

“Giving Workplace Spirituality a Bad Name?”

Peter Pruzan and Kirsten Pruzan Mikkelsen. *Leading with Wisdom: Spiritual-based Leadership in Business*. Sheffield, UK: Greenleaf Publishing, 2007.

Reviewed by William C. Frederick, December 2007

This book will appeal to an audience that believes business can and should be conducted—and especially led—in a climate of Godliness and transcendent spirituality. To help assure this viewpoint, the authors or publisher secured endorsements from 17 well-known authors, professors, NGO heads, and former CEOs, placing their supportive statements even before a reader encounters the book’s main title page. With both God and expert opinion on one’s side, what’s left to say? Hoping not to invoke the wrath of either Heavenly or Earthly authorities, I’ll chance a few further comments.

So, what does one find here? Some 30 figures from the business world—most of them high-level executives; others are consultants, trainers, and educators—tell how their personal sense of spirituality intersects with their workaday responsibilities. Helped along by editorial guidelines embodied in an interview schedule, the participants were asked to explain their sense of spirituality and how it might have contributed to their organizational leadership. [**NB:** The authors never define “leadership” but assume that being on top of the organizational pyramid is evidence enough.] The subsequent ruminations range widely across a spiritual spectrum embracing explicit God-inspired and God-directed maxims—two-thirds of the participants invoke an active workplace God—to rather more mystical notions of an inexplicit divinity as spiritual guide. Somewhat more grounded concerns for employee well-being and the planet seem to capture the meaning of spirituality for fewer than a half dozen of the interviewees. Each of the accounts is necessarily—and by authorial invitation—idiosyncratic and highly personal, with little or no generalization possible beyond a thematic bunching. Indeed, the very meaning of spirituality varies widely among the testimonials, along with the various ways in which the concept is thought to be relevant to workplace decisions and responsibilities. As a result, you get what might be expected—a mishmash of personal opinions about the link between spirituality and executive decisions.

To gain some order from the spectrum of opinions, the authors devised—or rather imposed *ex post facto*—seven “themes”—Love; Looking and Listening Within; Live It and Serve!; Compassion; Divinity; Purpose; and Balance and Grace—that allowed a rough grouping of the participants’ thoughts. From all this, they elicited six spiritual “maxims” that urge organizational leaders to accept a personal spiritualistic approach to business, blending it with organizational needs. Sort of a buck-up-you-can-do-it message.

The book’s failures are numerous and serious. As noted, one of the book’s two core concepts—organizational leadership—is never explained or defined, which granted each testifier maximum scope for imaginative (though sincere) interpretation of “its” link to one’s personal notion of spirituality. The same is true of the critical incidents cited by some as proof of spirituality’s aid in resolving organizational problems, such as: achieving “harmonious relations” with staff; or “no one was left with bad feelings toward me or toward the company”; or “people said ‘wow’ and really respected my decision”.

Such self-serving or self-deluding comments reveal the absence of scientific objectivity in evaluating the supposed linkages of work and spirituality attitudes. One wonders what the workers on the other side really felt and thought about the “leader’s” views, apart from a coerced organizational need to agree, keep quiet, or find another job—but we are given only the spiritual leaders’ biased and self-serving views.

The very methods used betray even graver shortcomings. Foremost is the biased sample chosen for the study: “executives we knew personally who were spiritually inclined” and others referred by “colleagues and friends whom we trusted to refer us to [similar] executives”. Well, if you begin with a sample already convinced that your underlying hypothesis is valid, aren’t you bound to find what you are looking for? Worse still, they dumped some interview results “because of the minor role that spirituality apparently played in the interviewee’s leadership”. Yet another participant backed out, fearing public scrutiny of his spiritual views.

Only toward the end of the book—in an appendix—do the authors acknowledge these and other shortcomings: few citations, no historical framework, no relevant leadership theory base (they say, “such well-established theories do not exist!”); no testable hypotheses; no representative sample (“we do not know what this would mean”); a confusion and conflation of religion and spirituality. Well, then, what do you have beyond an account that supports the views you held before the “study” started? Ah, there’s the key, revealed in the authors’ own words: “. . . it was our goal to demonstrate that business leaders can achieve success, recognition, peace of mind and happiness, while at the same time serving the needs of all those affected by their leadership, if they lead from a spiritual basis.”

Sorry, but this was not demonstrated at all. There simply is no basis to support this claim beyond the biased views of those already inclined to believe it, including those 17 prominent prepublication endorsers mentioned earlier. All that can be legitimately claimed is that these “leaders” who hold a variety of spiritualistic beliefs hold those beliefs. They may “achieve [personal] success, recognition, peace of mind and happiness” but nothing more is “demonstrated.” Certainly, not anything about a causal link between organizational performance and personal spiritual belief.

Mind you, these are executives one would like if encountered at some social occasion, say, a ribbon-cutting ceremony or the dedication of new building. Are their stories credible? Only in the sense that they could believe as they do—and still manage a company. Sincere? Yes, probably. Admirable? Perhaps, or at least preferable to the likes of Enron’s Kenneth Lay, HealthSouth’s Richard Scrushy, or Tyco’s Dennis Kozlowski whose power-and-glory management methods brought a sad ending to their bloated corporate empires. It’s worth recalling, though, that all three of these fallen corporate heroes claimed to have deep spiritual roots.

Late in an appendix likely by-passed by many readers, the authors reveal their own personal meaning of spirituality—one that embraces divinity, transcendence, a soul (“we exist beyond our bodies”), leadership “as a spiritual activity”, and “work and business [a] means for spiritual growth”. This late-coming revelation of faith makes apparent what might well have been said at the book’s outset—that the authors began with an unspoken religious agenda, coupled with the goal of trying to establish its relevance to organizational worklife.

The study of workplace spirituality needn't have such an outcome. Other scholars have pioneered more grounded approaches to research and theory that go well beyond personal commitments or doctrinal meanings drawn from religious philosophy. Robert Giacalone and Carole Jurkiewicz in the 2003 *Handbook of Workplace Spirituality and Organizational Performance* point out that "viewing workplace spirituality through . . . religious tradition is divisive . . . excludes those who do not share in the denominational tradition . . . conflicts with the social, legal, and ethical foundations of business and public administration . . . can lead to arrogance [and] insolence . . . disparages those who do not subscribe to similar beliefs," and replaces organizational trust with fear, can be dogmatic, self-righteous, and "can foster zealotry at the expense of organizational goals, offend constituents and customers, and decrease the morale and job satisfaction for employees."

Relevant also is a stream of research in neuroscience that explores the several complex ways by which humans encounter and interact with diverse cultural environments as they seek personal meanings for themselves. Mathew Alper's *The 'God' Part of the Brain: A Scientific Interpretation of Human Spirituality and God* is one such fascinating exploration of how the brain deals with, and perhaps generates, such phenomena as spirituality. In a 1998 article, "Moving to CSR₄", I hypothesized the possible existence of a "metaphysical impulse" embedded in the human neural system by adaptive evolutionary processes—"a phylogenetic trait that impels humans to explore and seek to understand the meaning of their lives within an evolving cosmos"—that might play a role in the decisions made by corporate executives.

Workplace spirituality enthusiasts, including the authors and participants of *Leading With Wisdom*, could gain clearer views of spirituality's place in the business world by going beyond their own personal views and religiously-confined beliefs. A good place to start would be Robert Giacalone's proposal for "A Transcendent Business Education for the 21st Century" in the Academy of Management's *Learning & Education* journal for December 2004. Another is Timothy Fort's tough-love argument that religious belief has a legitimate place in the executive suite: "Religious Belief, Corporate Leadership, and Business Ethics" in *American Business Law Journal*, 1996.