BRINGING SPIRIT TO THE WORKPLACE: INTEGRATING WORK WITH SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Tracy McDonald, Department of Management, California State University, Chico, Chico, CA 95928-0031,530-898-5773,tmcdonald@csuchico.edu

ABSTRACT

Work is the setting from which many Americans expect to derive meaning and where they spend the greater part of their waking hours. Yet, this setting is rife with stressors, insecurities, work overload, and other building blocks of burnout. The last years of the 1990s up until the present have witnessed a dramatic surge in researchers advancing the idea that the way to deep and meaningful change in today's organizations is by allowing spirituality into the workplace. Allowing spirituality into the workplace is recognition that spiritual questioning is relevant to all life activities, including work, and we cannot expect workers to leave their spiritual lives at the door. Thirty-one Buddhist meditators responded to a survey investigating how they bring work into their spiritual life. Responses were consistent with frameworks set forth by previous researchers and there was more commonality in responses than differences. Implications for organizations are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

What is meant by allowing spirituality into the workplace? First, such an allowing is an acknowledgement that humans have a spiritual self and root questions by which it is governed: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose (Richmond, 1999)? Allowing spirituality into the workplace is recognition that spiritual questioning is relevant to all life activities, including work. Researchers offer many different definitions of spirituality. Schmidt-Wilk (2000) identifies three streams of definitions of spirituality in the literature. His third, the relationship between a person's inner spiritual experience and the behaviors at work that reflect this experience is the definition of spirituality that will be focused on in this paper.

What sorts of benefits accrue to an organization that allows spirituality in the workplace? Garcia-Zamor (2003a) relates empirical evidence that employees perform better, feel happier, are more motivated, are less likely quit, and feel a sense of belonging to a community. In a review of the literature, Zellars and Perrewe (2003) conclude that spirituality can be an effective tool for coping with a stressful job. Some of the possible beneficial outcomes of workplace spirituality discussed in Giacalone and Jurkiewicz's (2003) review include increased employee enthusiasm, effort, collaboration, performance, productivity, innovation, teamwork, and commitment.

One area that has been largely unexamined is how workers themselves bring spirituality to their jobs. There are many courses of action an organization can take to allow spirituality in the workplace, but if the workers themselves do not actively bring spirituality to their jobs, it is doubtful whether the potential of the organization's actions will be fully realized. Further, it is possible that even if an organization makes no efforts at all to allow spirituality, workers can still bring spirituality to their jobs. There are tales of individuals bringing spirit to situations as terrifying as Nazi concentration camps or Chinese torture prisons in Tibet. Certainly, if it is possible to bring one's spirituality to such extreme situations, it is possible for individuals to bring spirit to the work situation regardless of any efforts made by the

company. This is not to say that an organization's commitment to spiritually is not important (I believe it is), only that it is possible, though perhaps more difficult, for a worker to bring spirituality to work whether or not the company is committed to workplace spirituality.

Though there exists much theory and conceptualization, no empirical studies were located documenting what workers actually do when attempting to make work part of their spiritual practice. How do workers bring spirit to their jobs? Does a worker's spiritual practice have an impact on co-workers? The current study surveys spiritually-oriented workers on questions just like these and analyzes workers' responses within the various frameworks described above. This area of exploration is so new that it is still too early to formulate hypotheses or measure relevant constructs with quantitative precision. At this early stage, it is likely that the richness of qualitative data workplace than the more sterile data than is obtained through the use of quantitative measures, such as rating scales.

METHOD

Subjects were participants in the Dedicated Practitioners Program (DPP), a two and a half year, non-residential course of study in Buddhist meditation and practice offered by a large, well-known practice center in Northern California. Admission into the DPP is competitive and students are selected based on their demonstrated history and commitment to Buddhist practice. The format over the two and a half years includes working with a mentoring spiritual teacher, homework assignments, maintaining contact with other students in the program, five weeklong retreats lead by a variety of respected teachers, and a commitment to a daily meditation practice.

Seventy five DPP participants were asked to complete a survey investigating bringing spirituality to their work at the fourth of the five weeklong retreats that comprise the DPP program. By the end of the retreat, 28 practitioners had responded and three more surveys were received by mail, making a total of 31 completed surveys.

RESULTS

Responses were content coded based on Emmons (2000) concept of spiritual intelligence, Ingersoll's (2003) ten dimensions of spiritual wellness, and Kurth's (2003) conceptualization of service. These researchers have developed frameworks that suggest ways in which an individual might integrate spirituality at work. Accordingly, practitioners' responses were read and coded regarding the degree to which they reflected one of more of the components of spiritual intelligence, spiritual wellness and/or service. Content coding was carried out twice in a blind fashion by one rater who was both a doctorally-trained social scientist and a longtime spiritual practitioner in the same tradition as the respondents.

The most commonly reported behaviors, practices, and views reflected the following factors of Ingersoll's model: Meaning, Present Centeredness, and Experience/Ritual. For Emmon's framework, applying spiritual resources to solve work problems and engaging in virtuous behavior were most commonly reflected. Finally, several respondents reported engaging in volunteer service. As to whether spiritual practice has had a positive impact on co-workers, 22 respondents believed that their practice did have a positive effect on those with whom they worked, one respondent did not know, and seven respondents did not address the question.

DISCUSSION

From the results of this survey, it appears that there is a vast array of behaviors and practices that people use to integrate their jobs into their spiritual lives. Though each set of responses was unique, there was more commonality in responses than differences and though individuals held a variety of jobs, the ways in which they integrated their jobs with their spirituality were similar. Terms like compassion, metta (Pali for lovingkindness), mindfulness, equanimity, being fully present, right speech (Buddhist precept of avoiding harm by words) echoed throughout the survey responses.

The most commonly reported integration method related to Ingersoll's concept of present centeredness or the act of staying present for each moment as it unfolds. In Buddhism, this term is usually referred to as mindfulness. An individual who is staying mindful remains aware of what is happening, whether it be pleasant or unpleasant and pays attention to thoughts, feelings, intentions, judgments, etc, as they arise. As a result of being mindful, a person is less likely to speak without thinking or to react instead of responding, and is centered in the present moment. Such individuals are usually able to remain calm, even in turbulent situations. Many of the respondents reported that they were perceived as calm by their co-workers or that their ability to remain calm increased as their practice deepened. Behaviors and practices related to Ingersoll's category of experience/ritual were also frequently reported.

Emmons (2000) mentions engaging in virtuous behavior as one aspect of spiritual intelligence since high value is placed on virtuous behavior in nearly all religious traditions. More than half of the respondents described behaviors that were classified as virtuous. Acting out of compassion was probably the most commonly mentioned virtue. Finally, more than one quarter of respondents reported engaging in volunteer service activities.

IMPLICATIONS

As was stated at the beginning of this paper, allowing spirituality in the workplace is seen by many researchers and organizations as essential to making deep and meaningful change. Workers, themselves, benefit when they are allowed to bring their spirituality to work. If organizations want to attract and retain employees with the qualities characteristic of spiritually-engaged workers, the most important implication is to maintain a culture supportive of and consistent with valuing spirituality. Displaying ethical, and perhaps even virtuous, behavior at all levels would be important. As was noted earlier, many respondents reported choosing not to work in jobs where behaviors and practices they considered to be unethical or injurious to workers, consumers, or the environment were engaged in. Self-selection into organizations and occupations consistent with their spiritual values seems particularly important to this group of spiritually-engaged individuals. Finally, the importance of meditation should not be neglected. Not only do employees benefit from practicing meditation. Meditation practice has been associated with positive outcomes such as improvements in job satisfaction, general health, productivity, and decreases in fatigue and job tension (Alexander, Swanson, Rainforth, and Carlisle, 1993).

REFERENCES

Available upon request.