

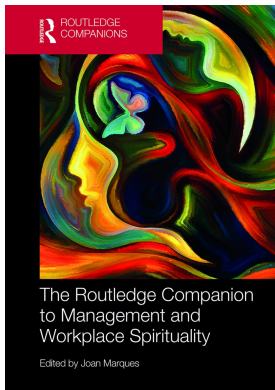
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## **The Routledge Companion to Management and Workplace Spirituality**

Joan Marques

### **A Theoretical Approach to Spiritual Leadership in Public Organizations**

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# A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS

## Is Spiritual Leadership a Good Fit for Public Managers?

*Kira Haensel and Jean-Claude Garcia-Zamor*

### **Defining Spiritual Leadership**

While a consensual definition of spirituality in the management literature doesn't exist, one common definition that combines a number of preexisting definitions and was suggested by Ashar and Lane-Maher reads as follows:

Spirituality is an innate and universal search for transcendent meaning in one's life. In addition, although it can be expressed in various ways, we submit that spirituality at work involves some common behavioral components. Above all, it involves a desire to do purposeful work that serves others and to be part of a principled community. It involves a yearning for connectedness and wholeness that can only be manifested when one is allowed to integrate his or her inner life with one's professional role in the service of a greater good.

*(Ashar & Lane-Maher, 2005, p. 252)*

In line with this definition, it can be said that spirituality in general concerns the feeling of interconnectedness (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). With reference to the workplace, spirituality thus addresses the level of interconnectedness between an organization and its employees, including the level of interconnectedness among the employees and with their leader.

Spirituality in the workplace has received increasing attention over the last two decades. According to Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003), the emergence of workplace spirituality can be connected to three thematic sections. The first addresses changes in the social and business environment, which require employees to deal with the consequential tensions. In times of instability, budget cuts, downsizing, and the increased replacement of employees through technology, people begin to distrust the organizations they work for (Cash & Gray, 2000; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). "This diminishing view of self and work exacerbates feelings of social alienation and fear, compelling the employee to search for deeper meaning in life (Ali and Falcone [& Azim], 1995) and thus integrating a spiritual-work identity" (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz,

2003, p. 3). That is, employees experience the need for satisfaction in the workplace, which goes beyond factors such as pay satisfaction (Izzo & Klein, 1998; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). The second thematic section emphasizes the global change in values. Accordingly, self-actualization has become an important component of the workplace. Employees do not just want to go to work for financial and material reasons, but actually identify themselves with their job. People feel the need for meaning in their work and the impression to have a positive impact on society. Furthermore, increasing social consciousness has led to the development of the idea of corporate social responsibility. Corporate social responsibility can be roughly defined as “actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law” (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001, p. 513). A third thematic section addresses the influence of Eastern philosophy on Northern American popular culture. Over the last two decades, the Eastern influence on aspects such as lifestyle choices, fitness, cuisine, and fashion has increased, which can be attributed to “societal shifts towards diversity and increasing interest in other cultures” accordingly (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003, p. 4).

Reconsidering the definition of spirituality mentioned earlier, “Spiritual leadership involves motivating and inspiring workers through a transcendent vision and a culture based in altruistic values to produce a more motivated, committed and productive workforce” (Fry & Matherly, 2006, p. 4). Accordingly, it is the leader’s task to create an environment in which on the one hand the leader herself/himself is able to intrinsically motivate her/him through attitudes, behaviors values, and behaviors that facilitate this motivation. On the other hand, the leader has the job to generate a climate within which the followers “experience a sense of calling in that life [or work] has meaning and makes a difference” (Fry & Matherly, 2006, p. 4) based on values such as appreciation, concern for others, and genuine care. Spiritual leadership theory builds on the idea that a spiritual leader is able to motivate her/his followers through the emphasis on “meaning and purpose rather than rewards and security, thus encouraging employees to transcend their self-interest” (Rego, Cunha, & Oliveira, 2008, pp. 169–170). Leaders consequently have an impact on followers through their influence on workplace spirituality. Thus, according to Strack, Fottler, Wheatley, and Sodomka, “the management of individual spirituality as well as the leadership of others from a spiritual perspective are among the most fundamental of all management tasks” (2002, p. 16).

Finally, Fry (2003) states that spiritual leadership theory includes several different major motivation-based leadership theories but that it is less conceptually confounded. For the purpose of the conceptualization of spiritual leadership, Fry argues that in order to respond to the global societal demands of organizational change, a paradigm shift toward a learning organizational paradigm which focuses on intrinsic motivation, team empowerment, flexibility, diversity, and innovation is necessary. This implies a radical shift away from the traditional, hierarchical, bureaucratic, centralized, and formal organizational structure. “For the learning organization, developing, leading, motivating, organizing, and retaining people to be committed to the organization’s vision, goals, culture, and values are the major challenge” (Fry, 2003, p. 694). In order to successfully transition to a learning organization, spiritual leadership is necessary. Accordingly, a spiritual leader is concerned about her/his and the followers’ needs of any kind in order to trigger greater organizational commitment and therewith productivity. Fry defines spiritual leadership “as comprising the values, attitudes, and behaviors that are necessary to intrinsically motivate one’s self and others so that they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership” (2003, pp. 194–195).

Fry’s model of spiritual leadership consists of the idea that a spiritual leader creates a vision, which then leads to a sense of calling in the leader and her/his followers, which in turn leads to spiritual well-being, since people feel that their work is meaningful. The second notion refers to

the leader as creator of an organizational culture that incorporates the values of altruistic love through which a sense of membership is created (Fry, 2003). In more recent work, Fry revised the model and added inner life and life satisfaction as additional factors of spiritual leadership. Accordingly, inner life refers to people's perception of who they are and how and what they are contributing. Life satisfaction addresses an individual's perception of her/his life in terms of wellbeing. Higher levels of life satisfaction can function as a motivator (Fry, 2005). The theory behind the model is that through the sense of calling and membership, people feel attached to the organization and develop loyalty toward it. Furthermore, through the sense of calling and membership, people will be motivated to be productive and therewith support the organization's success. Finally, people with a sense of calling and membership will reach higher levels of life satisfaction due to the creation of a sense of purpose and belonging (Fry, Latham, Clinebell, & Krahnke, 2017). Other scholars have tested both, the original and the revised model (e.g., Jeon, Passmore, Lee, & Hunsaker, 2013; Bodla & Ali, 2012). The results show that the original model is able to predict a number of organizational as well as individual level aspects within different cultures and countries (Fry et al., 2017). The revised model was tested by Jeon et al. (2013) who found "initial support that inner life is an essential source of inspiration and insight that positively influences spiritual leadership, which then positively predicted calling and membership. In turn, calling and membership positively predicted organizational commitment, productivity, and life satisfaction" (Fry et al., 2017, p. 5).

### **Differences between Administrative Leadership and Leadership in the Private Sector**

Most research on workplace spirituality related aspects such as value congruence between leaders and followers has been conducted in the private sector setting. The distinct compositions of the public and private sector however lead to doubts whether results from research conducted in the private sector setting are transferable to the public sector. Differences in the degree of political pressure (Wamsley & Zald, 1973), in the type of goods and services manufactured and or provided (Alford, 2002; Rainey, 2014), and the level of liability toward the public (Moore, 1995) form environments which require distinct management strategies (Rainey, 2014). Accordingly, leadership in public sector organizations is different and can be more complex than in private sector organizations, since political and ideological aspects, as well as concerns for values, are distinct. However, while there are some important similarities between cultures of private sector and public sector organizations, the differences at the structural and operational level in public sector organizations compared to private sector organizations cultures create unique challenges for public sector managers trying to evoke change (Schraeder, Tears, & Jordan, 2005).

Besides from the above-mentioned aspects, public sector leaders are also dealing with distinct types of employees, especially in terms of their motivation. Research on public and private sector work motivation revealed that public sector employees are less extrinsically motivated than private sector employees (e.g., Buelens & Van den Broeck, 2007). Extrinsic motivation refers to motivation that is driven by goals such as financial benefits or awards earned through the performance of an activity. Intrinsic motivation on the other hand concerns the engagement in an activity out of interest or the pleasure that might be gained through it (Lin, 2007). As one vital task of a leader is to ensure that employees are motivated (since motivation is also related to performance) the type of motivation that drives employees thus requires distinct leadership approaches.

Andersen (2010) empirically tested this assumption and found significant differences between managerial styles in the private and public sector. The scholar analyzed data from 495 Swedish

managers on leadership style, decision-making style, and type of motivation. The results reveal that public and private managers apply different types of leadership styles, and have similar approaches to decision-making. Leaders in the public sector were found to have change-oriented leadership styles, which are defined through openness to new ideas and change, future planning, and experimentation with new approaches (Arvonen & Ekvall, 1999; Andersen, 2010). Private sector leaders in contrast show a leadership style that is focused on relationships. Accordingly, private managers tend to have a stronger bond with their subordinates through a relationship based on trust and are also more likely to delegate authority to subordinates (Anderson, 2010). Other findings show that private and public managers have similar decision-making styles which are based on intuition. Thus, both types of managers are open to new possibilities, are future oriented, and use their imagination in the decision-making process (Andersen, 2010). Regarding motivation, the results show that public sector managers are driven by the “desire to outperform someone else, meet or surpass some self-imposed standard of excellence, do something unique, be involved over long term in doing something” (Andersen, 2010, p. 137). Private sector managers in contrast feel motivated through power, meaning the desire to have an impact, to impress others, and to maintain a good reputation and position. Accordingly, Andersen’s findings regarding public and private managers’ leadership styles reveal that there are significant differences regarding their motivation and orientation. Possible explanations for that include organizational differences in terms of structure which lead to behavioral differences, the type of profession, and the criteria used for promotion decisions (Andersen, 2010).

### ***Does Leadership in the Public Sector Matter?***

The traditional bureaucratic paradigm, typified by “internal productive efficiency, functional rationality, departmentalization, hierarchical control and rule-based management” (Kaufman, 1977; Ndou, 2004), has continuously been challenged over the last years. While hierarchical control and rule-based management were established and accepted structures within the public sector for a long time, its efficiency has been questioned, not only in the private but also in the public sector. A look at the evolution of management theory and the way organizational behavior has been addressed in theory and research reveals that the perception of employees, their role in the organization as well as their needs underwent significant changes over the timespan of roughly the last 100 years. With the emergence of human relations theory in the earlier 20th century at the latest, we came to realize that an exclusively technical approach is not sufficient to explain organizational behavior. Human relations theory shifted the focus from efficiency, the principle of the scientific approach, to the human element in organization. The movement can be interpreted as reaction to the deficiencies of theories of scientific management, offering “solutions” for the very same (Bruce, 2006). Thus, the main focus of human relations theory lies on the social context of organizations and the “relationships among changes in the organization, worker satisfaction, and productivity” (Fry & Raadschelders, 2013, p. 189). The main concern is the

“human factor” in industry and the unit of analysis is the social person and its central role in organizations: [...] humans are not merely the egoistic, utilitarian animal of neoclassical economics and Scientific Management, but they have other (high-level) psychosocial needs, and their social relationships at work play an important role in their productivity.

*(Bruce, 2006, p. 177; Dingley, 1997; Wren & Greenwood, 1998; Duncan, 1999)*

Human relation theorists emphasize that besides from organizational level aspects, we must also consider personal as well as inter-personal factors and their impact on organizational behavior. That is, while organizational level aspects are important, we must not forget individual level factors that impact organizational behavior. The latter includes the role of the leader. Box's argument in 1999 that we are in the midst of an "apparent fragmentation of meaning, [which entails that] the daily mechanics and values of the market permeate social, political, and economic life" (Box, 1999, p. 25) is still relevant today, and therewith human relations theory. Box's (1990) statement indicates that there is a need to refocus on the identification of grand themes of common belief or interest in order to build productive organizational culture, which, as a body of literature and research reveals, is essential to organizational performance (Garnett, Marlowe, & Pandey, 2008; Moynihan & Pandey, 2005; Popoli, 2016). The role the leader takes in this process is closer defined by Fry (2003), who argues that organizational change toward a learning organization is led by a spiritual leader. This is substantiated through the notion that, "from an ethics and values perspective, leaders have an impact on establishing and reinforcing personal, team, and organizational values" (Northouse, 2001; Fry, 2003, p. 708).

As the comparison of administrative leadership and leadership in the private sector has shown, the role of a leader in the public sector compared to a private sector leader is distinct. This is attributable on the one hand to the different organizational environment of public sector agencies (e.g., regarding funding and promotion) and the associated liabilities and on the other hand to the distinct bodies of employees, their motifs, and motivations. Thus, public sector leaders' work is complicated through high levels of bureaucracy, which at the same time makes it more difficult for them to reach their subordinates on an interpersonal level and accommodate according changes. Considering the purpose of public organizations and the way they are expected to operate in terms of liability and ethical behavior, it is clear that public sector leaders play an important and influential role. Relating to this aspect, Downe, Cowell, and Morgan (2016) asked the question whether rules or leadership determine ethical behavior in public organizations. The research which was conducted within the local government setting revealed that constantly ethically behaving organizations mainly have multiple leaders who lead by good example and further informally react to problems in order to prevent the necessity of use of formal regulation. According to this finding, public sector managers play a vital role in terms of the determination of ethical behavior (Downe et al., 2016).

Yet, again, since public sector organizations in general and especially compared to their private counterparts have the reputation of high levels of red tape and therewith limited leeway for leaders to have a personal and distinct impact on the work environment and culture as well as on organizational change, it is more difficult for leaders who operate within a highly bureaucratic environment to impact organizational commitment, performance, and employee well-being than for leaders who work for organizations with less rule-oriented organizational cultures. Within the frame of research on the impact of succession, Lynn (2001) reviewed the development of succession management strategies in public service organizations. The researcher found a direct link between organizational culture and leadership and identified "the need for new human resource management initiatives to foster the systematic identification, recruitment, development, and selection of high-potential candidates to improve leadership growth in the public sector" (Lynn, 2001, p. 114). Hence, the pointed out differences between public sector and private sector employees and leaders emphasize the necessity of public sector leadership as a separate branch from private sector leadership in research, theory, and in practice.

### ***Why is Spiritual Leadership a Good Fit for Public Sector Leadership?***

As outlined beforehand, one of the objectives of spiritual leadership is to create self-awareness and enhance spiritual engagement, which are powerful tools in terms of identity-shaping and resilience-strengthening. Self-awareness and a resilient identity are crucial characteristics for public sector leaders, since the sector's nature requires leaders to respond to the demands of different stakeholders, while keeping the focus on the public interest and ensuring ethical behavior. Hence, building a resilient identity is crucial for public sector leaders who need to stand "against the pressures of culture and complexity" (Roof, Bocarnea, & Winston, 2018).

Another important factor regarding identity is the identification of an individual with the organization. In order to identify with an organization, one must stand behind the organization's work and values. Depending on the level of authority, leaders have the unique opportunity to impact organizational structures and functions and therewith also the work and values. A study conducted by Feeney and Boardman (2010) investigated which individual and organizational factors lead to high organizational confidence. Related to spirituality, the scholars define organizational confident workers as "workers reporting high levels of pride in the organization for which they work, and who believe that the organization provides high-quality public services and operates by highly ethical standards" (Feeney & Boardman, 2010, pp. 673–674). The research was conducted with a sample of public sector employees. According to the findings, factors that are related to highly positive attitudes toward public organizations and highly motivated public employees are low organizational red tape, an increased desire to serve the public, high levels or perceived client satisfaction, as well as work motivation that stems from security factors such as a steady income and career advancement factors such as the opportunity for promotion. All of these factors are related to spirituality insofar as they are related to aspects that create a meaning in work, e.g., employees being able to deploy creativity, emotions, and intelligence, the ability to realize one's full potential, having an income, and serving the public (Feeney & Boardman, 2010; Mitroff & Denton 1999). Furthermore, according to a study by Mitroff and Denton (1999), employees who rated their organization as "more spiritual" were more likely to rate their organization as "more profitable" as well. The results of these studies show the importance of spirituality in public sector leadership not only in terms of the leader herself/himself, but also in terms of followers' satisfaction and therewith performance; not only on the individual but also on the organizational level.

Another argument for why spiritual leadership is a good fit for public sector leadership refers to public sector motivation. Motivational factors provide valuable insight into the way employees work and how their needs can be met. As outlined beforehand, public sector respondents attribute greater value to work that is beneficial to others and to society, to involvement in important public policies, and to self-sacrifice, responsibility, and integrity (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kouzmin, 2003; Khuntia & Suar, 2004). At higher management and professional levels, in particular, public sector respondents place less emphasis on money and high income as ultimate ends in work and life (Fernandez, 2005; Bjugstad, Thach, Thompson, & Morris, 2006). The mentioned aspects as well as esteem needs and self-actualization are closely related to intrinsic motivation, a type of motivation frequently found in the public sector (Buelens & Van den Broeck, 2007). Within that context, spiritual leadership focuses on the development of values that lead to intrinsic motivation and therewith to "spiritual survival through calling and membership" (Fry, 2003, pp. 194–195).

The fact that many public sector employees show commitment toward altruistic values calls for the adjustment of leadership strategies. Leaders need to be aware of the type of reward system their employees respond to and which organizational culture they feel comfortable working in. The idea behind spiritual leadership is to intrinsically motivate followers in order for them to develop a

personal bond with their work which in turn leads to higher levels of commitment. As the referenced research shows, public sector employees already show intrinsic motivation, which is why leaders need to focus on the advancement of this value in order to fully unlock workers' potential with respect to their own wellbeing as well as the organization's performance.

Finally, one further thought on spiritual leadership and the public sector concerns the role of ethics. Ethics play a decisive role in public sector work, since public sector organizations are highly liable toward the public mainly due to their nature of funding, i.e., publicly funded organizations have the obligation to act for the purpose of the society. The leader is the one who sets ethical standards by example. Ethical leadership entails honesty, empathy, altruism, and humility, values that are part of the concept of spiritual leadership. Due to the nature of public sector organizations, leaders of such organizations are dealing with ethical dilemmas such as competing values of different stakeholders. It therefore is crucial for public sector leaders to develop a clear vision to be followed and resilience to unethical behavior and outside pressure. As outlined earlier, empirical research revealed the importance of leadership in terms of ethical organizational behavior. Spiritual leaders focus on the creation of a shared vision and the mediation of ethical behavioral values. Thus, spiritual leadership emphasizes and facilitates the vital factor of ethical behavior in public organizations.

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