituality at work. The framework also discusses the organizational and individual outcomes of spirituality at work.

Introduction
“Spirituality is creeping into the office”, reported the June 1995 issue of Business Week; “…And companies are turning inward in search of a ‘soul’ as a way to foster creativity and to motivate leaders” (pp 82). Another survey conducted in 1999 by a sociologist from Princeton University indicated that more than four in ten respondents reported an increased interest in spirituality over the previous year (cited in Higgins, 2000). There is little doubt that practitioners and scholars are interested to know how to integrate spirituality and work in organizations. The literature on spirituality exploded in the late 1990s (e.g., Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Neal, 2000; Quatro, 2002; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). Spirituality at work is not a fad. The setting up of an interest group on management, spirituality and religion in the Academy of Management testifies to the relevance of this stream of research.

The objectives of this paper are to:
   a. Propose a holistic framework to foster spirituality at work
   b. Discuss individual and organizational outcomes of spirituality at work
   c. Identify opportunities for future research on this relatively new concept of spirituality at work

Management theories are shaped by scholars’ assumptions of man. The Scientific School and Administrative Schools of Thought tend to have a mechanistic view of humans and downplay the fact that we have feelings and needs. The Human Relations School of Thought realizes that we are not work-machines; we have needs and emotions. Managers trained in the Human Relations approach understand “the human organization” (Likert, 1967) and pay attention to inter-personal issues such as teamwork, communications, motivation, and conflict management. This paper extends current management thoughts by providing another view of man – the view that humans are spiritual beings. It argues for the need to look beyond the human side of an organization and incorporate the spiritual dimension in organizational life. Specifically, it explores the issue of spirituality in organizations and how it affects individual behavior and organizational performance.
**Theoretical background**

Traditionally, the study of spirituality falls under the domain of philosophy and religion. Entralgo (1970) traces the study of spirituality back to the ancient Greek philosophers in the fifth B.C. Plato believed in the healing power of dialogue for soul care. Socrates admonished people not to put priority in their bodies or possessions. Instead, people should attend to the welfare of their soul. Until recently, spirituality has always been viewed from a faith perspective. It is not surprising that there is so little consensus on what is spirituality. Every religion has its own views on how to achieve spirituality. Still, the contemplations of theologians and religious scholars will be a rich source of information for scholars interested in the contemporary interest in organizational spirituality.

Although the idea of integrating spirituality and work in organization may be new in management studies, there are scholars (e.g., Quatro, 2004) who believe that this idea can be traced to the works of earlier scholars like Mary Parker Follett (1918) and Abraham Maslow (1998). Likewise, there was much discussion on spirituality by early psychologists like Carl Jung (1960) and Soren Kierkegaard (1954). The interest in spirituality at the workplace is actually a revival of that in the past.

Despite the long heritage of spirituality studies, the definition of spirituality is still evolving and scholars are struggling to describe its full meaning and scope. The only consensus at the moment is that there is a lack of clarity and agreement in the definition of this construct (Harrington, Preziosi and Gooden, 2001). Nevertheless, Schmidt-Wilk, Heaton, & Steingard (2000), identified three streams of definitions. The first stream focuses on the “inner experiences” of individuals. The second stream is more principle-based. It defines spirituality in terms of values, emotions, intuitions, virtues, ethics, wisdom, etc. The third stream relates the individual’s inner experiences with external behavior, principles and practices.

**A Proposed Framework on Spirituality at Work**

**Spirituality at Work**

Figure 1 provides a parsimonious framework on how to foster spirituality at work in an organization. I agree with Ingersoll’s (1994) observation: “The observable elements can point to, but never fully explicate, the observable elements…” and I would only explore “the meaning of spirituality, the term description is used in lieu of definition to avoid the illusion of full explication” (pp 100). In this paper, I describe organizations that support spirituality at work as those that facilitate the spiritual growth and development of employees. Spirituality at work nourishes the inner life of the employees. There will be a sense of fulfillment experienced by the employees as they see their work as a means to achieve a higher goal beyond material gain and a means to live out their values fully. There will be a sense of community in the organization and employees will feel that they are connected genuinely with each other.
The open-systems view of organizations
In the framework, organizations are analyzed from an open-systems perspective. It views organizations as living organisms and emphasizes the inter-connectedness among the organization’s sub-systems, namely, the culture, leadership, people and structure. Organizations thrive when they are internally congruent and externally matched with their environment. A major role for leaders in organizations is to ensure that sub-systems in the organizations are aligned to achieve internal congruence and external fit with the environment.

The fostering of spirituality at work calls for a holistic approach leveraging at the different sub-systems of the organization to maximize the effectiveness and sustainability of the various interventions. This is based on Kilmann’s (1989) observation on the ineffectiveness of single-intervention approaches in solving complex organizational problems. For example, relying on training alone to promote spirituality at work is unlikely to have any lasting impact on the organization if the organizational culture and reward systems are not aligned to support spiritual practices. Also, employees trained on spirituality will not be able to practice spirituality at the workplace if managers and supervisors adopt traditional methods of driving productivity and performance through emphasis on short-term goals and tight financial bottom-lines.

Barriers to Spirituality at Work
Every organization has its own distinct culture that affect how its employees think, feel and behave. The organizational culture is reflected in the behavioral norms, artifacts, values, belief systems, and assumptions. The organizational culture provides a framework to guide the employee’s day-to-day behavior and decision-making. It provides meaning and direction for employees to work towards the organizational goals.

Organizational culture can create barriers to spirituality when it is characterized by a lack of a higher purpose beyond material success. For example, when the shared values and belief systems of the organization are based on the assumption that it exists to maximize profits, the whole organization will be steered towards material goals. There is little motivation for the members of the organization to act ethically. A highly profit-driven culture creates excessive competition among its employees and fosters an individualistic attitude. This is detrimental to spirituality as it destroys a sense of community in the workplace. Likewise, an over-emphasis on materialistic values in the organization culture will alienate the employees from their deeper longing to do something more meaningful than just creating material wealth.

The leadership of the organization plays an important role in shaping spirituality at work. Leaders can promote or stifle spirituality at work by their behavior since employees tend to view them as role models. When leaders practice oppressive leadership styles with no regard to people’s feelings and rely on externally imposed measures like rigid rules and regulations to drive behavior, it robs the dignity of employees and creates a stifling environment to work in. Employees will not experience a sense of inner peace working under such leadership and this undermines spiritual development. Likewise, when leaders act unethically, it will have a negative effect on spirituality at work. It sends a strong
signal to employees and they would have to struggle with their conscience to make judgments on the appropriateness of the leaders’ actions.

People-related barriers to spirituality include self-centeredness, lack of an internal compass, conflicts, and office politics. In a way, all these barriers are inter-related and mutually reinforcing. When individuals in the organization are self-centered, they only consider their own needs and ignore others. This causes excessive conflicts and hinders the development of a sense of community in the organization. The internal compass guides an individual’s outward behavior. A person without an internal compass will act in an unprincipled manner in response to external circumstances. Inevitably, this will bring out the worst in people and make the organization become very political. Excessive politics in the organization is not conducive to development in spirituality. It is unlikely for the members of the organization to experience inward peace when the organization is political.

The structure of the organization is reflected in the tasks, procedures, programs, reward systems, control systems, and communications systems. Structural barriers to spirituality at work include emphasis on extrinsic motivation to appraise and reward employee performance, over reliance on technology and bureaucracy. When the appraisal and reward systems in the organization focus too much on extrinsic motivation, they condition employees to respond only to extrinsic motivators and reduce their need for intrinsic motivation. This is detrimental to spirituality. It conveys to employees that only material success and achievement matter in life and there is no need to strive for a higher purpose.

Our experience tells us that there is an inverse relationship between technology and spirituality. Technology creates a sense of self-sufficiency and power. It reduces the need to connect and relate with some ultimate being beyond ourselves. Technology also reduces the human touch in the organization. People find it impersonal to work in a technologically advanced environment. In other words, technology can hinder community building and this is adverse to spirituality.

Bureaucracy creates barriers to spirituality because it ignores the human side of the organization. Rigid rules and regulations stifle creativity and initiative in people. They dehumanize the organization. Humans do not function like programs in the computer. We do not act like passive agents in response to some impersonal instructions. We are proactive agents acting purposefully towards our goals.

**Interventions**
The interventions in the framework are directed at the sub-systems of the organization to promote spirituality. They are also designed to remove the various barriers to spirituality. Three types of interventions are specified in the framework. Managers have to decide on the most appropriate interventions to foster spirituality at work depending on the needs of the organization. Often, more than one type of intervention is required to effectively remove the barriers to spirituality from the sub-systems and make them more supportive of spirituality.
Cultural interventions work on the organizational culture. They aim to foster a supportive environment for the development of spirituality in the organization. Organizational culture is represented by the shared assumptions, values and belief systems. Since these are deeply embedded in the individuals of the organization, the organizational culture is most difficult to change. In practice, it requires the reinforcement of training and structural interventions to effect a change in the culture.

Kilmann (1989) offers a five-track approach to change the culture. It involves influencing the organizational culture by (a) identifying the actual norms of the organization; (b) defining the desired norms; (c) measuring the gap between actual and desired norms; (d) closing the “culture-gap” through group sanctions; and, (e) sustaining the cultural change effort through rewards. To apply the Kilmann five-track approach in fostering a pro-spirituality culture requires managers to first identify the actual norms in the organizations. For example, managers may find that the norm among the employees is to compromise on ethics due to bottom-line concerns. Next, the managers have to specify the desirable pro-spirituality norms. In this case, the managers will have to specify the desired ethical standards. The gap between actual and desired will give the management an idea of how much work needs to be done to move the organization toward its desired standard. The fourth step involves having the managers develop group consensus on how to move towards the desired standard and to decide what needs to be done to sanction those who violate the agreed course of actions. The last step completes the change effort by designing appropriate reward systems to sustain the change.

Training interventions are directed at the people in the organization. The training programs are mostly designed to raise awareness and competencies in integrating spirituality and work. They instruct participants on the spiritual basis to life and business. After attending the programs, participants are expected to feel uplifted and able to find meaning in their work. Other programs, like Yoga and Transcendental Meditation aim to teach participants how to tap into their inner spiritual resources, which are believed to be available in everyone. Training interventions can also be directed at the leadership. For example, leadership programs can be designed to train leaders in the organization to identify leadership practices and behaviors that are detrimental to the employees’ spiritual development. Programs on Servant Leadership (DePree, 1993) and Stewardship (Block, 1996) and Principled Centred Leadership (Covey, 1992) are commonly known leadership programs linked to the spirituality movement.

Organization and design interventions are aimed at aligning the organizational structure to support spirituality at work. Examples of such interventions are designing jobs to make them more meaningful, aligning reward and appraisal systems to recognize employees for acting ethically and promoting a sense of community in the organization. Managers can also organize specific programs and events to promote awareness and practices of spirituality at the workplace. For example, managers can organize a “Spiritual Wellness Week” to promote awareness of spirituality issues at the workplace. Organizations can also invest in building library resource on spirituality at work. Neal (1997) provides a good list of readings on this topic.
Individual & Organizational Outcomes

There are desirable individual and organizational outcomes associated with spirituality at work. Gibbons’ (2000) extensive review uncovers a long list of claims. For example, at the individual level, spirituality is linked to individual well-being, motivation, and task performance. At the organizational level, it is linked to profitability and ethical conduct of the organization. Some researchers argue that spirituality leads to higher creativity in people because it gives them access to new frontiers of consciousness (Guillory, 2000; Harman and Hormann, 1990). Maslow (1943) believed in the linkage between spirituality and personal fulfillment. In this hierarchy of needs model, an individual will be most satisfied with life at the self-actualization state. At this stage, the individual feels most fulfilled intellectually, emotionally and spiritually.

The proposed framework in figure 1 specifies that spirituality at work is linked to spiritual wellness of employees and organizational performance. Spiritual wellness in this paper is viewed as comprising four dimensions, namely, meaning in life, intrinsic values, transcendence and community (Westgate, 1996). Organizational performance in this framework includes both financial and social performance.

A spiritually well person is one who feels that life is meaningful. He or she will find purpose in everything in life including his or her work. Organizations that support spirituality at work are those that have a larger purpose than just maximizing profits. These organizations believe in creating values to the community. They are not only accountable to the shareholders but also to many other stakeholders including the employees. Spiritual organizations are more attentive to their employees’ spiritual needs. Hence, they will be more likely to design jobs that are meaningful for their employees and enable them to see how their work-lives are linked to a larger purpose.

Another dimension of spiritual wellness is intrinsic values. Spiritually well individuals are value-driven rather than money-driven. Likewise, organizations that emphasize spirituality at work are those that driven by a strong set of core values. For example, the South West Airlines is well-known for their core values on the importance of community (Tyler, 1998). Every employee at South-West Airlines knows the company stands for teamwork, serving others and acting in the best interest of the company. An employee who does not subscribe to this value-system on community is unlikely to do well at the company. The company’s core values affect the employees in two ways. First, individuals may self-select themselves to the company based on its core values. Second, they may align their value-systems to fit the company’s core values.

Transcendence is the third dimension of spiritual wellness. Noble (1985) study shows a positive relationship between transcendence and psychological well-being. We expect a positive relation between spirituality at work and transcendence. Transcendence refers to having a transcendent perspective in life that believes in connecting with a higher being or creator of the universe (Ellison and Smith, 1991). Individuals with a transcendent perspective will have a cosmic view of life and experience a sense of awe in thinking.
about life and the universe. Organizations that promote spirituality will convey to the employees the importance to having a broader and deeper perspective of life.

The fourth dimension of spiritual wellness is community or a sense of connectedness with fellow human beings. This is definitely a highly desired outcome. As the society becomes more and more affluent, people tend to feel alienated and long for a sense of connectedness. Individuals working in organizations that promote spirituality at work will experience a sense of community. Spiritual organizations promote sharing and support among the members of the organization.

There is some empirical support on the positive organizational outcomes associated with spirituality. Thompson (2000) cited a Harvard Business School study to lend support to his observation that spirituality could let to corporate performance. In that study, it was reported that some of the “more-spirited” companies outperformed their counterparts by 400 to 500 percent in terms of net earnings, ROI and shareholder value. Anecdotally, the Southwest Airlines case study has been used to illustrate the strong correlation between spirituality and profitability (Milliman, Ferguson, Trickett & Condemi, 1999). Other scholars like Krishnakurmar & Neck, (2002) also notes the linkage between spirituality and organizational performance in terms of financial success. They argue spirituality at work could help to improve organizational performance through its influences on employees. For instance, spirituality at work could help to foster creativity, honesty, trust, personal fulfillment and commitment among employees and in turn these factors would have a positive impact on organizational performance.

Besides financial success, spirituality at work would also contribute positively to social performance of the organization through its influences on corporate values. Tom’s of Maine is a good example on the linkage between spirituality at work and social performance. Tom Chappell, co-founder, President and CEO, believes in “doing well by doing good”. This philosophy is reflected in the company values and philosophy. He also conceived the “seven intentions” to translate this philosophy into corporate actions (Chappell, 1999). The first of the “seven intentions” as stated in the company’s website is “Connect with Goodness -Set aside your own ego, open up, and connect to a universal force that is bigger than you and available to everyone—the power of goodness”. The website also shows the list of awards achieved by the company for its outstanding social performance. (http://www.tomsofmaine.com).

Discussion

Managerial Implications
The framework in this paper calls for a holistic approach. Fostering spirituality at work is complex. Managers cannot hope to cultivate spirituality at work simply by relying on a single intervention like training or job design, etc. The single-intervention approach to spirituality is able to only target one sub-system of the organization. To be effective and sustainable, we need multi-intervention approaches. Each intervention is designed to
make changes at a specific sub-system of the organization. Collectively, the interventions complement and mutually reinforce each other.

A holistic approach in fostering spirituality requires proper planning. There is no copycat approach nor standard solution. In other words, managers cannot blindly adopt another company’s program even though it has been proven to be successful. Managers have to conduct a thorough diagnosis of their organizational situation before deciding on the proper interventions. The proposed framework can serve as a good diagnostic tool. It guides the managers in analyzing the organization’s readiness for and barriers to spirituality at each of the organizational sub-systems. For example, an organization may be ready for spirituality at work at the cultural level with its established corporate values and philosophy. However, the organization may be hampered by wrongly conceived reward systems that tend to be bottom-line oriented and which in turn lead to excessive competition among the employees. In this case, the needed intervention would be the realignment of the reward systems to make them oriented towards intrinsic values. The other intervention would be conflict management to foster a sense of community in the organization.

An in-depth diagnosis of the organization’s situation does not only enable the manager to decide on the kinds of interventions to adopt, it also gives suggestions on how to sequence these interventions. Using the previous example, the priority for the management will be redesigning the reward systems and team-building. If these issues are not resolved, it will be a waste of resources to invest in training the employees or leadership on spirituality at work. In contrast, if an organization is not ready for spirituality due to its bottom-line oriented culture, the logical step is to engage in cultural interventions first to remove this cultural barrier to spirituality. Other training and structural interventions can follow. Otherwise, the training and restructuring efforts will not be supported by the organizational culture.

Since organizations exist as a system, all the sub-systems are interconnected. Any changes in any sub-system will affect the others. This means that we need to monitor the implementation process closely and make refinements accordingly to correct any unforeseen problems. The proposed holistic framework recommends an organic approach to implement the interventions. Timely feedback is important to alert the managers to issues and problems that have not been identified earlier in the overall change program.

The proposed framework may seem simple. In reality it calls for tremendous management commitment to make it work. There is no quick fix solution to foster spirituality at work. Managers cannot expect to improve spirituality of the organization by paying lip services. They must be personally convicted and committed to the changes. Employees see their managers as role-models. If they perceive that their managers are not fully committed, they will be likewise. Management commitment is expressed in terms of time, resources and authority. Besides investing time and resources to diagnose, plan and implement the change strategies, managers need to empower their employees with the authority to take prompt and necessary actions to resolve any unforeseen problems.
Future Research Directions
There are so many ways to define spirituality. It has been defined as a personality trait (Mohamed, Wisnieski, Askar, & Syed, 2004), an intelligence (Emmons, 2000), an inner experience (Clark 1958) and a cultural phenomenon (Oliveira, 2004). This suggests an urgent need for further conceptual refinement to develop and measure this construct of spirituality in the organizational context. There should different levels of analysis. For instance, at the organizational level, we can look at “spirituality at work”, and at the individual level we can look at spiritual wellness. Likewise, there should be a corresponding spirituality construct at the group-level.

Another stream of research is to investigate the nomological network of spirituality at work. Since this is a new construct, it will be interesting to examine how spirituality at work influences employee attitudes and behavior and organizational performance. Milliman, Czaplewski and Ferguson (2001) provided an exploratory empirical assessment of the relationship between spirituality and employee attitudes at the workplace. In addition, researchers can also examine the antecedents of spirituality at work. For example, researchers can investigate how leadership affects spirituality.

There is also scope for research in examining the effectiveness of various interventions in promoting spirituality. This stream of research has direct practitioner implications. The proposed framework has specified three types of interventions to influence spirituality at work. What is needed is to empirically investigate the relative effectiveness of these interventions in organizations.
REFERENCES


Figure 1: A holistic framework to promote Spirituality at Work

Interventions
- Cultural
- Structural
- Training

Organization

Culture

Leadership

People

Structure

Barriers to Spirituality

Cultural

Leadership Related

People-Related

Structural

Spirituality at work

Spiritual Wellness
Organizational Performance
Dr Gilbert Tan, Practice Associate Professor of Management, Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University (SMU), has written and presented papers at regional and international conferences in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Australia, the United States and Canada. His articles appeared in international and regional journals, such as the International Journal of Management, Journal of Global Marketing, Creativity and Innovation Management, Journal of Organizational Behavior and Asia-Pacific Journal of Management. (gilberttan@smu.edu.sg)