Can critical people also be spiritual? Reconciling critical and spiritual approaches

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Abstract

Spirituality and religion have gained increasing prominence in recent years. Several critical reviews of spirituality have pointed out ways in which spirituality can be misused by both employees and management. Yet, many of these critical authors are drawn toward a need for more spirituality in their own lives and work. This paper will review some ways in which spirituality can be misused or used as an addiction. We will then explore ways in which spirituality and spiritual practices can and have been used in a positive, healthy way in organizations.

Critical Reviews of Spirituality

Critical reviewers have pointed out a number of ways in which spirituality can be misused or be used as an addiction in an organization. Some of these are as follows: 1) in an addictive organization, or in an organization where the top leaders are addicts, spirituality can itself be used as an addiction, and as a way to avoid or deny dealing with real organizational problems; 2) an organization or leader may impose spiritual or religious beliefs on its members; and 3) organizations can use spirituality or religion as a management tool.

While the literature on spirituality in the workplace has largely considered spirituality to be an individual phenomenon (e.g. Ashforth and Pratt, 2003), workplace spirituality has also been advocated as a means for improving organizational performance (Mitroff and Denton, 1999, Neck and Milliman, 1994). Spirituality has also been described as a way to increase employee motivation (Tischler, 1999) cohesion (Dehler and Welsh, 1994), and better performance (Guillory, 2000; Mitroff and Denton, 1999). Spirituality has thus been depicted as a means of supporting "longer term enterprise stability, growth and profitability" (Burack, 1999, p. 280) and "real bottom-line improvements" (Leigh, 1997, p. 26).

Critics of organizational spirituality (e.g. Bell and Taylor, 2003) have argued that the spirituality discourse is totalizing because it seems to advocate, implicitly or explicitly, the idea that individuals have to accept the social structures in which they work, and more importantly, come to see these structures as meaningful and good.

They further argue that the spirituality discourse is totalizing because it provides mechanisms through which individuals are better able to cope with all, including exploitative and dysfunctional, aspects of capitalist systems but no mechanisms by which to recognize or critique them as exploitative and dysfunctional (Bell and Taylor, 2003).

This legitimizing of current organizational structures and getting individuals to believe in them as the manifestation of "a sacred power" (Bell and Taylor, 2003, p. 340), leads to the individual being placed in a position of potentially increased conformity (Ashforth and Pratt, 2003), a position from which the individual may lack critical distance and the impetus to resist or change dysfunctional organizational structures (Nadesan, 1999).

Bell and Taylor (2003) further suggest that spirituality in organizations goes further and seems more totalizing than the Protestant work ethic in positioning work as one or perhaps the only path for self-fulfillment and

spiritual transformation. Critics have raised further concerns that spirituality may be misappropriated as a tool for "material gain" (Benefiel, 2003) or of increased managerial control (Brown, 2003; Elmes and Smith, 2001).

Some critical theorists have seen a more positive role for workplace spirituality in organizational transformation. Boyle and Healy (2003), for example, suggest that organizational spirituality may be a tool for increased managerial control, but that it may also be illusionary to believe that employee spirituality can ever be totally controlled and that it may not also lead to employee resistance. That is, by creating a space for individual spirituality, the organization may also create a space for individual resistance. Further, Boje (2000), has suggested that organizational spirituality should lead to the rejection of existing paradigms and the adoption of a new business paradigm characterized by non-violent business practices, sustainable growth, ecological awareness and the cultivation of personal development.

Misuse of Spirituality in Addictive Organizations

Organizations become addicted when they habitually use processes that promote avoidance of difficult problems. Workplace spirituality can strengthen addictive and defensive functioning to the extent that it contributes to the avoidance of significant problems. An increasing emphasis on spiritual awareness and sophistication as an important indicator of personal and professional competence has created fertile ground for addictive and abusive organizational practices. In particular, definitions of growth, transcendence and holism can be crafted by management to shame organizational members for experiencing the design, culture and management of an organization in a negative manner. For example, Maslow's definition of growth as the achievement of independence from the environment can be used to imply that negative experiences of an organization are an indication of the inability to manage internal experiences and relating to the organization. Such experiences can also be shamed by implying that they indicate the inability to transcend challenging conditions or are manifestations of a lack of self acceptance projected outward. There is a fine line between shaming someone's experience and appropriately challenging their construction of reality. Spiritual practices that emphasize a positive construction of reality may become addictive when organizational members habitually use such processes for avoiding difficult and significant organizational problems.

An approach to workplace spirituality that shames descent and/or encourages avoidance of important problems promotes a kind of paralysis that makes organizational change very challenging. Organizations that have become shamed based because of a pervading sense of inferiority and failure often manifest defensive processes that are activated and sustained by the fear of exposure. This is more likely when the leaders of the organization have become addicted to defensive and avoidant behavior in their own lives. Shame and fear based organizations often fail to address problems effectively and soon face the need for transformational change in order to survive. It is precisely at these points in time that addictive behavior is strengthened because of the pressing need to expose and address important organizational problems. These conditions produce increasing levels of fear and anxiety. Transformational change processes that address shame and fear in a positive manner are important for helping addictive organizations unfreeze and make the changes necessary to survive.

Using Spirituality to Develop Positive Approaches to Transformational Change

The development of new and more effective organizational states is an important management challenge. This requires

organizational change ranging from incremental adjustments to radical transformations of both organizational culture and design. Transformational change requires a paradigm shift in which members of the organization fundamentally restructure the way in which they perceive themselves, others and the organization. This suggests that existing psychological systems that guide perception and interpretation may produce a kind of paralysis that prevents people and organizations from perceiving new opportunities. When a paradigm shifts, significant and permanent changes take place within the basic assumptions, beliefs and values that guide the process of perception and interpretation. Theories of transformational change have attempted to bring the process under control by suggesting ways to manage the predictable intellectual and emotion challenges that emerge. For example, the process of surfacing and challenging assumptions underlying traditional interpretations of organizational events is considered to be an important intellectual activity (Bushe, 2001). Treating decisions as experiments is thought to help manage emotions that inhibit appropriate risk taking. We believe that such insights are important but suggest that the understanding of organizational transformation is limited without consideration of spiritual viewpoints about transformation.

Personal transformation is a central concern for most spiritual ideologies and practices, and typically requires a fundamental change in how a person views themselves, others and the world. We believe that spiritual perspectives on transformation may provide some important insights for managing organizational transformations. We use the Christian concept of possessing a 'dominant spirit' as a way to explain the role of spirituality in transformational change. Although we have chosen 'dominant spirit' as our paradigm we do believe that there are numerous other spiritual concepts that can provide a framework for understanding the role of spirituality in organizational transformations.

A dominant spirit manifests itself as a network of emotions, beliefs, values and desires that becomes the guiding force in the life of a person or social system. In other words, a dominant spirit fundamentally influences how people perceive, think, feel and act. Christian theology often categorizes these spirits as either forces for good or evil. Christian theology expresses concern about allowing fear to become the dominant spirit in a person's life, or in the case of an organization, the emergence of a culture of fear. Salvation is often thought of as the process of removing fear as the dominant spirit and allowing the holy spirit to transcend the spirit of fear. Many Christians believe that when fear becomes the dominant spirit in a person's life, they are more vulnerable to being possessed by the forces of evil.

We believe that during times of rapid change in which people experience a loss of control over their immediate future, fear is likely to become the dominant spirit. This is especially true when the organization is populated by people with a high desire for control arising out of weak psychological states. In situations where a culture of fear takes hold, which is more likely when the leadership of the organization allows fear to become the dominant spirit in their lives, attempts at transformation must be carefully managed. We believe that the efficacy of traditional problem solving may be limited under such circumstances because of the likelihood of the process strengthening fear as the dominant spirit. We instead see promise in a relative new approach called appreciate inquiry. In order to make our case for the use of appreciative inquiry we first outline some of the key dynamics that encourage fear to become the pervasive force in the life of a person or organization. We then use the traditional twelve step recovery process to explain why appreciative inquiry may be more effective than traditional problem solving when attempting to transform a culture of fear.

Healthy fear helps individuals and

organizations to identify and respond to threats. However, when people and organizations experience a rapid and significant loss of control over their immediate future, they are more likely to experience debilitating levels of fear. This is especially true when this experience continues unabated. As fear becomes dominant so does the desire for control which in turn increases the likelihood of experiencing fear given the uncertainties of life in a rapidly changing world. An intensifying cycle of fear and control is likely to produce increased reactivity, antisocial behavior, and a decline in general functioning. A continuation of this experience should begin to lower self esteem and efficacy, and begin to have a negative influence on the self concept, especially the fundamental question of "am I a good person?". The loss of healthy intimacy should contribute to a sense of isolation which may be reinforced by others distancing themselves.

This cycle becomes a spiritual battle when a person or organization's claim of being 'good' becomes increasingly hard to defend. From a Christian perspective a battle between good and evil is now underway to determine what the dominant spirit and paradigm will become. This battle is often thought of as losing one's soul. Christian perspectives on the process of recovery are well represented within the traditional twelve step recovery process. The first three steps of the recovery process emphasize letting go and turning our lives and will over to the care of God. This helps to break the debilitating cycle of constant fear and an intense desire for control. The following nine steps emphasize becoming reality oriented, solving problems and building a relationship with God. Traditional problem solving, which is simply defined as identifying and addressing gaps between the actual situation and the preferred/required situation, enters the process when people are required to take a fearless moral inventory of themselves. Identifying and addressing past and future gaps is emphasized in the rest of the process.

The twelve step process emphasizes the need to turn our will and lives over to the care of God before we begin the process of problem solving. This helps to break the hold that intense fear and the desire for control have over us. However, in organizations where fear has become the dominant spirit as a result of continuing change that is not well managed, management is typically expected to intensify their problem solving efforts. Attempts to conduct a fearless inventory of the actual situation to identify deficiencies may simply intensify shame and fear, and strengthen addictive and defensive patterns of behaving. Although we believe that turning an increasingly unmanageable organization over to the care of God may help to improve attempts at problem solving, such an approach is unrealistic in most of our modern organizations. Alternatively, processes that attempt to strengthen esteem, efficacy and a positive self concept before, or as a part of a problem solving process may be more useful and acceptable.

Appreciative inquiry is different in that the process begins by identifying the best of what is and attempts to amplify those positive features in the process of encouraging people to imagine what could be (Bushe & Coetzer, 1995). Ultimately the process turns to identifying what should be based upon an understanding of the generative, affirming and life giving forces within an organization. This point in the process begins to resemble traditional problem solving in that it examines gaps between current situation and what should be. However, the current situation is framed more in terms of the life giving and 'good' aspects of the organization. In simple terms the emphasis of the process changes from examining what is 'bad' to what is 'good' and in doing so may help to shift the spiritual battle in favor of transcending the dominance of shame and fear.

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