

Divine Labours

Fostering spirituality in the workplace makes for more contented and productive employees, Martin Rutte says

By CLARE MELLOR Business Reporter
Sun. Jun 21 - 4:45 AM

SHOWING THEM the money isn't enough. Fat paycheques, big bonuses and even awards won't stop employees from questioning the meaning of their work.

Businesses must allow people to nourish their spirituality at work if they want them to be productive and excel at their jobs, says the founder of the Centre for Spirituality and the Workplace at Saint Mary's University.

"What people think work is, is a place where you get money to cover your needs. It is your survival . . . (and) that you have to give up your heart and soul at the door to do that," said Martin Rutte, chairman of the board for the centre, which is located at the university's Sobey School of Business.

"We're saying, 'No, that is not accurate.' "

Mr. Rutte, who co-authored *Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work* in 1995, is a leader in the field of spirituality and the workplace. He was a key figure in founding the centre, which opened its doors in 2004. It is the only one of its kind in Canada housed in a business school.

A consultant who runs his own business, *Livelihood*, in Santa Fe, N.M., Mr. Rutte, was working in Toronto in the late 1980's when he had an epiphany.

"I wanted to talk about God and spirituality at work. Everyone said, 'You're crazy. You can't do this, you'll ruin your reputation,' " said Mr. Rutte, who is originally from Hamilton, Ont.

He persisted, becoming a trailblazer in the field.

Everyone has a different idea of what spirituality at work is, he said. For some it is organized religion, for others it may be respect, compassion, purpose, ethics, faith. No concept is right or wrong. The idea is not to force values or beliefs on others in a workplace, but allow people to express what is meaningful for them, he said.

"When (people) know you are not going to come to them with your answer, but allow or evoke what is there for them, it is incredible, the shift. You can't shut them up. Not everybody, but I'd say a good 95 per cent," he said in an interview in Halifax on Wednesday.

Vince Brewerton is the centre's recently hired, first full-time executive director. He said the university showed leadership and courage founding the centre before the concept of spirituality in the workplace was fully accepted.

Several academic-based centres are now operating in the United States, including one at Princeton University, he said.

The Sam M. Walton School of Business recently set up the Tyson Center for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace at the University of Arkansas with \$2 million from the Tyson Family Foundation and Tyson Foods Inc.

The Walton Family Charitable Support Foundation matched the gift with another \$2 million donation for the centre.

"This has put a whole new level of legitimacy and power behind this field. . . . Serious money has started to come into this field," Mr. Rutte said.

The Saint Mary's centre currently carries out research on spirituality and the workplace, does conference presentations and brings visiting scholars to Halifax.

It is now trying to connect with and assist businesses and organizations, Mr. Brewerton said.

"Really what we are trying to do is open the conversation about spirituality at work. In some cases, it is already open, but there are a lot of workplaces and individuals who aren't comfortable having those kind of conversations. We are trying to open those conversations and make it permissible."

Mr. Rutte said the concept of spirituality at work has gained legitimacy as baby boomers have aged.

"When people reach their 50s and 60s, what happens is their career aspirations are on the wane. Either I am president of the company or I am not, and if I am not, I am clearly not going to be. My kids have left home. I am beginning to see mortality show up in my life, relatives, friends. Then people begin to ask questions like: What is my legacy? What values are really important to me?"

Huge shifts have also occurred in the dynamics of the workplace, which have eroded employees' sense of security, he said.

"The nature and meaning of work has changed. The old nature of the meaning of work was: 'You come to work for me and as long as you work hard and are loyal, and as long as the company is successful, you have a job.' That's not true anymore."

Current economic conditions are also causing people to question the meaning of their work, Mr. Brewerton said.

"As a result of the current economic climate . . . especially how dramatic it has been and the stories of the financial executives, all their payouts and things, I think people are really asking some fundamental questions about work and about whether they want to do a certain type of work."

Research studies have shown that spirituality in the workplace improves employees' engagement and productivity and decreases absenteeism, Mr. Rutte and Mr. Brewerton said.

"We don't say that we have the answers to what is spirituality. Spirituality is really the question," said Mr. Brewerton.

"It is really asking questions and having conversations with people about that question."

(cmellor@herald.ca)