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Title: Spirit at Work: Finding
Meaning and Purpose

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“It was total bliss, as if everything was perfect, which it was. . . . I was feeling as if I was “in the moment” not being hurried by tasks, deadlines or activities, but by a connection with a greater source that had a wonderful effect on the workplace at that moment. It was genuine, authentic, and everything seemed to make sense and I actually felt like I saw a much bigger picture of work and how all the various aspects fit into one.”

— As described by a person with high spirit at work

What exactly do I mean by “spirit at work”? Spirit at work is about finding meaning and purpose, beyond self, through work. It involves profound feelings of wellbeing, a belief that one’s work makes a contribution, a sense of connection to others and common purpose, and an awareness of a connection to something larger than the self. Spirit at work is related to positive outcomes for the employee and the employer. Perceived benefits include an enhanced sense of wellbeing, improved relationships, enhanced customer service, and increased productivity.

Researching spirit at work came with some surprises for me. Although my PhD studies at the University of Alberta focused on how individuals came to experience spirit at work, I expected to find an emphasis on the organizational factors that fostered the experience. The revelation was in finding that the creation and nurturance of individual spirit at work is a shared responsibility between the employee and the organization.

My findings culminated in a human ecological model of spirit at work. An ecological approach suggests that spirit at work is not determined solely by personality, individual actions, or working environment, but as the interaction of the environment and the person, including his or her personality and behaviour. This interrelationship among personality, individual behaviours, and the organizational context is considered central to the creation of spirit at work and is the essence of the spirit at work model.

So how does one get to spirit at work? Individuals come to experience it in different ways. For some individuals, spirit at work is “always there”— that is how they always experience their work. Others describe their experience of spirit at work as a “coming together” of their values, beliefs, abilities, and life experience. For these individuals,

spirit at work seems to emerge during mid-life. A third way of coming to spirit at work is in response to a “transformative event.” This event can be viewed as a spiritual crisis, spiritual growth, or both and can occur at any age. Finally, some individuals describe their experience of spirit at work as “contextually sensitive” — that is, it is influenced by their contextual environment, and comes and goes.

I call these different ways to spirit at work *paths* because persons with spirit at work describe the experience as a journey with defining moments along the way. Although not everyone develops spirit at work in the same way, the way they experience spirit at work is similar.

Individuals with spirit at work also share a common set of personality characteristics, suggesting that it is not only what the person does to foster spirit at work, but that the inherent nature of that person also contributes to the experience. Persons with spirit at work tend to be well-adjusted individuals, characterized by a sense of inner harmony, positive energy, conscientiousness, self-transcendence, an openness to possibilities, and a spiritual inclination.

I call this the *integrated self* personality profile because the essence of the spirit at work personality seems to be the integration of personality characteristics often considered to be at odds with one other. For example, persons with spirit at work have the ability to focus on self and others simultaneously; they are achievement striving but altruistic; have a sense of control but are open to possibilities; are goal oriented yet reflective. Another surprise came when I discovered that having a spirit at work profile did not alone guarantee a continuous spirit at work experience.

Individuals with spirit at work take responsibility and action for creating the kind of life they desire, including how they experience work. They consciously live a life that is purposeful and meaningful; they cultivate a spiritual, value-based life; they appreciate self and others; and they refill their cup in ways that are meaningful to them. The good news is that these behaviours can be learned. For example, living with *conscious intention*, that is, being mindful about how one lives one’s life and choosing to live with purpose and meaning is central to cultivating spirit at work at the personal level.

One research participant described how intention guides his behaviour. “Your intention toward somebody is the most important aspect of what you are doing. So, your intention is kindness, compassion, you are not there for you, you are there for them That whole intention is part of the spirituality in how I go about things.”

In addition to personal responsibility taken by persons with spirit at work, the ecological framework points to the importance of context, especially one’s work environment, in

fostering spirit at work. Seven organizational features are identified as promoting spirit at work:

- (1) leaders and senior members who inspire employees through their leadership and their example;
- (2) a strong organizational foundation that includes a compelling vision, shared mission and purpose, and an intention to contribute to the overall good of society;
- (3) organizational integrity and work that is aligned with the organization's mission and purpose;
- (4) a positive workplace culture including a positive physical space for employees to work in;
- (5) positive connections among all members and a sense of community in the organization;
- (6) opportunities for members to pursue professional and personal growth and to fulfill their own personal mission through work; and
- (7) appreciation and regard for the contributions made by its members. Key to these conditions is *inspiring leadership*.

In order for organizations to be successful, some management consultants argue, employees need to be committed to and passionate about their work. Thus, they call for workplace cultures, work processes, and leadership that foster such commitment and passion. In fact, it has been suggested that future successful leaders will be spiritual leaders. In the knowledge age, with a reduced expectation of commitment and loyalty from the employee and the employer, there needs to be a new way to engage and retain talent.

Corporations like Boatmen's First National Bank and the Bank of Montreal are attempting to do this by integrating spirituality – defined as the basic desire to find ultimate meaning and purpose in one's life and to live an integrated life – into human resource and organizational development programs. Exxon introduced a "whole person" model – which supports employee authenticity and creativity – as well as a process for employees to consciously explore work at higher levels of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual levels of their life. They also helped employees to link their purpose, principles, and values to personal and work goals.

Others are writing vision statements not only to provide business direction, but to inspire employees to be committed to a worthy purpose. Corporations such as WalMart, 3M Corporation, and Proctor and Gamble are assisting employees to identify and then align their personal vision for the company with the organization's vision. Recognizing the value of spiritual energy in the workplace, Boeing and Xerox, Fortune 500 companies, have hired consultants to cultivate the spiritual energies of their staff. Such

programs are being promoting as ways to increase employee spirit at work and positive outcomes for the organization. The “Spirit at Work Scale” which I co-developed with Dr. Berna Skrypnek now makes it possible to test the effectiveness of such programs.

Whereas efforts to foster spirit at work can be initiated at the individual or organizational domain, chances for success increase when endeavours are directed simultaneously towards the employee and the organization. However, of all the things that fostered spirit at work, the intrinsic reward experienced by participants seemed to be the greatest. It was the intrinsic reward that kept the participants going as was evidenced in comments about their work such as, “It gets me cranked,” “That is what keeps me at it,” it is “the thing that gets you up in the morning,” it “gives you that raison d’être” and “It is like filling the cup.” Spirit at work occurs when employees are able to find meaning in their work. And more and more, individuals are looking for ways to find meaning in their lives.

Val Kinjerski inspires and guides individuals and organizations to foster the creation of spirit at work through her company, Kaizen Solutions for Human Services.

More information about spirit at work along with an opportunity to participate in a study designed to validate the Spirit at Work Scale can be found at www.kaizensolutions.org or by contacting Val at valkinjerski@telus.net.