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Connecting to the Bigger Picture: Work and Spirituality

In the past two articles, my colleagues, Kevin Kelloway and Terry Wagar, described how employees need to be motivated and satisfied in the workplace. I extend the discussion by suggesting that many employees also want their work to be meaningful and spiritually fulfilling.

Over the past decade, interest in spirituality in the workplace has been growing rapidly and that's reflected in the popular press as well as in academic research. There is a marked increase in courses, books, and websites on spirituality and work. As an example, Amazon.com currently lists 140 titles on the topic. Interestingly, this increased desire for meaning in work comes at a time when many in the business world are spending more of our time working. Many of us are also facing more uncertainty and insecurity tied to 24-7 accessibility, downsizing, the introduction of new technologies and other workplace stressors. At the same time, we are witnessing a growing gap between the world's rich and poor, and an increasing number of global environmental problems. As well as being problems for the global economy and humanity, these reflect very real ethical and spiritual problems for organizations and their employees. Many people need to feel there is a higher purpose to their work than simply paying the bills or planning for retirement.

Consultant, international speaker, and co-author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work*, Martin Rutte, began a talk in Halifax last August by stating that many of our workplaces are stripped of spirituality. Our media typically portrays business as self-interested, materialistic, and cut-throat. Donald Trump's reality-based show, *The Apprentice*, doesn't exactly exude spiritual concepts like kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and service, with his motto of "It's not personal. It's just business." If that's the case then, is it possible to have a work environment that does allow for spirituality?

I say yes, based on two assumptions; we are all spiritual and we are all workers. Although there are numerous definitions of spirituality, there are themes in common to many wisdom- and faith-based traditions. Most definitions deal with the idea of connectedness. In the workplace, this means that the employee acknowledges connections to community, humanity, ecology, compassion and care, selfless work, ethical integrity, and/or God. Creating a spiritual workplace however involves more than having an ethics code and ethics training. There is a genuine examination of deeply held values and assumptions. According to David Sable, Executive Director of the Information Technology Human Resources Council here in Halifax, "What's most

important is taking the time to listen to people who want to talk about how their work is meaningful or not. Respect for the individual, regardless of their views, is a value that can translate into better communication and a sense of connectedness. Respect can create the ground for a genuinely shared vision, a story about the organization that genuinely inspires people to be of service to each other and all the lives that are affected by the organization.”

Inspirational leadership is also essential. Spirituality in the workplace involves leadership that is people-centred and people-building. David Hawkins, co-founder and former President & CEO of Hawk Communications in Moncton, NB, refers to himself as having been a "closet spirituality and business person" throughout his 37 year career, and he has spoken about how something as simple as our use of language can influence a work environment. “I wonder why so many in our society seem to find it difficult to see our workplaces as places of healing. At Hawk Communications, we initiated Wellness Leave instead of a sick-leave policy because wellness, not sickness, is the natural state of things. We really wanted to make it clear that the reason that our colleagues had time off was to help them return to their natural wellness.” Inspirational leaders, like David Hawkins and David Sable, integrate morality and spirituality into the workplace and can transform an organization so that members feel more connected to a larger community and higher purpose. Research shows that such employees are more satisfied and more motivated at work.

An increasing number of organizations are recognizing these benefits, realizing that spirituality can be applied to personal, organizational, and leader development. Caution is advised, though, because spirituality at work can also be perceived by employees as the latest management fad, or worse abused as a method of management control to improve the financial bottom line with no genuine interest in the betterment of employees. Spirituality in the workplace will only enhance the meaning of work and behavior in organizations if there is a fundamental change in the relationships in an organization and the nature of the relationship that people have with work. For those genuinely interested in creating a more satisfying work environment for their employees, here are a few suggestions for organizations and employees to begin integrating spirituality into the workplace.

- Leaders have to create a climate where talk of ethical and spiritual values is safe and acceptable. Many employees might feel that it is too risky to talk about morality and spirituality.
- Individuals and groups need to be encouraged to develop reflective practices. Leadership training, team building, and innovation workshops can be broadened to include the practices of journal writing, meditation and reflection, and diversity (including religious) training.
- Workplaces can establish mini-libraries with numerous books and websites full of morally, emotionally, and spiritually-based workplace stories. In addition to the popular press, there is a wealth of foundational sources from wisdom- and religious-based traditions which have stories that can be used to guide ethical decision making.

The goal of these and other work and spirituality practices is to foster personal as well as group development toward a larger view of the individual, the organization and their joint potential. Together, such practices can make work, which plays such a significant role in all our lives, a much more satisfying and rewarding experience.