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# Spirit and community at Southwest Airlines:

## An investigation of a spiritual values-based model

Spirit and  
community

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**Abstract** *One important issue is whether spirituality in the workplace can be used only to benefit employees or can it be developed also to the advantage of organizations? The purpose of this article is to articulate a model of how spiritual values can be integrated into organizations and then assess how this model predicts organizational behavior in one company, Southwest Airlines (SWA). The application of this model provides insights into how and under what specific conditions spiritual values can positively impact both profitability and employee attitudes in organizations. Implications for both research and practice are discussed.*

### Introduction

Recently there has been increasing interest in spirituality in business. One of the challenging aspects about spirituality is that it seems to mean different things to different people, making it difficult to give a universal definition of this dynamic concept. Nonetheless, in all cases it appears to involve deeply-held values. Some of the fundamental ideas that individuals typically posit in spirituality include: Who am I?; What is my purpose in life? What is it that I have to offer? (Block, 1993; Hawley, 1993; Neal, 1998). An active spiritual life can help individuals find meaning and purpose in their lives and live out deeply-held personal values. These values often reflect a desire to make a difference and to help create a more meaningful world (Block, 1993; Ray, 1992). However, much of what is written focuses on the concept and philosophy of spirituality rather than its implementation. This leads to two important questions.

First, what might spirituality look like if it were manifested in an organization (Neck and Milliman, 1994)? We do not have many examples of how spirituality is demonstrated throughout an organization. For instance, how do organizational spiritual values simultaneously impact different types of people such as managers, employees, and customers? How does spirituality affect organizational practices such as strategy, human resource management (HRM) practices, and customer service?

A second key question is what would be the impact on both individuals and the organization if spirituality were manifested in the workplace? In

investigating its impact, some observers view spirituality as a “soft” approach that either benefits individuals only, or has a neutral or possibly negative impact on organizations – such as threatening the traditional business goal of maximizing profit. These observers question whether creating a spiritual environment for employees is truly compatible with a profit-making objective. In contrast, others believe that having a strong set of deeply-held values not only benefits employees, but can also positively impacts organizational performance (e.g. Neck and Milliman, 1994). As an example, in their book *Built to Last*, Collins and Porras (1994) note that all the visionary companies in their study have posted exceptional long-term financial performance and have, as their primary goal, something other than maximizing profit. For instance, at Merck the purpose is “to preserve and improve human life” and at H-P it is to “make technical contributions for the advancement and welfare of humanity.” Although Collins and Porras do not use the term “spirituality” to describe these corporate statements that focus on a deeper purpose, they are excellent examples of how an aspect of spirituality, namely, the concept of “contributing to the greater good”, is articulated in these firms.

We believe that the issue of whether spirituality can have a positive impact on both employees and organizations is particularly important because many chief executive officers (CEOs) will not justify a practice unless it favorably impacts the bottom line. Thus, we believe that researching whether and under what conditions spirituality can have a positive impact on an organization and its employees is not only an important academic question, but also is relevant for practice. Such research is needed if we are to create a paradigm shift in CEOs so that they incorporate spiritual principles into their organizations.

One key to creating such a paradigm shift is to show how spirituality is actually manifested throughout all areas of an organization. Using such a case study approach is also consistent with the newness of the field of spirituality in business where an inductive approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is appropriate in assessing and developing theory. We selected Southwest Airlines (SWA) for our case study because it appears to have a strong sense of spiritual-based values guiding its organizational goals and practices. In addition, the company has an established track record of excellent organizational performance as well as high employee and customer satisfaction. In profiling SWA we certainly do not want to imply that it is a perfect example of living spiritual values; it has its problems and limitations like other firms. Despite this, there seems to be a genuine sense of spirit and affection in both SWA employees and customers (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993).

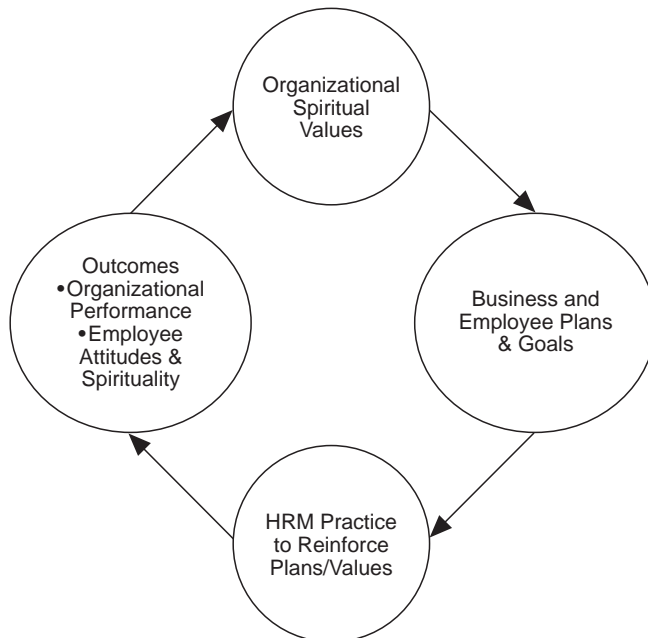
The purpose of this article is to examine the ways spirituality is manifested within SWA and assess the impact of spirituality on SWA employees, customers, and organizational performance. Because spirituality is reflected through values such as making a contribution to humankind, we have adapted a model of spiritual values-based management as a framework for our analysis. The use of such a framework minimizes concentration on anecdotal evidence and forces a more comprehensive analysis of spirituality in organizations.

First, we articulate a four-step model of spiritual values-based management which addresses both the development and the implementation of spiritual values in organizations. Second, we summarize the literature on SWA to identify the manner and extent to which spiritual values are exemplified in its organizational practices. Third, we discuss lessons learned about how a business organization can employ a spiritual approach to gain benefits for both its employees and the bottom line. Finally, we make suggestions for a preliminary contingency framework of spirituality in business and suggest propositions to guide future research in this emerging field.

**Spiritual values-based model**

A model of how spiritual values are proposed to affect an organization is shown in Figure 1. This figure is based on an integration of the literature on spirituality in business with two models – Anderson’s (1997) values-based management model, which focuses on the impact of values on top management strategy, and Schuler and Jackson’s (1987) strategic human resource management framework, which focuses more on the implementation of organizational strategy. The combination of these frameworks provides an integrated approach for analysis of spirituality in organizations.

At the top of Figure 1 are the organization’s core spiritual values which represent the philosophical views of the organization as well as its priorities and sense of purpose (Anderson, 1997). In a real sense, these values represent the “soul” of the organization (Blanchard and O’Connor, 1997) and reflect its sense of spirituality and purpose. The higher purpose of an organization is



**Figure 1.**  
Spiritual values-based  
management model

reflected in its values which directly influence the organization's mission, goals and objectives (Channon, 1992) and ultimately provide the foundation for corporate practices and the context into which employees think, act, and make decisions (Brown, 1992; Collins and Porras, 1994; Rosen, 1992). However, it is important to note that for these values to truly have an impact, they must reflect the inner needs, beliefs, and aspirations of the employees (Collins and Porras, 1994). As such, a central question in spirituality in business concerns is how organizations and employees can put their spiritual values to work (Miller, 1992) so that they can find their higher purpose and meaning in life (Ferguson, 1993; Mandel, 1993; Miller, 1992; Sanford, 1993).

As shown in the right-hand side of Figure 1, the organization's core values shape its business plans and individual employee plans (Anderson, 1997). The business plan determines the organization's various businesses and states specific directions, time frames, and goals. In turn, these business plans define individual and team plans at the operational level (Anderson, 1997; Schuler and Jackson, 1987).

Many organizations have lofty values, but do not integrate them into daily practice. Thus, an important challenge for an organization is to ensure that its employees align their work habits with the core values of the firm (Blanchard and O'Connor, 1997; Schuler and Jackson, 1987). This is why it is important that spirituality be examined at both the organizational and individual level. As illustrated at the bottom of Figure 1, HRM represents the fundamental way an organization develops and motivates its employees so that they exhibit the behaviors and high productivity needed to help the company accomplish its business plans (Schuler and Jackson, 1987) and value-based goals. The successful attainment of the company's strategy then reinforces the company's spiritual values and purpose as shown in the upper left-hand side of Figure 1. Therefore, the model shows an iterative cycle of how spiritual values can be integrated throughout the organization. We now use this model to examine spirituality and organizational behavior at SWA.

### **SWA spiritual values**

SWA is widely viewed as having a very strong set of values which shape its corporate culture. As we shall see, many of these values are manifestations of spirituality. First, SWA has a strong emphasis on community (Godsey, 1996; Tyler, 1998). Teamwork, serving others, and acting in the best interests of the company are central aspects of this community value at SWA (Caudron, 1997). There is a strong feeling among the employees that they are part of a family and that the employees take care of each other as well as their customers. Even though SWA places a strong emphasis on customers, it states that its employees always come first (Frieberg and Freiberg, 1996; Levering and Moskowitz, 1993). Moreover, not only are employees encouraged to be part of the company, but so are their families who are often invited to participate in company activities and celebrations (Freiberg and Freiberg, 1996).

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Second, SWA employees feel they are part of a cause. SWA seeks to offer the lowest fares, frequent flights, and a personable service characterized by fun and humor. When demand increases, SWA seeks to expand flights rather than increase prices. With this philosophy, SWA has frequently driven down the prices of other airlines and significantly increased the number of people who fly. To some degree SWA seeks to give an opportunity to fly to people who ordinarily could not afford it. It is important to realize that this cause of cheap and fun air travel originated from the intense struggle SWA endured in setting up operations, and later in surviving an industry that was then dominated by restrictive regulations and large, established airlines. SWA had to struggle for years to even earn approval to start operations. Later it had to work very hard to make its concept of low-cost, no frills air travel succeed in the face of continued opposition from regulators as well as the large, established airlines. For these reasons a sense of being a “rebel,” independence, and liberty are associated with SWA’s cause or mission of offering low-cost, fun air travel (Freiberg and Freiberg, 1996).

These aspects of SWA are consistent with the literature which states that the organization acting as a community and having a cause or important purpose are central interrelated aspects of workplace spirituality (Brown, 1992; Channon, 1992; Gozdz, 1993; Kelly, 1993; Ray, 1992). These articles contend that people want to have something to believe in, have meaningful work, and feel like they can contribute to an organizational mission that makes a difference in others (Collins and Porras, 1994). In addition, the sense of community promotes the feeling of partnership with other employees and with the organization (Rosen, 1992) as well as a connection to something larger than oneself (Brown, 1992).

Another integral aspect of spirit at work mentioned in the literature is the empowerment of all employees (Jaffe and Scott, 1998; Ray, 1992). True empowerment involves several levels, including whether employees believe they can:

- really make change;
- be a source of creativity;
- behave in a self-managing way;
- fully accept the values and culture of the organization; and
- have input into corporate policies (Jaffe and Scott, 1993).

Many of these levels of empowerment are found at SWA. SWA employees, including flight attendants, customer service reps, and baggage handlers, are encouraged to take whatever action they deem necessary to meet customer needs or help fellow workers – even if it means breaking company policies (Noe *et al.*, 1997). If employees make mistakes in judgement, the employees are not punished, but given feedback on how to improve the next time. In fact, errors are sometimes celebrated with the intent of turning failures into personal

growth (Bruce, 1997). All of these practices work to reinforce the self-worth of employees.

A related aspect of empowerment is that employees are strongly encouraged to give suggestions to create continuous improvement of the company. To this end, employees and their unions are given many opportunities to influence the company's decisions and policies. In fact, at SWA the input of unions is often actively sought in company decisions. SWA also constantly surveys its employees and unions to identify their perceptions and solicit ideas about how to run the company (Sunoo, 1995).

Another core value of SWA is an emphasis not only on the intellectual and skill-based aspects of work, but also on emotional and humor aspects (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993). A portion of SWA's mission statement states that its customer service will be "... delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and Company Spirit" (Southwest Airlines, 1988). This is manifested in two ways. First, the organization places an extraordinary focus on showing "heart" – caring for its customers and employees. While this may sound simplistic, SWA appears to live this idea actively. There are legendary stories about the extent SWA has gone to please its customers. For example, there are times when employees have driven customers to their destinations when they missed a flight, had a customer stay at their home when they were undergoing medical treatments in an unfamiliar city (Kelleher, 1998), taken care of a customer's pet when a customer had no other alternatives (Noe *et al.*, 1997), or paid for a customer's ticket when they did not have enough money (Frieberg and Freiberg, 1996). While every company has a few stories like this, at SWA they appear to happen on a much more regular basis. Although described as routine business practices, they are another manifestation of a commitment to a greater cause and a desire to serve humanity.

Second, SWA highly values humor and enthusiasm (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993). For instance, the CEO, Herb Kelleher, is famous for his humorous and eccentric behavior, such as singing and entertaining at company functions and playing jokes (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993). He has been known to help flight attendants serve drinks and peanuts (Malloy, 1996), sing at company picnics, wear costumes on holidays, play pranks, and belt out rap songs at press conferences (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993; Sunoo, 1995). Not just Kelleher, but also the employees dress up in costumes at Hallowe'en and during casual dress days, produce rap videos, and perform songs and dances at company celebrations. Flight attendants tell jokes and sometimes pop out of the overhead baggage compartments (Noe *et al.*, 1997). One employee noted that at a previous company she was told that she laughed too loud, but at SWA she states "Now I can laugh in the hall as much I want to . . . They (SWA) allow each person to really be themselves" (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993, p. 413). In sum, the intent at SWA is to have personable, outgoing employees who display their spirit in humor, energizing emotion, celebration, and sheer fun while they work (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993; Sunoo, 1995).

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These elements of SWA are consistent with the literature which states that an emphasis on enthusiasm and commitment (Rosen, 1992), emotional expression (Bracey *et al.*, 1993) and personal relationships (Miller, 1992) are all considered important aspects of spirit at work. Similarly, it has been stated that having employees who act fully alive (Ray, 1992) and have relationships that provide caring, nurturing, and cooperation (Miller, 1992) are considered as essential aspects of spirituality in business.

While SWA values community and having fun, it also has a strong work ethic. Employees at SWA are expected to work hard and be flexible so that they can reduce staffing requirements below their competitors (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993). Both employees and managers are expected to work different jobs (Kelleher, 1998). At SWA, top managers as well as pilots sometimes help with boarding passengers or loading the plane. This hard work appears to be based to a large extent on the pride of being part of a company that stands for something. For SWA employees, working hard and having fun are not at odds with each other. The culture at SWA reflects the view of having "... people who take their jobs seriously, but not necessarily themselves" (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993, p. 413). The philosophy is that happy and relaxed employees are also more productive (Noe *et al.*, 1997; Sunoo, 1995).

These elements of the work ethic at SWA are in line with the view that a healthy company contains employees who are hard working, enthusiastic, eager to share their ideas, and committed to the organization (Rosen, 1992). Together these values of work ethic, community, having a company cause, empowerment, and expression of emotion form the spiritual core of SWA and in turn play an integral part in shaping its business plans and goals (La Barre, 1996).

### **SWA business and individual plans**

As discussed earlier, SWA's philosophy is to make flying "cheap, fast, and fun" (Stewart, 1998) by providing low fares, frequent and dependable flights, and high quality, friendly, and humorous service (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993; Noe *et al.*, 1997). While this philosophy certainly seeks to fill a strategic niche within the airline industry, it also seems to reflect a genuine desire to provide customers with low prices and a unique brand of high quality service (Freiberg and Freiberg, 1996).

SWA's business practices include the use of only one type of aircraft to reduce maintenance, inventory, and training costs. The company also has flights of short distance with frequent service between destinations, a limited food and beverage service policy, no advance seating, and no baggage or ticket exchange with other airlines. All of these practices are specifically geared to help SWA fulfill its low-cost, no frills, but highly personable service niche (Noe *et al.*, 1997). To provide for successful execution of these values-based business plans, SWA's employees work hard and frequently perform multiple job functions (Godsey, 1996; Tyler, 1998). As stated previously, employees are: empowered to make decisions; instructed to consistently provide high-quality

service; and encouraged to add fun and humor in their interactions with customers. These employee goals and behaviors are specifically encouraged and nurtured by the company's HRM practices, which are discussed next.

### **SWA HRM practices**

Other airlines have sought to imitate many aspects of SWA's strategy, but few of these airlines have survived, illustrating how difficult it is for organizations to successfully execute their philosophy over time. A major reason for SWA's longer-term success is its HRM practices which are carefully designed to provide "...the conditions that energize and inspire people ... ." (Stewart, 1998) and to implement the company's core values and strategy (Noe *et al.*, 1997). We now briefly discuss several aspects of these HRM practices.

SWA places the highest importance in its selection process on employee attitudes and values, rather than technical abilities. This philosophy includes all employees, including pilots (Caudron, 1997). To test for behaviors such as a sense of humor, ability to work with others, and friendliness, SWA's interview process includes group interviews where applicants tell jokes and role-play a variety of situations to demonstrate teamwork, a sense of humor, and the capacity to act spontaneously. Frequent flyers and peer employees participate in interviewing candidates to provide a deeper perspective and to further emphasize teamwork (Noe *et al.*, 1997; Sunoo, 1995). Because of its reputation for being an excellent place to work, SWA can be very selective as it receives an extremely large number of job applicants without active advertising (Kaydon, 1998).

Once employees are hired, they are immediately given a celebration greeting into the company (Tyler, 1998). Customers are brought in to provide their perspective to new employees, more senior employees are assigned as mentors, employees are oriented to think independently, and training includes humorous videos and skits to teach employees about the company's culture of teamwork and fun. SWA's casual dress policy and its allowance of employees to wear costumes to work are intended to reinforce its fun, relaxed, and spontaneous atmosphere (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993).

SWA asks a lot of its employees and in return provides them with a wide range of financial and non-financial rewards. These rewards are consistent with the literature that states spiritual-oriented organizations give much back to their employees, including respect, growth (Rosen, 1992) and intrinsic value through their work as well as extrinsic rewards such as ownership and security (Brown, 1992; Mollner, 1992). The company, which has never had a layoff (Noe *et al.*, 1997), recently announced that it has officially adopted a no-layoff policy (Branch, 1999). SWA has a strong policy allowing lateral transfers and promoting from within (Joinson, 1997). They offer profit sharing (McNerney, 1998), bonus, retirement savings policies, and stock option plans (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993). As a further demonstration of this kind of community



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attitude, the CEO agreed to freeze his pay when SWA's pilots accepted a stock option plan in lieu of an annual pay increase for five years (Cimini, 1995; Noe *et al.*, 1997).

SWA also offers many non-pay rewards, including merchandise, travel, celebrations for specific organizational and employee accomplishments, as well as just for the fun of it (Gruner, 1998). Deal and Key (1998) note that SWA is a model company in providing both frequent spontaneous praise (acknowledgment) on current behaviors as well as having formal recognition programs which reward past behaviors.

### **SWA employee and organizational outcomes**

SWA's core values and its implementation of those values through its various HRM practices appear to generate strong employee, customer, and firm results. SWA has consistently been named in the list of 100 best companies to work for in the USA (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993) and, in 1998, was voted the number one company at which to work (Levering and Moskowitz, 1998). A typical comment found in random employee surveys in this selection process of the 100 best companies was: "Working here is truly an unbelievable experience. They treat you with respect, pay you well, and empower you. They use your ideas to solve problems. They encourage you to be yourself. I love going to work!" (Levering and Moskowitz, 1998, p. 84).

As a result of this high employee satisfaction, SWA employees have one of the lowest turnover rates (6 per cent) in the airline industry (Levering and Moskowitz, 1998). At the same time SWA consistently has one of the lowest labor cost per miles flown of any major airline (Lederer, 1995) and its employees are credited with being primarily responsible for SWA's various quality awards (Laabs, 1998). Employees are also actively involved in community-based service projects. In addition, they demonstrated their support for each other by setting up a catastrophe fund to support employees during personal crises (Noe *et al.*, 1997).

Many researchers assert that this high employee satisfaction and productivity play a major role in SWA's profitability (Freiberg and Frieberg, 1996; Nirenberg, 1997; Stewart, 1998). At least the following is clear. The company has won the triple crown of air travel with the highest on-time arrival, best score on baggage handling, and fewest customer complaints five times in the 1990s. SWA has been profitable every year except one since it began in 1971 (Levering and Moskowitz, 1993) despite the high volatility of the airline industry (Sunoo, 1995). In one year in the early 1990s it was the only major US airline to make a profit. It has also been able to accomplish this while maintaining strong growth. SWA currently employs almost 25,000 people, having created almost 5,000 jobs during 1996-98 (Levering and Moskowitz, 1998). In 1998 and 1999 it was the only company named on the top ten list of most admired companies as well as best companies to work for in the USA (Branch, 1999; Brown, 1999; Levering and Moskowitz, 1998; Stewart, 1998).

### Discussion

In this article we have sought to make several contributions to the emerging literature on what is being called “spirituality in business.” First, we have proposed a spiritual values-based model to systematically illustrate how spirituality can be manifested in an organization and influence its performance. Using this model as a comprehensive framework for assessment highlights the complexity associated with implementing spirituality throughout an organization, for it is not enough merely to integrate spirituality into the mission statement. Instead, these ideas need to be woven into business strategies and practices. Second, while SWA certainly has its limitations, we believe that its values of a sense of cause, community, empowerment, work ethic, and rich emotional expression can provide important insights into the conditions when spirituality can benefit both employees and organizations.

In terms of implications of spirituality for both employees and companies, we can relate our analysis of SWA in several important ways to recent findings which link a highly satisfied workforce (a core aspect of a spiritual-based company) to organizational financial performance. First, Grant (1998) found that in order for the “best” (from an employee satisfaction perspective) companies to be profitable, workers must see a connection between their jobs and the company’s mission. Further, in support of the earlier contentions of Collins and Porras’s (1994) *Built to Last*, it was found that this sense of mission is not making a profit, but involves some notion of making a real difference in the world or personal betterment of the company’s customers (Lieber, 1998). Concerning this point, SWA’s core values of a sense of community and cause directly relate to SWA’s business strategy of offering low-cost air travel to customers who ordinarily couldn’t afford to fly. In addition, the emphasis SWA places on emotional expression and humor directly connects to offering an extremely personable and fun-oriented brand of service quality.

Based on this research we believe that companies that engage not just the minds, but also the hearts and emotions of their employees, will be more profitable. In other words, an organization that earnestly treats its employees as part of its community and emotionally engages them in a company purpose which makes a difference in the world, will obtain a higher level of employee motivation and loyalty – and ultimately higher organizational performance (Brown, 1999). SWA’s treatment of its employees as part of its family and focus on relationships, caring, and emotional expression taps an entirely deeper level of employee spirit, motivation, and satisfaction. In contrast, most companies seek only to engage the workers through pay or through workers’ minds and intellect. This leads to the following proposition:

*PI:* Company spiritual values that tap both the mental and emotional aspects of employees will be more positively related to employee work and spiritual attitudes and organizational performance than company values which only tap the mental aspects of employees.

Second, Grant (1998) found that workers must believe that they are consistently given the opportunity to perform their best and that their opinions must count

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if there is to be a relationship between employee satisfaction and organizational performance. An important spiritual-based principle at SWA is the empowerment and involvement of its employees. SWA employees are actively encouraged to make the best decisions for customers, break company rules when necessary, and are encouraged to give active input (often via unions) into company decisions and practices. Based on this, we propose the following moderator proposition:

*P2:* The degree to which employees are truly empowered to have input into company decisions moderates the linkage from organizational spiritual values to employee attitudes and organizational performance. Specifically, firms that highly empower their employees will experience a stronger positive linkage of the company's spiritual values, employee work and spiritual attitudes, and organizational performance.

Third, it was found that employees in the "best" (from an employee satisfaction and financial perspective) companies believe that their fellow workers are also strongly committed to high quality (Grant, 1998). SWA's HRM practices are all carefully designed to align employees with the company's values and goals. SWA's practices are applied consistently across all job levels (e.g. top managers and pilots as well as mechanics and flight attendants). While other organizations may have some similar values, SWA's HRM practices help make its values a daily reality for all of its employees over the long-run, which is key to integrating spirituality throughout an organization. This leads to the following moderator proposition:

*P3:* The degree to which the company's HRM practices are aligned with the company's spiritual values moderates the linkage of the company's spiritual values to employee attitudes and organizational performance. Specifically, firms that highly align HRM practices with the company's core values will experience a stronger positive linkage of the company's spiritual values, employee work and spiritual attitudes, and organizational performance.

We believe that these propositions provide a starting point for a preliminary contingency perspective of the conditions when a company's spiritual values can enhance both employee spiritual and work attitudes and organizational performance. In addition, this inductive research effort illustrates the need for future research to empirically test and refine the spiritual values-based model and these propositions. This research should probably involve some type of qualitative component to ensure that the notion of spiritual values and employees' reaction to them are assessed on an in-depth basis. Such systematic research is needed if we are to create a paradigm shift in CEOs so that they incorporate spiritual principles in their organizations. It is clear that we need to conduct more rigorous, theory-based research on spirituality in the workplace if organizations are to create a higher level of social and economic performance and to offer employees an opportunity to find a greater sense of meaning in their work.

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