

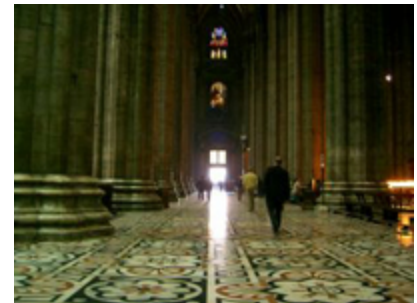
[P gbr.pepperdine.edu/2010/08/six-components-of-a-model-for-workplace-spirituality/](http://gbr.pepperdine.edu/2010/08/six-components-of-a-model-for-workplace-spirituality/)

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## Six Components of a Model for Workplace Spirituality

By [KENT RHODES, EdD](#)

Photo: Thijs Pulles



Workplace spirituality has continued to gain acceptance as a topic of study in business schools across the country, presumably with application to practice within organizations. Though initially the topic of spirituality in the workplace may have been viewed as a passing fad, it now seems to have reached trend status. Management textbooks routinely include sections about “workplace spirituality,” and professional organizations such as the Academy of Management offer membership in special interest groups emphasizing spirituality.

### **The Implications of Spirituality in the Workplace**

On the heels of Enron and Sarbanes-Oxley and the subsequent birth of the ethics consulting industry,[1] conversations around the value and place of spirituality in the workplace have been further encouraged by the need for managers and leaders to behave more ethically in the world and to foster ethical decision-making in their workforces. These events continue to impact the marketplace, yet decision makers are also struggling to understand the place of spirituality at work and its implications for character development while simultaneously handling a rise in requests by some employees to be able to express religious practices in the workplace.

Robert Bellah, Elliot Professor of Sociology, Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, describes the term “spirituality” as traditionally being “...an aspect of religious life. In its recent usage, however, spirituality is a contrast to religion, or what is often called ‘institutional religion,’ which means a church, a continuing solidarity community. Spirituality in this new sense is a private activity, although it may be pursued with a group of the like-minded, it is not ‘institutional’ in that it does not involve membership in a group that has claims on its members.”[2]



Photo: Thijs Pulles

Researchers such as Douglas Hicks, Associate Professor of Leadership Studies and Religion at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, University of Richmond, think that whatever the theoretical understandings the academic community may have of spirituality and religious distinctions, empirical evidence indicates that spirituality in the workplace is being treated as an alternative to religion more than religion itself being increasingly accepted within work settings. Hicks suggests that workplace spirituality involves adherence to a particular way of thinking about self, work, and organizations.[3]

While evidence suggests that people are not always clear regarding the definition of spirituality or its practical application in the workplace, an early contributor to the emergence of a shared understanding of this new emphasis in business includes Howard Gardner. As the John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Gardner has described spiritual leanings as one of several critical measures of intelligence.[4] In another seminal publication, *Leadership and the New Science*, author Meg Wheatley points analogously to self-organizing, self-creating systems in nature as a way for companies to work more effectively by embracing the natural cycle of change, stability, and renewal. Thus the “spiritual” or constantly renewing nature of these processes has been construed as an important blueprint for developing workplace spirituality.[5]

### **The Search for a Global Approach to Spirituality**

Other thinkers have published their attempts to define spirituality in the workplace. They have expanded the conversation, but have not necessarily brought consensus. Even in a recent professional association blog on the subject, researchers in the field

were trying to sort out exactly what spirituality in an organization looks like. These bloggers wondered together if the injection of spirituality into the workplace was a uniquely American event that is easily confused with religion and that hinders development of a global approach to the field.

The search for a globally shared understanding of spirituality and its place at work has spurred ongoing debates about the validity and practicality of separating one's spiritual development from one's religious experience. The debate has caused some thinkers to wonder if this new emphasis on spirituality represents an inability to integrate spirituality and religion in Western societies that cannot be effectively addressed in a work environment alone.

### **Different Cultures, Different Definitions of Spirituality?**

Indicators suggest that cultures other than that of the U.S. may not be engaged in the same exploration of and confusion about the topic of spirituality in the workplace. Such concern in the U.S. regarding separating personal spirituality from work could be in part due to America's political insistence on the separation of church and state and therefore the disintegration of personal spirituality from work. This separation stands in stark contrast to cultures in which individuals' daily lives are infused with religious tradition. Either way, routine list serve discussions by professionals in the field of spirituality seem to indicate a strong need among Western thinkers to sort out some of the confusion on the topic before touting workplace spirituality as a universal organizational value across cultures.[6]

Debaters on one side seem to recommend adapting a uniquely individualized Western view of spirituality that says one's personal beliefs or ideas about spirituality are private and potentially too volatile to discuss in the workplace. The other side argues that true spirituality is actualized only in conversation with others and within community while lamenting that it is only in America that one's spirituality is effectively separated from all other concerns within an organization.

Robert Bellah sums it up this way, "The way 'spirituality' is often used suggests that we exist solely as a collection of individuals, not as members of a religious community, and that religious life is merely a private journey." He goes on to suggest critically that religious expression in Western societies has been boiled down to deeply held cultural

beliefs about free markets and free choice. “It is the religious expression of the ideology of free-market economics and of the radical ‘disencumbered’ individualism that idolized the choice-making individual as the prime reality in the world.”[7]

The spirituality debate extends beyond business schools and cutting-edge corporate managers. Complications in clarifying the meaning of spirituality at work have arisen more recently with the blurring of religious beliefs and political leanings in the United States. For example, a perception seems to be growing that a person of faith, by definition a spiritual person, votes Republican. While that notion may not be problematic within itself, some fear being labeled “non-spiritual” if one’s party affiliation is Democratic, thus limiting conversations about workplace spirituality to a context of a specific political preference. As Amy Sullivan of the *Washington Monthly* observed, “The GOP cannot afford to allow Democrats a victory on anything that might be perceived as benefiting people of faith. Republican political dominance depends on being able to manipulate religious supporters with fear, painting the Democratic Party as hostile to religion and in the thrall of secular humanists.”[8] Others may fear that the emerging emphasis on spirituality could embolden some workers to more actively express their personal religious belief systems at work, thereby threatening to dilute the original conversation regarding spirituality and the value of diversity in organizations.

### **Characteristics of a Spiritual Workplace: Suggestions for a Model**

Regardless of this ongoing debate, identifying desired characteristics of spiritual workplaces can bring us closer to understanding the role that spirituality can play in organizations, the way it can function to positively impact the bottom line, and the value it might bring to members of the work community.

This article suggests six effects that can be associated with a model of workplace spirituality.

#### **1. Emphasizes Sustainability**

A systemic view of work and contribution in the world promotes links between sustainability and an awareness of limited resources. This approach to design, production, and commerce is being increasingly associated with spirituality because it

seeks to contribute to the greater good in the world. It also has the potential to actually increase market value and attract investors.

An understanding of sustainable growth and development includes a well-thought-out strategy that identifies potential long-term impacts or implications of actions that could have an eventual negative impact on business. This systemic view of global business means that a company will constantly reassess the long view of risks and rewards associated with doing business in the long run, including a careful ongoing review of potentially negative and unintended consequences of business decisions on individuals, societies, or the environment.

## **2. Values Contribution**

More than providing excellent service for customers, global service indicates a larger sense of responsibility to contribute to the betterment of the world. While the local family business may not provide products and services that will improve the quality of life in third world countries, American companies historically have fundamentally understood that part of their role is to make the world a better place through the products or services that they sell. Today's spiritual organization is deliberate in implementing a vision that is built around contributions to the betterment of mankind. It promotes work outside of the organization that contributes to and "gives back" to society through community and volunteer service. Spiritually aware managers and businesses consider themselves servants of employees, customers, and the community.

## **3. Prizes Creativity**

Creativity is a necessary part of the business cycle. When technology, markets shifts, and demographic changes force organizations to rethink products and services, creativity is the key to successfully navigating those changes. The artistic industries have long recognized the spiritual nature of individual and group creative processes, and many educators understand the importance of seamless, daily incorporation of creativity in helping their students learn. The spiritual workplace recognizes that being creative is not necessarily reserved for a



Photo: Alfonso Romero

special few, but that all people have creative capacities. A spiritual workplace provides resources to help people to uncover their creative potential and to practice creativity within the organization.

#### **4. Cultivates Inclusion**

Businesses are increasingly becoming core sources of community for people in societies. The spiritual organization respects and values individuals' life experiences and the lessons learned from them. Such an organization is intentional in its efforts to include individuals who bring appropriate skill sets to a particular job, but who may have been excluded historically from participating in a professional community of practice due to circumstances they did not choose. Such historic exclusion from the workplace has included people with physical disabilities, people whose skin color or ethnic origin differs from those of the majority population, and those who have been discriminated against due to gender or sexual orientation. Increasingly, corporations are seeing the value of their employees working together in community toward a commonly held vision. They have a sense that the concepts of love and acceptance within a cultural context of care builds a sense of community that supports the work of the company and that has a direct impact on the bottom line.

#### **5. Develops Principles**

Organizations have begun to realize the benefits of treating the whole person by actively supporting the formulation of ethical principles that promote personal growth, long-term character development, and personal connections of faith and work development. Assisting employees in integrating personal growth, learning, and faith with job performance benefits the organization. This type of principled emphasis includes providing resources that help employees better understand themselves, develop successful professional and personal relationships, and enhance personal management skills. Employees are encouraged to develop an accurate and realistic sense of the impact that other people have on them and the impact that they have on others.

#### **6. Promotes Vocation**

Organizations have long been aware of the benefits of shared ownership of corporate values by every member of the organization. By acknowledging that one's general search for spiritual growth and fulfillment need not be separate from one's work, organizations lay the groundwork for spiritual development to assist in engendering understanding among employees. Companies that understand workplace spirituality go beyond being supportive of learning and development by helping employees develop a sense of "calling" or identification of passion about their lives and their work. Such companies emphasize the discovery and appropriate utilization of individual giftedness and encourage employees to use their unique skills within the organization. Grounded religious faith development is recognized as an important and deeply personal part of growth for many people, one that can help them more easily recognize their vocations.

## **Conclusion**

The six components presented here as building blocks toward considering a model of workplace spirituality serve as a partial framework for engaging in a broader conversation of spirituality's place and influence in Western business culture. The recent trend in businesses within the United States to reclaim and recognize the spiritual nature of people and the importance of incorporating the "whole person" at work will continue to change the face of how business is done in America for the foreseeable future.

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[4] Academy of Management (2005-2006) Spirituality Special Interest Group ListServe Group discussions.

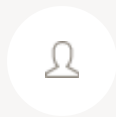
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AUTHOR OF THE ARTICLE



Kent Rhodes, EdD

Kent Rhodes, EdD, serves as a participating faculty member at Pepperdine in the area of Organizational Behavior, Theory and Leadership. He is an entrepreneur who maintains a successful coaching and consulting practice for a variety of privately held and family-owned enterprises. Rhodes founded OnCourse Network, Inc., an Internet education company, and served as chief executive of the company. He successfully negotiated the sale of the company to a Silicon Valley publicly traded corporation and subsequently served as a principal with that company in San Jose, California until he successfully completed its acquisition and integration growth strategies in 2001, when he joined the Pepperdine faculty as visiting professor.