

LEADERSHIP AND PRACTICAL SPIRITUALITY

Ethan Raath, ThD.

Why the call for spiritual leadership in the workplace?

Work can be satisfying, fulfilling, and rewarding. It can also be soulless, uninspiring, impersonal, and lacking vitality. That is how many leaders and workers often feel. Surveys reveal a high percentage of disengaged workers who are doing just enough to get by. Very few have a clear sense of purpose or meaning in what they do beyond the present moment. Performance and results suffer and infect the spirit of the work setting and affect bottom-line results.

That is why spiritual leaders are desperately needed. Inspired by a deep sense of their personal spiritual values and practices, they influence the spiritual energy of organizations and the work setting.

Spiritual leaders have the opportunity in the right circumstances to:

- ✓ Help followers engage in work that is meaningful.
- ✓ Connect workers to the larger mission and vision of the organization.
- ✓ Support motivation and engagement through satisfaction in work.
- ✓ Structure work that emphasizes the benefits of communal collaboration.
- ✓ Maintain the integrity of personal and organizational values.
- ✓ Cultivate the development and leadership potential of followers.
- ✓ Pursue a genuine presence that models integrity and promotes trust.

To understand the value and impact of spiritual leadership, this presentation looks at the *meaning*, *purpose*, and *practice* of spiritual leadership in the workplace.

Meaning of Spiritual Leadership

Spiritual leaders are empowered by a true inner sense of who they are and who they are called to be in the world. Their source of strength lies in spiritual values that shape the direction of their lives and inspire them to walk in a path of service.

Spiritual leadership is the application of leaders' values and principles in the workplace, to produce spiritual outcomes for their organizations and followers that also produce bottom-line results. In their leadership, they embody universal spiritual practices like faith, hope, vision, servanthood, and community.

What makes spiritual leadership different? Various motivational leadership theories emphasize mental (thinking), emotional (reasoning), and physical (wellness) attributes. Yet we are also spiritual beings, evidenced by the need for that which inspires, sustains, and gives life to the inner being. The call for spirituality in the workplace is a response to the human need for purpose, vision, meaning, community, and satisfaction in life and work.

Our understanding draws on ancient wisdom that conceived of *spirit* as a life giving force. The Hebrew *ruwach* speaks of spirit as breath, a forceful wind that gives vigor to life and instills a sense of the divine spirit. The Greek *pneuma* speaks of the breath of life as a dynamic force (think *pneumatic*). In the

Christian scriptures this word is used to describe an empowering spiritual life force. In Latin, *spiritus* also implies a vigorous life source from which we have words like aspire, inspire, respire, conspire (working together).

Spirituality in this sense is more than religious beliefs. Religion inspires the moral and ethical values of spirituality for many. Practices such as prayer, reading of sacred writing, worship, and service, develop personal spirituality. Major religions are universal in their call for compassion and empathy in the spirit of servant leadership. For religious and secular alike, spirituality can also be inspired by relationships, nature, music, writings, meditation, recreation, or whatever else nurtures the spirit of the individual.

Yet we live in a time when more and more people declare themselves to be “spiritual but not religious.” They have turned from what they perceive as the excesses, double standards, and irrelevance of religion. But they are still look for spiritual inspiration and nurture.

In an internet age there are many ways for people to research and draw on various religious teachings to shape a spirituality that is personalized. This is especially true for a younger generation of workers. Wise leaders take cognizance of the pluralistic nature of spirituality in the workplace.

However, religious spirituality can also be limiting and inauthentic when practiced out of duty or obligation to a Higher Power or set of dogmas, rather than an expression of inner spiritual renewal and transformation. Leaders who attempt to embody spiritual practices and actions without a personal experience and heart centered commitment will soon be recognized as inauthentic, insincere, and untrustworthy.

I was raised in a religious tradition that measured spirituality more often by outward appearance and behavior than inner spiritual enlightenment. The motivation was based on the one hand by the promise of a heavenly life, and on the other by fear of divine retribution, a life in hell, and rejection by the group.

That fear was transformed in a spiritually transcendent moment when the reality of divine grace was revealed to me. *Grace* is manifested as *good will and favor lovingly extended even to those underserving*. The affirming presence of grace in my life sustains my calling as a spiritual guide to others on the journey of life – especially to leaders who are overwhelmed, unbalanced, and spiritually drained.

Over the years I have come to value traditions broader than my Christian upbringing that inspire spirituality in me. For instance, Native American spirituality speaks of the inner and outer paths of life. I am reminded to nurture the inner spirit if I am to live faithfully in the world. *Seek to make your life long and of service to your people* (Tecumsah)

Purpose of Spiritual Leadership

The image of a wheel is used to describe the different facets of life. The spokes represent work, home, family, relationships, recreation, community, religion, and more. My question is this, “What is the hub that holds the wheel of life together and keeps it steady on the journey of life?”

This figurative hub is the core of personhood and spirituality – the sense of who we are, our calling, our values, our desire for meaning, our relationship to others. Spiritual leaders strive to know and live from

this center in all of life. It is a way of being that transcends position or title. It is a way of life, a spirit of service, which permeates all they do. Growth toward spiritual leadership is a life journey.

This deep sense of self continually develops through life stages and experiences. It grows through conscious reflection on the meaning we find in the highs and lows of life. In a fast paced world it requires concerted effort to take the time for stillness and reflection. Spiritual leadership is something to aspire to, yet ebbs and flows with the realities of our humanness and the circumstances of our lives.

Spiritual traditions point us to an inner sense of who we are and the call to understand and cultivate the persons we are meant to be. Sometimes it takes more than personal effort to see deeply, especially in the crisis times of life. We can draw on the wisdom and insight of trusted guides to help us find meaning in our conditions and point the way forward.

Spiritual leaders recognize the strength and frailty of their own humanity. This offers the opportunity to be empathetic and unite with the common humanity of those they lead – recognizing the mutual desire for meaning, value, reward, peace, and spiritual well-being. This awareness calls for spiritual leadership that empathizes with and respects those who follow them. *Love your neighbor as yourself* (Jesus).

Practice of Spiritual Leadership

The style of leadership that dominates and rules through fear is not spiritual and does not enrich the spirit of others. Heartless, angry, and controlling bosses can be soul destroying to those they lead. They do not inspire professionalism, performance, vision, commitment, or satisfaction in work.

Spiritual leaders strive to instill intrinsic values where work and accomplishments are rewards in themselves. Their organizational mission and values (hopefully) are focused on providing services and products that add value to people's lives and benefit the common good. When these values are in place, then spiritual leaders can inspire their followers to see a common vision and meaning in their work that can overcome apathy and disengagement.

A small example is when I consulted with workers at a greeting card company – printers, packagers, and logistical workers. I asked what was important to them in their work. There wasn't much response beyond working for survival. I gave them a vision of the value of their work – that greetings cards celebrate life events, send get well greetings, say hello to friends, share expressions of love, provide sympathy at times of loss, and that they had a part in that. I saw a spark in the eyes of some who gained a new perspective on the meaning in their work.

Spiritual leadership is a way of life that is rich and fulfilling when expressed in service to others.

DR. ETHAN RAATH
Highwire Leadership LLC
www.highwireleadership.com
ethanraath@highwireleadership.com