

THE ROLE OF SPIRIT

IN THE WORKPLACE



By Lori L. Silverman

In January, 1999, I attended the Rose Bowl football game in Anaheim, California, USA. I am an avid American college football fan; my favorite team—the Wisconsin Badgers—were playing the UCLA Bruins.

The game was close until the fourth quarter, when Badger fans seated in one end zone cheered louder than ever before. This sense of spirit upset the opponent team and caused the quarterback to become unsettled. He had several bad plays that resulted in turning the ball over to the Badgers. A few minutes later, when it became apparent that the Badgers were going to win, I saw fans everywhere slapping each other on the back, hugging each other with great pride, and crying tears of joy. It was the most glorious sporting moment of my life.

Back home I wondered about the role this sense of spirit could have in the workplace. I discovered that since the early 1990s, several books have been written about its impact on leadership practices and organizational performance. They include those written by Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal (*Leading with Soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit*), Allan Briskin (*The Stirring of Soul in the Workplace*), James Autry (*Life and Work: A Manager's Search for Meaning*), Michael Novak (*Business as a Calling: Work and the Examined Life*), Thomas H. Naylor (*The Search for Meaning in the Workplace*), and David Whyte (*The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*).

Consider what some organizations have done in this arena. Since the early 1990s, AT&T, Shell Oil, Deloitte & Touche, and Boeing have employed poet David Whyte. At Boeing, 500 top managers listened to Whyte three days a month for a year to help them think more creatively about the company and their lives. The

World Bank has a Spiritual Unfoldment Society that meets weekly to discuss spiritual topics, drawing upwards of several hundred people. Craig and Patricia Neal run the Heartland Institute and the Conscious Business Alliance, both of which help employees (from firms such as Chevron, Levi Strauss, 3M, Pitney Bowes, and Pillsbury) and companies discover purpose and meaning in the workplace.

As an organizing principle, Diana Whitney, founder of The Taos Institute, asserts that spirit and its relationship to business, our work lives, and organizational development can be clustered into four areas: spirit as energy, spirit as meaning, spirit as sacred, and spirit as epistemology. Spirit as energy encompasses the “energy” or “feel” of the workplace. Think about what you feel when you walk into an unfamiliar organization—its level of stress and tension, its level of warmth and receptivity, and its overall mood. This type of energy, or spirit, at work can result from celebrations, such as promotions and team accomplishments; events that include play, such as birthday parties, picnics, and training sessions; spontaneous humor and laughter; and the appropriate urgency to accomplish critical tasks and objectives.

Spirit as meaning speaks to those elements of ideology (shared vision and values) that provide the catalyst for change. Within this context, leaders must inspire their workforce to engage in transformation by sharing stories in their presentations that provide symbolic meaning. In addition, employees are

more apt to change if they are provided with meaningful work that engages their mind, body, heart, and soul. Spirit as meaning is also displayed through strategic planning activities and use of the organization's corporate identity (i.e., logo, tag line, or image) on mugs, T-shirts, jackets, newsletters, and reports.

Spirit as sacred implies that all of life is permeated with a divine spiritual presence—one that is integral to the quality of all beings—and that there is a connection and interdependence between all life and all forms of energy—the notion of wholeness. This type of spirit is a common part of Native American and Buddhist belief systems. However, because of its reference to the divine, it can be an uncomfortable topic to speak about in organizations. Here, relationships are the center of social organization—and as such, they must be honored and people must be treated as sacred. To demonstrate respect, leaders must fully and respectfully share information and improvement feedback in order for people and the situation to become whole, rather than fragmented or disconnected. What is considered “sacred” is also a part of moving from the “old way” to the “new way” of doing things (i.e., procedures, policies, etc.).

Spirit as epistemology recognizes the existence of spirit(s) beyond the three-dimensional world that communicate through rituals and ceremonies to encourage communities and organizations to be constructed in harmony with spirit. For example: Individuals who have knowledge of the founder(s) of the organization, acts of heroism, and critical parts

of an organization's history can provide the foundation for alignment to occur. Also key here are leaders and/or consultants who are hired to "heal" the organization (e.g., bring it back from the brink of moral or financial bankruptcy) as well as those whose advice is most sought within the organization, independent of their formal role.

The question that continues to arise from the application of these four spirituality areas to organizational life is, "What do they have to do with improving organizational performance?" Imagine an organization that does not demonstrate the behaviors outlined here. What would it be like to work in this environment over an extended period of time? How effective would people be at getting the work done, at engaging in meaningful

interactions with each other, or at creating value for the organization's consumers? Do your responses touch on productivity, creativity, or other aspects of performance? If so, then the questioned has been answered.

The challenge I leave you with is to find ways to bring spirit into the workplace. It can no longer be ignored as a key force in improving overall organizational performance.

Article appeared in the March 2001 issue (Vol. 15, No. 2) of *QUALITY Australia*. All uses, including reprints, require advance permission from the author.

Lori L. Silverman is the owner of Partners for Progress, a management consulting firm dedicated to helping organizations achieve and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage. She is also the co-author of *Critical SHIFT: The Future of Quality in Organizational Performance* and the upcoming book, *Stories Trainers Tell*. Lori can be reached by e-mail at lori@partnersforprogress.com.

For additional free articles, go to www.partnersforprogress.com.
