



World Business Academy

Rekindling the Human Spirit in Business

PERSPECTIVES

Volume 17, Issue 2

March 12, 2003

Editor's note: Karen Wilhelm Buckley writes that courageous men and women in organizations around the world are increasingly making a connection between running a profitable, successful business and spirit. These determined individuals are demonstrating a commitment to shift *spirit* and *work* away from an opposing dialectic to a larger relationship where they can engage and inform one another. These leaders are responding to the opportunity and responsibility to explicitly promote or enable spirit at work. They are translating essential values into actions as they integrate their inner and outer lives. Through a mindful focus on the inherent dignity of people in organizations and of those they serve, these leaders are helping to create alternatives to mindless greed and life-endangering practices. **J.S.**

Cultivating Spirit in Organizations

Karen Wilhelm Buckley

A quiet revolution bringing *spirit into the workplace* is gathering momentum in organizational leadership.



Karen Buckley

Spirit and work traditionally were kept as separate concepts along with the “hard” realities of economics and the “soft” sides of human management. Personal values and organizational goals may have coincided, but were certainly not expected to.

While small pockets of innovators gathered around conference tables to take note of successful initiatives and strengthen their personal mission to bring spirit into the workplace, their influence was subtle or localized. Thought of as perceptive, humane managers or inspirational leaders, their relationship with spirit was personal, the way they conducted themselves in business, but not talked about or built as a strengthening force.

Today, courageous men and women in organizations around the world are increasingly making a connection between running a profitable, successful business and spirit. These determined individuals are demonstrating a commitment to shift *spirit* and *work* away from an opposing dialectic to a larger relationship where they can engage and inform one another. This requires putting value propositions and mission statements into action. It means creating value by integrating what we do in our working environment with the animating force of who we are on spiritual, emotional and physical levels.

For Profit Companies Blend Spirit and Work

Socially responsible and/or spiritually based for-profit companies such as The Body Shop, Odwalla, Weleda, and Ben and Jerry's have generated much media attention for blending values beyond short-term profit while growing a sustainable enterprise. The 2002 Willis Harman Spirit at Work Awards, co-sponsored by Spirit at Work Association, World Business Academy, and Spirit in

Business Global Institute and Network, acknowledged companies implementing specific policies, programs, or practices that explicitly integrate spirit into their organizations. Seven companies were honored with the Award at the April 2002 Spirit in Business conference in New York City. Four of the honorees are U.S. companies, two are based in Canada, and one is a Britain-based company. This yearly award benchmarks best practices. A few of the 2002 honored companies are briefly highlighted below.

- Embassy Graphics, Ltd. in Winnipeg, Canada works for a seamless interface between spirit and peoples' experience of being served. Their inspired company leadership was evidenced by detailed written feedback from vendors and customers on how their stated values are experienced.
- Methodist Health Care System in Houston, USA is explicitly spiritual with a non-sectarian "charter," which forms the basis for its mission, vision and values. Methodist also appointed a Vice-President of Spiritual Care to oversee system-wide initiatives that foster a "spiritual environment of caring" for every stakeholder.
- Eileen Fisher, Inc., a New York City, USA clothing manufacturer, explicitly cares for the spiritual well-being of its employees and its vendors. Employees are nurtured through proactive application of the company values and through the Employee Wellness Benefit that must be used for self-care. Vendors upgrade internal and manufacturing practices through the company's commitment to international standards of social accountability.
- Telus Mobility in Ontario, Canada is a wireless provider integrating spiritual values in its communications, wellness and reward programs, as well as offering explicitly spiritual courses that nurture the employee in body, mind and spirit.
- Medtronic, Inc. is a Minnesota-based medical manufacturer that engages spiritual values in the workplace. It is committed to prolonging life through its products and services, a commitment that has sustained through four generations of corporate leadership while the company grew to over \$6 billion.

Nonprofits Also Value a Spiritual Approach

Spiritually based nonprofits are also part of this wave. Historically, essential values directed the work of many cultural institutions, including churches, school, and faith-based care organizations. Today a growing number of nonprofits orient their work to arise from and serve a conscious relationship with spirit. Believing that every living being is part of an evolving spiritual world, they value:

Transparency — gaining respect for a congruency between their work, values and mission

Integrity — giving and keeping their word and being trustworthy to clients, volunteers or staff

Innovation — keeping the competitive edge while working in new ways to serve their clients

Self-development — creating opportunities for authentic individual expression at work

Spiritual connections — bringing consciousness to work relationships to support awake and caring individuals while encouraging financial, social and organizational growth

Efficiency and effectiveness — developing conscious systems, aligned with their values, to create the greatest public benefit from their work.

Following are some examples of organizations that deserve recognition for articulating spirit as central to their existence. They are committed to the values of community, compassion, integrity, honesty and relationship. We can learn from these innovators who are risking the integration of spirit and the flow of money, spirit and social service, and spirit and education.

The Rudolf Steiner Foundation, a 501(c)(3) with total assets of \$42.1 million, creates social benefit through innovative approaches to working with money that reflect the highest aspirations of the human spirit. They foster relationships, collaboration and community-building as the basis for the movement of money and the cultivation of living economies.

In a culture that tries to keep death at arm's length, the Zen Hospice Project (ZHP) in San Francisco meets death face-to-face. Each year more than 100 volunteers discover their innate generosity and compassion as they provide an estimated 2500 hours of practical, emotional and spiritual support to 200 indigent individuals and their families as they face death from cancer, AIDS and other terminal illnesses.

More than 800 Waldorf schools in approximately 40 countries provide a curriculum dedicated to the child's soul development. There are more than 50 full-time Waldorf teacher-training institutes worldwide. Waldorf schools view each human being as a unique spiritual individuality and strive to draw out the innate capacities and abilities of children through engaging the hands, heart and head in each element of the curriculum.

Camphill Communities are dedicated to social renewal through a life of celebration, service and community- building with children, youth, and adults who have developmental disabilities. The International Camphill Movement consists of more than 90 communities in 19 countries.

The people in these organizations and others like them spend time alone and with each other in spiritual practices. Their work is different because of their devotion. They are working from the inner side of a mission statement that includes what they aspire toward and what they value. Their work reflects the quality of their *being* as well as what they *achieve*.

A Path of Integration

Around the world leaders are responding to the opportunity and responsibility to explicitly promote or enable spirit at work. They are translating essential values into actions as they integrate their inner and outer lives. Through a mindful focus on the inherent dignity of people in organizations and of those they serve, these leaders are helping to create alternatives to mindless greed and life-endangering practices. They are accessing the great potential for individual and organizational fulfillment, resulting in more joy but also better business results and innovative initiatives that unlock the full human potential to create ethical and sustainable success.

Essentially, these spirit-and-business pioneers are discovering how to dance with the duality of being and doing, moving toward one expression that is woven together until the "being" becomes integral in the "doing" while the "doing" naturally expresses the essential "being." When this remarkable shift in perception occurs, management philosophy changes, business is oriented to be an agent of world benefit, and customers, vendors and employees are viewed as incarnating spiritual beings instead of reduced to problems to be solved, cogs in a wheel, or a target market.

The challenges to living this life of integration are enormous. The questions are many: How will this impact the quarterly financials? How can we accelerate this fundamental shift without losing our competitive advantage? How do we stay awake through the shifting inner landscapes of an integrative, spiritual process? How do we develop discriminating capacities to recognize and amplify the best of what is in our organizations that is of true benefit to the world?

In *The Answer to How is Yes*, Peter Block suggests that the question "How do I do this?" expresses each person's struggle between having confidence in their capacity to live a life of purpose and

yielding to the daily demands of being practical. He suggests that if you are caught in the how questions, the answer is simply yes...take action!

Like the hawk hovering above the field that suddenly spots the movement of prey and with a tilt of the wings, dives earthward, progressive leaders are rapidly working to create value and sustainability along all supply chains. The initiatives include developing wellness programs for employees, pressuring every supplier to meet humane standards for working conditions and instituting a senior position responsible for spiritual direction.

These leaders work hard to find the reflective time to focus their personal mission and stay true to their key principles. One CEO quipped, "I need to outsource my reflection time." A number of vital practices have been reported to help keep passion connected to personal mission:

- Dialogue with like-minded business people to stimulate possibilities and provide reflective discrimination on the timing and direction of an initiative.
- Re-visit ancient spiritual teachings to strengthen connection with higher purpose and overarching work priorities.
- Engage meditative practices or quiet reflection to draw forward the lessons from the day, access latent wisdom, and engage the will in the right direction.
- Develop mindful attention to the breath to increase the direct application of the creative mind in realistic and practical ways.
- Mentor with a spiritual teacher to stay centered in the most important values while meeting quarter-end priorities.

This process of building an integrated life is perplexing and often frustrating. It is both onerous and joyful. One day, the quality of a run or a meditation leads to feeling connected with the Absolute, with work priorities congruent with a higher self. Another day, the rapid-fire response to email and voicemail, interspersed with an analysis of work cycle data or difficult personnel issues, depletes any sense of deeper meaning and purpose. As the pace of a day picks up, the person has the experience of being a machine -- producing until the switch is finally turned off. Then, in the evening reflection, comes the remembering, the settling back into, once again choosing a conscious relationship with a more essential self.

Defining Spirit in the Workplace

Spirituality is a natural part of what it means to be human, the inseparable dynamic that gives life and vitality to the physical body. The Latin origin of the word spirit is *spirare*, meaning, "to breathe."

Inner personal freedom is an essential element of walking a spiritual path. Because of this an organization should not dictate or require any particular spiritual belief or orientation. Fairhold (1997) provides a useful perspective when he points to "One's spirituality is the essence of who he or she is...It is a recognition of the truth of the inner nature of people...Spirituality does not apply to particular religions, although the values of some religions may be a part of a person's spiritual focus."

Definitions are as diverse as the individuals involved. Leaders from Fortune 500 companies to entrepreneurial start-ups describe spirit in the workplace:

- Maintaining and actively working on an inner equilibrium that prevents quick reactions and gives others the benefit of the doubt.

- Committing to a spiritual path so that one's work life is conducted by certain inward northern stars.
- Understanding and welcoming each experience as an opportunity for reflection and growth.
- Seeing the soul developing within every human and striving to nourish his or her path of development.
- Living from the values and principles that unite mind, heart, and spirit.

Most agree that spirit in the workplace starts with the individual, a perennial idea reinforced by S.N. Goenka, a spiritual teacher and business owner who has promulgated the effects of his early encounter with meditation since the late 1960s.

“If business people start practicing spirituality, it’s not only good for themselves but all of society,” Goenka says. “When cruelty changes into compassion, it is spirituality. When hatred turns into love, it is spirituality. When selfishness changes into selflessness, it is spirituality.”

“Spirituality in the workplace is about people seeing their work as a spiritual path, as an opportunity to grow personally and to contribute to society in a meaningful way,” says Judi Neal, founder of Spirit at Work, a nonprofit organization with more than 62 chapters growing worldwide.

In April 2002, more than 500 business and religious leaders from more than 30 countries attended the inaugural Spirit in Business World Conference in New York City. Sponsored by companies such as Forbes, American Express, Verizon and Calvert, the conference offered the opportunity for participants to examine the growing confluence of ethics, mindfulness and business. Together they engaged in appreciative dialogue about the positive core of their past work experience and their visions for the future reintegration of “inner” and “outer” lives in the professional environment.

“There’s always spirit in business — there can’t not be,” said conference speaker Peter Senge when asked if spirit in business is an oxymoron. The senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology explained that the oldest Swedish word for business translates as “nourishment for life,” the oldest symbols in Chinese for business mean “life’s meaning” or “life’s work” and the word “company” comes from the same root as “companion.”

“Think of spirituality as a persuasive force in human affairs — the core of who we are individually and collectively,” Senge said. “Indigenous people had a different way of putting spirituality into their world and it was probably inseparable [until] the industrial revolution... What is happening in the world today is a very different type of spirituality that can coexist with religions and religious communities, but is not inseparable from them.”

“At a certain stage of maturity we recognize that all the diverse elements of nature are parts of one, indivisible whole. When this oneness is a conscious experience in our lives, our decision-making automatically expands to give priority to the greatest benefit for all. . . The solutions sought must not only be good for the shareholders, or the customers, or the environment, or Americans, they must also be good for all of these and the entire living system of which each of these is a part.” (Mollner and Buckley, 2002)

Taking the Higher Leadership Path

By taking a higher leadership path, organizations become resilient, responsive to the needs of the times, and a fuller expression of their essential mission. There are many ways to demonstrate a commitment to spirit in work:

- Point to ways in which work is already meaningful and to times when the organization's practices are demonstrating essential values.
- Help organizations translate older spiritual insights and make them relevant to contemporary issues.
- Support all levels of management to make the common good the highest priority and to reflect this intention through *all dimensions of infrastructure*, including business processes, services, systems, work behaviors, culture and consciousness.

Mary Gelinias and Roger James suggest an integrated perspective for leaders. “It is not a question of people or profits, jobs or the environment,” they explain. “The question is how organizations can generate profits in a way that both sustains and nurtures the humanity and goodness of people in the organization and considers the health and survival of communities and the planet as a whole. Nothing else makes sense for the long haul.”

Challenges in Applying Spiritual Perspectives

Organizations integrating a spiritual perspective commonly report increased sustainability and employee loyalty as core values flow into daily work. The four organizations below demonstrate that a number of significant challenges exist as well.

- Heavy reliance on an external source of spiritual authority, with resultant dogma and rigidly applied principles, restricted personal commitment as well as creativity in programming and flexibility in adapting to current student needs in an educational institution.
- Fixed adherence to ideals from a charismatic founder and a historical set of written materials limited a manufacturing company’s proactive real-time responses to a local economic downturn and a service area’s changing population.
- An institute, devoted to research into the evolving consciousness of humans, informed the work of innovative business leaders and academic institutions through their excellent publications and educational events for many years. Their work held tremendous potency until their meetings degraded into arguments about whose spiritual guidance was right. The overdevelopment of a spiritual ego blocked effective teamwork and reduced capacity to collaborate between projects.
- Ineffective work relationships and destructive backstabbing between key staff in a public relations firm grew because they assumed that being on a spiritual path was sufficient to solve interpersonal challenges, and so they avoided conflict altogether because it did not fit with “spiritual” ideals.

Challenges such as these will always exist as a vital part of the authentic learning process: distinguishing between *habitual choices*, those compulsively selected out of past tradition or unquestioned beliefs, and *resonant choices*, those choices emerging from a mindful present time orientation that integrates the best of the past with current and future needs. Rigorous research and scrutiny are needed into the strengths and challenges of spirit-filled workplaces. While actions are motivated from ideals and passions, the mind, centered in objective consciousness, can carefully consider the truth and authenticity of initiatives blending spirit and business.

A Fad or a Trend?

But is this a fad or a trend? Recent research from the Foundation for Global Awakening suggests that "currently we are experiencing a growing shift in American attitudes, beliefs and values toward the search for a more integral way of life, a shift that has profound implications for all facets of our society. Our current social structures and institutions do not reflect these values, as they were developed to maintain a course based more on old paradigm history than a new paradigm for the

future." Their completion of the *In Our Own Words (IOOW) 2000 Research Program*, an extensive research study of American core values and beliefs, points to a new social-spiritual landscape of America and its potential for transforming society. This work contradicts some of the natural assumptions that people are generally distrustful and disenchanted with one another, their world and their future. The study found that an overwhelming majority (85%) of Americans agree that "underneath it all, we're all connected as one." Nearly as many believe that our earth is a unique kind of living organism and, as a whole system, is fundamentally alive. These percentages are sadly not represented in the mass media.

In this exploration of the connection between spirituality and consciousness, the *IOOW 2000* research study found that most Americans (73%) report being directly aware of or individually influenced by the presence of God or a higher consciousness. More than half (55%) say they have experienced a sense of the sacred in everything around them or perceived everything as being spiritually connected. They also note that a significant number of other types of people are not as concerned with their spiritual growth, nor in expressing spirituality in any form. But, the percentage of those that do experience a direct connection with the sacred is much higher than a literature review of current management journals and books might suggest.

In conclusion

This workplace trend to integrate spirit and business is rocketing globally into business gatherings in Holland, Brazil, Peru, Canada, Thailand, Australia, Switzerland, USA and South Africa. As Meg Wheatley reminds us, "There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about."

Organizational leaders integrating spirit into business are in the midst of a potentially generative or life enhancing change. As spirit and business are integrated, the essential values and enduring human qualities desperately needed in our world today have a greater chance of being evidenced in our conduct with each other and recognized by our customers and the knowledgeable public.

Connection with spirit, the animating life force, is a natural, essential part of what it means to be human. As we consciously trust and express this relationship, we increase our capacity to serve our organizations and the world in finding the most powerfully positive possibilities.

"Let us widen our perspective to include the well being of the whole world and its future generations in our vision of economics and business." The Dalai Lama

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Karen's client list includes: Pacific Gas and Electric; Dupont; County of Santa Clara; Environmental Protection Agency; American Society on Aging; Grace Cathedral; The Rudolf Steiner Foundation; Electrical Distributors Association; Association of Waldorf Schools of North America; and the California Institute for Integral Studies.

Karen is a member of the Board for the Spirit in Business Global Institute and the Trusteeship Institute. From 1991-2000 Karen co-founded the GreenWood School, an innovative Waldorf inspired elementary school in Mill Valley, California.

Karen's work on organizational change and spirit-filled leadership has been published in many professional journals and books, including *Transforming Work* and *Transforming Leadership*, edited by John D. Adams, 1984 and 1986, re-published in 1998. The Washington Post called each "A classic in its field."

Ms. Buckley frequently speaks at leading-edge forums on Cultivating Spirit at Work, Organization Transformation, and Intuition in the Workplace. In 1990 she co-organized and facilitated an International Conference on Intuition in Business with the International Management Institute, Geneva, Switzerland.

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