

An exploratory analysis of definitions and applications of spirituality in the workplace

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Abstract In response to the rising interest in “spirituality in the workplace”, an exploratory analysis of text passages expressing definitions and applications of the topic was conducted. A grounded theory process applying thematic and network analysis techniques was used to examine text samples from three different sources: e-mail, survey responses, and a literature search. Throughout the investigation an emphasis was placed on maintaining the multiplicity of definitions and applications of “spirituality in the workplace” while methodologically studying the thematic content of these expressions. Code words representing concepts in four function categories emerged: nouns, actions, qualities, and theories. Sentences were re-formed to reveal concepts and relationships discussed in the text samples. Practical applications of the themes of diversity, learning and development, intuition and the personal aspects of “spirituality in the workplace” are presented.

As the twenty-first century approaches, the contemporary work force is faced with escalating ambiguity and chaos. Information technology and globalization are forcing organizations to respond with increasing flexibility (Hitt *et al.*, 1998). Contemporary theorists (Harman, 1992; Ray and Rinzler, 1993; Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1996) call for new and/or different ways of viewing organizational systems. Michael Ray describes this response, “Throughout the world, people in business – including owners, managers, and employees – are changing the way they think and work. They are engaged in a transformation, that some have said is as great as any in history” (Ray and Rinzler, 1993). Michael Gorbachev puts it this way, “It is time for every individual, nation, and state to rethink its place and role in world affairs. We need an intellectual breakthrough into new dimensions where the human spirit is paramount” (Gorbachev, 1995). Correspondingly, Conger (1994) asserts that there is a current surge in the search for spirituality in the workplace and in our daily lives. Reflecting this sentiment has been a noticeable (to those interested in such topics) increase in publications and conferences on “Spirituality in the Workplace” and spirituality in daily life (Austin, 1995; Conger, 1994; Chappell, 1994; Brussat and Brussat, 1998; Lee and Zemke, 1993; McAteer, 1995; McCormick, 1994; Moore, 1992; to name a few publications). In response to this growing attention, the primary endeavor of this study is to investigate contemporary definitions and applications of “spirituality in the workplace”.

“Spirituality in the workplace” often conjures up a flood of images, with positive and negative associations. My personal experience is that people’s

reactions to the “S” word associated in the workplace run the gamut, from a wild thirst for knowledge, to skepticism and confusion, to fear. Some of my friends in the “rat race” have expressed that the concepts of “business/work” and “spirituality” are diametrically opposed. A recent quote from a conversation I was having with a New York based media entrepreneur provides an example. With a chuckle and smirk he quipped, “The only thing spiritual about my work is the bottom line”. Other folks I have met are afraid to discuss spiritual issues in the workplace for fear of being persecuted. However, there have also been many people that I have met who have an enthusiastic interest in spirituality in the workplace. Don McCormick (1994), in his article titled “Spirituality and management” captures the vast array of thoughts and feelings on the matter by deducing, “Definitions of spirituality abound”. Hence rather than specifically defining “spirituality in the workplace” in a conclusive way, this study attempts to answer the question, “What are people writing about when they refer to ‘spirituality in the workplace’?”

Emerging new paradigms of research have allowed investigators to methodologically examine complex social constructs from multiple perspectives, thus enhancing understanding (Rowen and Reason, 1981). This requires new ways of thinking about data collection and analysis. In order to capture a snapshot image of definitions which are admittedly varied and in flux, this study has set the intention to explore rather than conclude. Starting from the assumption that definitions and applications are numerous and diverse (McCormick, 1994) the attempt is made to document the terrain currently being traversed in the area of “spirituality in the workplace”. The emergence of this explication occurs through a grounded theory process. Grounded theory is focused on the organization of ideas by thorough analysis using systematic and microscopic comparisons (Strauss, 1984). Comparisons and contrasts of the data from the three different text sources employed the qualitative techniques of thematic categorization and network analysis. The three sources were:

- (1) e-mail discussion group on the topic of “Spirituality in the workplace”;
- (2) questionnaire on “Spirituality in the workplace”; and
- (3) literature search on “Spirituality in the workplace” and revealed related topics. The results of this process lead to sense-making and model construction.

Method

Text sources

Three sources of text were used for analysis. E-mail messages from the on-line discussion group “Spirit at work” were one source. A total of 100 e-mail messages were selected at random out of a sample of 362 e-mail messages gathered over a three-month period. The second text sample source was a survey administered to this and other discussion groups and bulletin boards on-line. The inquiry asked the two direct questions following:

- (1) What does “Spirituality in the workplace” mean to you?
- (2) How do you apply/practice spirituality in your workplace?

After the questionnaire responses and e-mail messages were collected, the sample text passages were entered into the AtlasTI program and underwent a coding process. This procedure analyzes the text and tags constructs with one word code labels. Relationships between codes were documented with symbol links. The most frequent codes and topics that emerged were used as a basis for a literature search to obtain additional text samples. These codes were [goals], [intuition], [authenticity], and [awareness]. A variety of literature resources were explored by cross referencing these four most frequent codes with “spirituality in the workplace”. In addition, the key words and “spirituality in the work place” were used in an on-line data search employing internet search engines. Text passages from the books and on-line search were entered into the program and subjected to analysis.

Technology

The software program, AtlasTI , published in 1993 by Thomas Muhr in Berlin was used in the qualitative analysis process. This program assists with coding functions and has the capability to draw graphic networks of relationships between codes. A PC laptop computer was used for all electronic gathering and coding processes.

Design and procedure

The research and analysis in this project took place in several steps. First, the data samples (text sources) were collected and analyzed, generating codes and identifying relationships. Next the data was arranged into network views, displaying codes by source and revealing relationships to prepare for further interpretation. Then a comparative analysis of the three network views revealed four “Family” categories (actions, nouns, qualities, and theories). The next step arranged the composite data into network views based on the four “Families” and sentence interpretations were formed (see results section). The final step organized the findings into a flexible model with the ability to expand and allow for multiple interpretations and additions while still maintaining a semblance of structure. Each one of these steps is described in more detail.

Step one

Text passages from the email discussion group and surveys were entered into the computer, read and analyzed for content meaning. The examiner reviewed the text line by line, within paragraphs asking the following questions of the data:

- (1) What is the intent of the message? (i.e. to help, to ask a question, to respond, to vent – release tension and anxiety by sharing, to announce events . . . etc.);

- (2) What is the content of the message? (i.e. the subjects involved, the actions reported or expressed, the reactions of the parties involved);
- (3) What are the relationships between ideas or concepts expressed? (i.e. connections, assumptions, conclusions, associations).

Each time an answer to question no. 1 (intent) or no. 2 (content) was established, the text section that expressed that answer was then labeled with a code(s) that reflects the intent and/or content of the message. Text segments that reflected Question no. 3 (relationships between ideas) were identified as "relationships" and were documented by creating a link between codes in a text segment. Some examples of these links are: is associated with; leads to; is about; is an aspect of; supports; influences. To illustrate, the following statement, "[meditation] enhances my [connection] to my [higher self]", would be documented as a text statement with three codes (in brackets) with a relationship link of positive influence. The same idea could take place over a longer paragraph or story form, "I often think that my daily [meditation] practice somehow brings me closer to my [higher self], I remember once when I was up to over 30 minutes a day on a very regular basis . . . I felt so [connected] then . . . "

A frequency count was taken on all the codes generated from the two sources. The top four codes in the frequency count ([goals] [intuition] [authenticity] [awareness]) were then used as a basis for the literature search. The text passages found were then entered into the Atlas software program and underwent the same "coding" processes described above that were conducted on the e-mail and questionnaire sources. A list of codes by source was generated and displayed in Table I.

Step two

Network views from each of the three sources; e-mail, questionnaire, and literature were generated to view the relationship links between "spirituality in the workplace" and the codes revealed.

At this point the data was sufficiently coded and displayed to allow the investigator to observe themes and/or patterns. This examination was assisted by the use of a grouping heuristic. Specifically, when investigating the coded relationships within and between the source network views the examiner reflected on the following three questions; "What are the categories or patterns present?", "How do the codes relate to each other?", "How do the codes relate to the base code of 'spirituality in the workplace'?" This reflection process led to the formalization of the following four "Families" and their explanations as defined by the researcher:

- (1) Nouns – (persons, places or things), tangibles, entities;
- (2) Actions – things that can be done, verbs, activities;
- (3) Theories – interpretations, assumptions, beliefs, value added thoughts; and
- (4) Qualities – experiences, feelings, attributes, adjectives, non-tangibles.

| Codes common to all three sources | E-mail only | E-mail and survey | Survey | Beyond and literature and survey | Literature only | Literature and e-mail |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|--|
| Acceptance | Abundance | Choice | Acknowledgement | Beyond | Model | Alignment |
| Applied spirituality | Active receptivity | Ethics | Attention | Caring | Depth | Appreciation |
| Authenticity | Age | Fear | Backlash | Critical- | | Attitude |
| Awareness | Androgyny – | Holistic | Demonstration | skepticism | | Balance |
| Compassion | masculine – | Humor | Dignity | Growth | | Change |
| Creativity | feminine | Listening | Dialogue | Respect | | Chaos theory and self-organizing systems |
| Culture | Angels | No harm | Innovation | Service | | Commitment |
| Development | Announcements | Reflection | Light | | | Communication |
| Diversity | Conformity | Support | Safety | | | Community |
| Goals | Conflict | | Unconditional | | | Corporate |
| Higher purpose | Death | | love | | | Control |
| Integrity | Downsizing | | | | | Connecting |
| Learning | Discrimination | | | | | Corporate |
| Meditation | Home office | | | | | Entrepreneur |
| Personal | Information | | | | | Effectiveness |
| Spirituality | Technology | | | | | Faith |
| Stories | Internet | | | | | Forgiveness |
| Trust | Interdependence | | | | | God concept |
| Truth | Knowledge workers | | | | | Inspiration |
| Unity | Labyrinth | | | | | Intuition |
| Values | Language | | | | | Leadership |
| | Nature | | | | | Management |
| | NLP | | | | | Meaning |
| | Protection | | | | | Motivation |
| | Questions | | | | | Nurturing |
| | re-engineering | | | | | Openness |
| | Responsibility | | | | | Organization structure |
| | Searching | | | | | – size |
| | Surrender | | | | | Organization benefits |
| | Teaching | | | | | Organization learning |
| | Tools | | | | | Partnership |
| | | | | | | Path |
| | | | | | | Paradigm shift |
| | | | | | | Play |
| | | | | | | Purpose |
| | | | | | | Rational |
| | | | | | | Stress |
| | | | | | | Survival |
| | | | | | | Uncertainty |
| | | | | | | Visualizations |

Table I.

Phase one results.
Codes generated from data analysis of three text sources on “spirituality in the workplace”

Step three

Next, the codes unveiled in step 1, were reviewed and categorized into one of the four families categories (nouns, actions, theories and, qualities). The researcher then constructed a network image for each one of the four families. The network images were constructed by placing the code symbol for “spirituality in the workplace” in the center and then instructed the community

to pull up the respective family codes and links. The images were visually scanned and reviewed for comparisons.

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Step four

To gain clarity and lead to possible applications the views were re-interpreted into clauses. Codes that are linked together are used as subjects and objects in sentences where relationships symbols provide nouns and prepositions. Sentence translations for each of the four views (actions, nouns, qualities, and theories) were generated forming paragraphs.

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Results

Results unfold at each phase of the study and culminated with the sentence interpretations and discussion below. Each step contributes to answering the question, “What do people write about when they refer to ‘spirituality in the workplace?’” Step one compiled Table I which shows all the tagged codes by source. Step two resulted in the emergence of the four family groupings (nouns, actions, theories and qualities). These four categories then became the basis for four more network views. Step four re-interpreted the views into sentences that reflect the links expressed in the data. The network views are visual distillations of the concepts ([codes]) and relationships (links) revealed in the sample text passages without the descriptive, personal examples. The sentence interpretation paragraphs below are the result of re-interpreting the views into text clauses. For the sentence interpretations below “spirituality in the workplace” is represented as a topic code = [Spirit@Work].

Action family view sentence interpretations

[Acceptance] of [diversity] is a resultant action of [Spirit@Work]. [Understanding] and [acceptance] of [diversity] helps with [conflicts]. [Applied spirituality] is an activity of [Spirit@Work]. [Community] applied to [work] (in the work setting) is an action of [Spirit@Work]. [Development] of perception is an example of [Learning]. [Learning] is an action of [Spirit@Work]. [Intuition] supports [work] and [spirituality]. [Awareness] is an aspect of [spirituality]. [Personal] [development] leads to [spirituality]. [Religious practice], [visualizations] and [meditation] are examples of [applied spirituality]. [Searching] for [truth] is an aspect of [spirituality]. [Storytelling] is an action of [Spirit@Work] that influences [culture] and helps with the manifestation of [purpose]. [Storytelling] has [management] applications. [Teaching] about [compassion] is an aspect of [Spirit@Work] is occurring. [Work] as an action of [Spirit@Work] is an application of [service].

Noun family view sentence interpretations

[Goals] associated with [higher purpose] lead to [Spirit@Work]. When [Management] [communicates] about [values] which are related to aspects of the [paradigm shift] this helps/supports [Spirit@Work]. [Organizational

Structure] and [leadership] influence [culture] which in turn influences [Spirit@Work]. [Management] applies [storytelling] to influence [culture]. [Personal] [relationships] are actions of [applied spirituality]. A [home office] is an example of an [authentic] [path].

Qualities family view sentence interpretations

[Authenticity] is an aspect of a [God Concept]. [Authenticity] is a [path]. [Awareness] is a quality of [Spirit@Work]. [Awareness] is an aspect of [intuition]. [Awareness] leads to [creativity]. [Creativity] supports [learning] about [community]. [Intuition] leads to [creativity]. [Creativity] is a quality of [Spirit@Work]. [Compassion] is a quality of [Spirit@Work]. [Compassion] and [wisdom] are aspects of the [new paradigm]. [Diversity] is a quality of [Spirit@Work]. [Flexibility] is a quality of [applied spirituality]., [Integrity] is a quality of [Spirit@Work]. [Integrity] is applied to [leadership]. [Integrity] is [energizing]. [Personal] is a quality of [Spirit@Work]. A property of a [spiritual] [path] is that is [personal]. [Trust] is a quality of [Spirit@Work]. [Trusting] [relationships] help to build [community]. [Searching] for the [truth] is a [quality] of [Spirit@Work]. The [integration] of [truth] and [self] helps [unity]. [Unity] is a quality of [Spirit@Work]. [Unity] is [omnipresent] and [beyond].

Theories family view sentence interpretations

[Diversity] leads to [organization benefits] and when applied to [leadership] can influence [culture] and assist [management] with [perceptions] that lead to [learning]. [Spirituality] is a theoretical aspect of [Spirit@Work]. [Spirituality] is a [personal] [connection] to [God]. The [Path] of [spirituality] is an aspect of [Spirit@Work]. [Values], [ethics] and [volunteer work] are aspects of [spirituality]. [Spirituality] is not [religion]. [Higher purpose] is a theoretical aspect of [Spirit@Work]. [Higher purpose] leads to [guidance]. [Intuition] leads to [higher purpose]. [Higher purpose] has aspects that are [beneficial] and [beyond] the physical. [Service] is an example of [higher purpose]. [Truth] about [reality] is [unity]. [Truth] is an aspect of [Spirit@Work].

Discussion

Discoveries have been made in reference to the opening question of this paper, “What do people write about when they refer to ‘spirituality in the workplace’?” As projected in the introduction, not any one, two or even three things can be said about “spirituality in the workplace”, that would include the universe of explanations. The data collected and analyzed here reflects the diverse nature of the concept. New challenges arise in my mind. Is there an inclusive way to approach the complexity of the results that will lead to some practical applications and/or increased knowledge in the area? And more specifically, is anything useful to make of the clauses? These statements are certainly not intended to be taken as “facts” or even statistically significant relationships (although in future research this might be possible). Rather, definitions and

applications of “spirituality in the workplace” of an involved population are revealed. Fortunately, it is the similar and diverse perceptions of employees that often matter most in change management processes. A possible next step in an organizational context would be to feed the findings back to the group members as part of an unfolding participative process inviting “spirituality into the workplace”.

A next step in the present context, is to highlight themes and practical applications reflected in the results. One of the predominant motifs is the presence of diversity as a beneficent contributor to “spirituality in the workplace” across each of the family interpretations. Specifically, a “qualities” family sentence states, “[Diversity] is a quality of spirituality in the workplace”. A theories clause asserts, [Diversity] leads to [organization benefits] and when applied to [leadership] can influence [culture] and assist [management] with [perceptions] that leads to [learning]. Clauses re-interpreting the “activities” network give some examples of possible organizational benefits, “[Acceptance] of [diversity] is a resultant action of spirituality in the workplace”, and “[Understanding] and [acceptance] of [diversity] helps with [conflicts]”. These concepts appear relevant and practical since cultural pluralism is “an integral part” of today’s society (World Commission for Culture and Development, 1996).

Possibly contributing to the pluralistic aspect of “spirituality in the workplace” is the emphasis on the uniquely personal aspect of spirituality. This point is also echoed several times in the sentence re-interpretations. Specifically, a theories sentence states that, “[Spirituality] is a [personal][connection]”, in the qualities family, “[Personal] is a quality of spirituality in the workplace”, and “A property of a [spiritual] [path] is that it is [personal]”. From the action clauses, “[Personal][development] leads to [spirituality]”. Previous emphasis has been made on the personal and diverse attributes of spirituality in a work setting. Specifically, Vaill (1996) suggests that dialogue, rather than debate is more productive when dealing with the diversity arising from multiple personal perspectives on spirituality.

The code [intuition] was also involved in multiple statements; “[Intuition] supports [work] and [spirituality]; [Intuition] leads to [creativity]; [Awareness] is an aspect of [intuition]; [intuition] leads to [higher purpose]”. Practical intuition is considered to be an integral aspect of emotional literacy which is a key skill for organizational leaders (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997).

Another recurring theme in the data is the multiple appearance of [learning] and [development]. Example clauses are; “[Learning] is an action of [Spirit@Work]; [Development] of perception is an example of [Learning]; [Creativity] supports [learning] about [community]; [Personal][development] leads to [spirituality]”. Strategic continual learning has been suggested to be an adaptive strategy for individuals (Vaill, 1996) and organizations (Collins and Porras, 1994; Senge, 1990) in dealing with the current turbulent conditions of contemporary workplaces.

A suggested practical use of this information would be to help individuals reflect on what emerges as possible next steps in their own self-development. To explain, for those people interested in increasing their active experience of “spirituality in the workplace” a look at the phrases in the “actions” family could provide some suggestions and/or stimulate other ideas. Similarly, to gain clarity of one’s own definitions and associations of “spirituality in the workplace”, a review of the “theories” and “qualities” sentence interpretations, coupled with self-observation (inner listening), could lead to personal insight.

Perhaps, the most useful part of what has been demonstrated here is that there is no “one answer” to the question “What is spirituality in the workplace?”; but rather a framework is presented with opportunities for exploration and discovery. In a sense this study is an attempt at operationalizing the quote from management professor Don McCormick (1994), in the opening paragraphs of this paper, “Definitions of spirituality abound”. The researcher further asserts that when investigating “spirituality in the workplace”, the process benefits by being as inclusive as possible with respect to the diversity of definitions held by the specific population involved. It is also strongly recommended that any organizational interventions around “spirituality in the workplace” treat all employees and their beliefs with respect. Any effort to do otherwise would not only miss the point but also the miss the opportunity for learning and growth and could possibly do more damage than good.

This study’s attempt to reflect the expansiveness of the topic is motivated by a “Social constructionist” orientation. “Social constructionism views discourse about the world not as a reflection or map of the world but as an artifact of communal interchange” (Gergen, 1985). This intent was reflected by the collection of data from the writings of a people who were actively engaged in discourse on “spirituality in the workplace”. The current author further asserts that definitions and applications of “spirituality in the workplace” are unique to individuals. One must be careful not to presuppose otherwise. Therefore when planning any group or organizational intervention around the topic, again the suggestion is made to derive definitions and goals from the participants themselves.

In conclusion, to say that the definitions and experiences of “spirituality in the workplace” are limited to what is presented here would be a disservice and a misrepresentation. Multiple perspectives and understandings of the topic can contribute greatly to its comprehension. The sentence interpretations and following discussion are presented, not as a summation, but rather as an invitation to reflect on interrelated concepts associated with “spirituality in the workplace”. An inclusive framework is most efficiently achieved through the use of methodologies that can handle pluralistic concepts. Martin Rutte (1995) has stated, “Spirituality in the workplace is not an answer, but rather a way to

ask the questions?" The methodological applications and results of the current study are presented as only one of many possible ways to understand such a complex and diverse area as "spirituality in the workplace".

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