

# Can You Train People to Be Spiritual?

By William David Thompson

Train people in spirituality? *Impossible!* most trainers would say. In fact, we probably wouldn't have even considered raising that question five years ago. What has happened?

One, people are increasingly comfortable talking about the spiritual side of their lives. Oprah Winfrey helps millions of viewers "remember their spirit" every day by interviewing people who work at connecting their spirituality with their marriages, their work, and their communities. Books on spirituality crowd every bestseller list. Human resource events feature speakers who help people find meaning in their work and dig deep into their souls to handle stress.

No wonder: A spirited workplace can manifest itself in low morale, high turnover, burnout, frequent stress-related illness, and rising absenteeism. That corporate malaise calls forth an army of business doctors who share their diagnoses and prescriptions with people who read their columns or books. The authors of *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America* say, "Most of us know that money isn't everything, that the pursuit of power can be spiritually draining, and that happiness hinges crucially on a healthy inner spirit. Why, then, do we have to give up those beliefs when we come to work?"

Those comments reframe my original question: It's not whether you can train people in spirituality. Indisputably, every person is a combination of body and spirit, and therefore lives life with a spiritual dimension. The rightful question is, What does that spirit have to do with work?

An issue of *Fast Company* that landed on my desk this fall touches on the topic of spirituality at least three times. "Business in the Internet economy," begins one article, "is about more than just technology, venture capital, and IPOs. It's also about character." A second article reads, "There is a disturbing imbalance today between giving and getting. Somehow we find it easier to focus on our self-interest than to focus on the greater good." Yet a third writer says, "The startup road is littered with temptations to cut ethical corners in order to grow a busi-

ness faster. These Silicon Valley figures are taking the high road and betting that it's the road to success."

Don't confuse spirituality with religion. Of course, trainers have no business teaching religion, beliefs about deities, or religious rituals. Spirituality is far broader. It encompasses the very topics written about in *Fast Company*: character, ethics, the giving of oneself for the benefit of others.

No one disputes the reality of the human spirit and its importance in the workplace—least of all trainers. Wielding a flipchart marker in front of a training room or sitting alongside an employee trying to make sense of new software aren't the only things trainers do. They deal with the spiritual dimension of life every day.

For example, a promising employee is having marriage troubles and is unable to concentrate on even simple tasks. A middle manager, blessed with well-trained workers, gets the job done superbly but sends people in tears to the HR department—or out to the sidewalk for a nervous smoke—after inflicting a put-down yet again.

Trainers who help people develop supervisory skills, teach them how to deal with difficult colleagues, or coach them on their career paths are providing training in spirituality—just under different names. They're helping people discover their identities, their purposes, the values they bring to interpersonal relationships, and the principles of right and wrong that shape the management decisions they make. Much of our working life necessitates getting in touch with our own spirit and helping others get in touch with theirs.

Ultimately, the real question isn't whether trainers can or should deal with spirituality at work, but how intentional we can be about it.

High schools in the United States have begun to figure out the importance of spirituality training. The character education movement is sweeping into schools all over America. The tragic shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado gave the movement impetus and publicity, but it had begun years before when dishonesty and incivility

among students seemed to be reaching epidemic proportions.

The annual International Conference on Business and Consciousness attempts to remind the business world of the deep spiritual values that give it meaning and gird its productivity. Attendees—management consultants, clergy, psychotherapists, and others—are finding open doors for helping to develop more spirited workplaces. They discuss interpersonal relationships, ethical decision making, corporate treatment of the environment, and social responsibility in investment policies—concerns of the spirit.

How does spirituality affect the goal of every business, which is to make a profit? A Harvard Business School study examined 10 companies with strong corporate cultures—let's call them spirited workplaces—and 10 with weak corporate cultures, drawn from a list of 207 leading corporations. In an 11-year period, the researchers found a dramatic correlation between the strength of an organization's corporate culture and its profitability. In some cases, the more spirited companies outperformed the others by 400 to 500 percent in terms of net earnings, return-on-investment, and shareholder value. A Vanderbilt University Business School study resulted in similar findings, using the annual *Fortune* listing of "The 100 Best Companies to Work For."

Is there a case for character education in business? If senior managers understand how vital a spirited workplace is to corporate goals—and that's a big *if* for many people who keep their eyes on the bottom line—then they will support efforts to develop the spiritedness of their workplaces. A trainer's first task, therefore, is to make sure that senior management is in step.

The second job is to find needs assessment tools you can use to make sure that you're giving sufficient attention to the human spirit. (The "Spirited Workplace Inventory," available from The Spirited Workplace, is one of those tools.) In addition to using written instruments, conduct interviews posing open-ended questions that enable and encourage employees to talk freely about the intersection of their values and

their work.

Third, take a look at your training programs through a set of spiritual lenses. You may discover that you're already doing a good job helping people relate their values to their work. Your organization's employees may already know that they're important, take satisfaction in their work, function well in teams, and enjoy well-deserved compensation. But there may be areas of weakness—of dispiritedness—that you can identify by searching for the spiritual dimensions of your training programs.

If, for example, you discover a great deal of ambiguity and stress about ethical issues, you've uncovered a fourth task: targeting a new area for training. Let's say that your senior managers are concerned about such fierce competition among teams that it threatens the success of a project. Or salespeople are making claims that aren't accurate or promises that aren't likely to be kept. Or management is receiving reports of behavior that is just shy of sexual harassment and the training department is directed to head off trouble.

At their roots, those are matters of the spirit—honesty, beneficence, justice, and respect. They also happen to be the fundamental principles of Ethics 101. Trainers must approach sensitive issues gingerly. Another option is to contract the training to a professional ethicist who's more knowledgeable and comfortable with such issues. Ethics is clearly a matter of the spirit, and ethical lapses violate the spirit of the offending employees, the people who have been offended, and, ultimately, the credibility of the company—even its profitability.

Above all, you need to fully recover your own spirit. You will be of little help to people's spirituality as a trainer if your own spirit is undiscovered or unfulfilled.

Helping people link their spirit with their work may be the most rewarding task you can undertake.

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