

**MAKING SENSE OF WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY:  
TOWARDS A NEW METHODOLOGY**

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**ABSTRACT**

The study of workplace spirituality is a relatively new area in the field of organizational theory. Although interest in the topic has grown significantly over the last 10 years, many of the traditional research methods are not well suited to study workplace spirituality at the organizational level. We propose that sensemaking offers a useful heuristic for understanding the process of institutionalizing workplace spirituality, as well as a way to study how and why workplace spirituality initiatives are wholly accepted by some individuals and resisted by others.

**Keywords:**

Workplace Spirituality, Sensemaking, Critical Sensemaking, Identity

# **MAKING SENSE OF WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY: TOWARDS A NEW METHODOLOGY**

## **Introduction**

Although the subject of workplace spirituality is relatively new to organizational studies, interest in it has grown significantly over the past 10 years and researchers have started to focus on it as an interesting phenomenon of study. As such, scholars in the domain of management, spirituality, and religion have been called to “showcase excellent theoretical, conceptual and most importantly empirical research” (Lund Dean et al., 2003). However, it has been pointed out that many of the “legitimated research methods” lack the tools needed to study workplace spirituality due to the personal, experiential, and even supernatural nature of spirituality (Lund Dean et al., 2003). To overcome some of these concerns, we are proposing the use of sensemaking as a useful heuristic for understanding the social psychological processes that occur when an organization decides to implement spirituality initiatives. Specifically, we suggest that Weick’s seven properties of sensemaking offer a template for understanding why organizations choose spirituality programs in the first instance, how they are understood and recreated within an organizational context, and how different meanings can be assigned to the same event. In short, because of its focus on processes, rather than outcomes, we feel that applying sensemaking to the study of workplace spirituality allows for an understanding of how individuals make sense of workplace spirituality, how they enact it, and what consequences differences in meaning can have on the individual and ultimately the culture of the organization.

## MAKING SENSE OF WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY

Over the past decade, the interest in workplace spirituality has been demonstrated in the popular press as well as in academic research. Interest has grown among management scholars, practitioners, and professionals, as evidenced by the establishment of the *Academy of Management* interest group on Management, Spirituality, and Religion, as well as the proliferation of MBA programs in the United States offering courses on this topic (Garcia-Zamor, 2003). In academia and in the popular press, there has been an increase in writings on leadership and spirituality (e.g., Bailey, 2001; Blanchard et al., 1999; Bowling, 2001; Fairholm, 1997; Graves and Addington, 2002; Kim, 2002; Moxley, 2000) and about the corporate soul and spirituality in the workplace (e.g., Batstone, 2003; Bolman and Deal, 1995; Brown, 2001; Canfield et al., 1996; Canfield and Miller 1996; Fairholm, 1997; Maio, 2006). In 2002, there were more than 200 titles on spirituality and work listed on Amazon (Weston 2002).

Yet despite the proliferation of literature and interest in the topic, at present, there is little consensus over the meaning of workplace spirituality. For example, in the *Handbook of Workplace Spirituality and Organizational Performance*, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) cite some 14 different definitions of the construct developed between 1975 and 2000. In general, workplace spirituality can be described in broad terms as "a framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promote employees' experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy" (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003, p. 6). Whereas Burr and Thomson (2002) emphasize the need for "the all" to be included in the psychological contract between the organization and its employees, in order to acknowledge connections to community, humanity, ecology, compassion and care, selfless work, and integrity, it is also important to remember that

part of spirituality in the workplace is about organizations promoting a sense of meaning and interconnectedness (Geroy, 2005). Spirituality in the workplace has also been linked to ethics and values (e.g., Cavanagh and Bandsuch, 2002), typically in a way that allows for people to align organizational values to their own particular philosophical or religious roots (Weston, 2002). According to Garcia-Zamor (2003 p.361), in this sense, spirituality determines how people understand and interpret ethical behavior.

In the domain of management, spirituality, and religion, researchers have more recently described the transcendental idea of connecting to others (e.g., Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Mitroff and Denton, 1999). Whereas Wedemeyer and Jue's (2002, p 18) "pragmatic spirituality" is actually seen as distinct from one's belief systems. Brown (2003), on the other hand, suggests that 'organizational spirituality' has little in common with 'spirituality' and much of the 'new' workplace spirituality literature is secular in nature (Marcic, 2000).

It comes as no surprise that since there is no consensus on the definition of spirituality, there is also disagreement over how best to study workplace spirituality, or what to study. Many scholars argue that quantitative approaches are not suitable given the nature of the phenomenon (Fornaciari and Lund Dean, 2001), while others argue for the need to quantify the possible contributions of workplace spirituality in order to establish its legitimacy (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003). For those recognizing that spirituality is very much a personal experience, finding research approaches that allow for a deeper understanding of that individual experience would seem to be important, as would being able to understand the growing interest in spirituality in the workplace. Because of its focus on the social-psychological processes that individuals engage in to make sense of their worlds, we feel that sensemaking offers a novel approach to understanding the various debates surrounding workplace spirituality. Although it

may not provide all the answers, it does offer a useful starting point to make sense of what spirituality means to individuals and how these meanings come to be constructed in work settings.

## **SENSEMAKING**

Although the term sensemaking has been used by a number of people to make sense of ambiguous situations, it is generally agreed that Karl Weick's (1995) *Sensemaking in Organization* is the seminal work in this area because it provides a detailed description of the processes involved in sensemaking at both the individual and organizational level. Weick challenges traditional approaches to organizations as rational entities, and suggests that a focus on the process of organizing is more important than an emphasis on organizational outcomes. His earlier work (Weick, 1969) builds the foundation for sensemaking by emphasizing the retrospective nature of organizing. Weick suggests that we can only make sense of our actions after we have carried them out. Subsequently, his work on organizational disasters (Weick, 1990; 1993), including the Tenerife air disaster and the Mann Gulch fires, demonstrated the processes that set crises in motion. Specifically, Weick showed how a series of small failures contributed to a major systems failure, and his broad sensemaking 'recipe' was used to show how structure unravels (Helms Mills, 2003).

With the publication of *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995), Weick finally offered a comprehensive framework that provides a valuable and alternate tool to study organizations. The notion that "people make sense of things by seeing a world on which they have already imposed what they believe" (Weick, 1995, p.15) ties together various strands of social and psychological theories (Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1974). This supports Weick's claim that sensemaking is

different from merely understanding and interpreting because it offers an explanation for how interpretation is generated. The key distinction is that sensemaking explains how people generate that which they interpret (Weick, 1995, p. 13). Through the properties, sensemaking highlights the "invention that precedes interpretation . . . it implies a higher level of engagement by the actor" (p. 14).

For the purposes of this study, we will show how the properties of sensemaking are useful to explain the selection and varied meanings attributed to workplace spirituality.

### ***Properties of Sensemaking***

“Sensemaking occasions” are often triggered by ambiguity or uncertainty (Weick, 1995) that disrupt routines and force us to deal with them. In order to do so, we rely on “a self contained set of research questions” (Weick, 1995, p.18). These are linked to the sensemaking properties, which provide the analytical tools that are needed to understand the sensemaking process (Helms Mills, 2003). Thus, when we say that sensemaking is a process that is “ i) grounded in identity construction; ii) retrospective; iii) enactive of sensible environments; iv) social; v) ongoing; vi) focused on and by extracted cues; and vii) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy” (Weick, 1995, p.17), we are describing a set of activities that, although not mutually exclusive (on their own they can only partially explain activities), taken together and interdependently they can help make sense of how sensemaking occurs. Although the properties are in no order of importance, we will suggest later, in our discussion on critical sensemaking, how some are pivotal in the sensemaking process and help to legitimize certain events.

The first property, ***grounded in identity construction***, describes sensemaking as “beginning with the sensemaker.” (Weick, 1995, p.18). Weick maintains that the process of

sensemaking is fuelled by our need as individuals to have an identity and, in particular, an identity that is consistent and positive. He suggests that the identity creation process is one that is interactive, and this interaction means one's identity is continually being redefined as a result of experiences and contact with others. For example, parents, friends, religion, where we went to school, where we work and what type of job we do all influence how our identity is constructed. This property is particularly relevant in helping us to understand the factors that influence those in decision-making positions at the workplace and have the ability to implement spirituality programs. At the same time, identity construction explains some of the causes for rejection of the same programs.

*Retrospection* is another property of sensemaking. Simply put “people act and then make sense of their actions” (Helms Mills and Mills, 2000). There is a sense of “20-20 vision” (Parry 2003). When we make sense retrospectively we are relying on past experiences to interpret the current situation (Helms Mills and Mills, 2000). Again, in terms of workplace spirituality, retrospection is useful in explaining how the prior experiences of organizational members, with similar programs, can have a positive or negative effect on acceptance or resistance to spirituality initiatives.

Another property of sensemaking is that it is *enactive of the environment*. This suggests that, at one level, individuals create their own reality. But at the same time we create these environments, we can find ourselves constrained by the very environment we have created. Weick (1995, p. 30) describes enacted environments as “the activity of ‘making’ that which is sensed.” In the case of workplace spirituality, this property is relevant in helping us understand the institutionalization of certain elements of spirituality over others.

Sensemaking is also *social*. This property acknowledges that the sensemaking process is contingent on others, whether physically present or not, and this social aspect influences the process of interpreting, as well as the resulting interpretations (Weick, 1995). Thus our sense of a situation is more often developed for and within a social context. For example, an organization's rules, routines, symbols and language will all have an impact on an individual's sensemaking activities and provide routines or scripts for appropriate conduct. Where such routines or scripts do not exist, the employee is left to fall back on his or her own ways of making sense (Helms Mills and Mills, 2000). Thus if an organization introduced elements of spirituality, the social property explains how they become institutionalized over time, or disappear if they are not maintained.

Sensemaking is *focused on and by extracted cues*. This property highlights the fact that the sensemaking process involves focusing on certain elements, while completely ignoring others, in order to support an interpretation of an event. Similarly, sensemaking is *driven by plausibility rather than accuracy*. This means that we do not rely on accuracy when we make sense of an event. Instead, we look for cues that make our sensemaking plausible. With these two properties, the retrospective nature of sensemaking means that we tend to rely on past experiences and structures (rules and regulations) to dictate what cues we will extract to make sense of a situation. We then look for cues that will support this plausibility, which may cause us to distort or eliminate what we perceive as not accurate. This means that we may be relying on faulty decision making in determining what is right or wrong for the organization. If, for example, an organization changes the way things are done and doesn't provide proper training or explanations for the changes, employees may resist the change because the new cues may contradict the old cues.

Finally, sensemaking is *ongoing*. While Weick (1995) maintains that sensemaking has no beginning or end and sensemaking flows are constant, he maintains that we make sense of what is happening around us and we “chop moments out of continuous flows and extract cues from those moments” to shape and reshape our sense of the situation (Weick 1995, p. 43). In this way, novel situations, such as new ways of structuring, or the introduction of new organizational values, will ‘shock’ individuals into making sense of them. If the change is moving the organization towards spirituality, employees will evaluate the initiatives and base their understanding on what they know and what they believe they can expect and look for cues to make their sensemaking plausible. For some this will be a positive experience and for others it may have negative connotations.

In his later work, Weick (2005, p. 416) has acknowledged the claims of others that identity construction and plausibility are “fundamental criteria” for sensemaking. Mills and Helms Mills (2004) suggest that both of these properties are pivotal to the sensemaking process and influence the remaining properties. For example, individuals engage in the processes of the organization and reproducing and enacting the rules of the organization and their associated meanings on a daily basis. But it is our identity that helps influence the cues we extract, based on our past experiences, to give plausibility to our actions. In turn, plausibility helps to explain why we privilege some events or situations over others, how we might have different interpretations of the same event and how we give legitimacy to those events. For these reasons, we will make these properties central to the sensemaking process, in order to show how they affect the other properties.

### **Sensemaking as a Heuristic and the Study of Workplace Spirituality**

Although Weick (1995, p. 46) claimed that sensemaking was developed to provide a set of explanatory ideas that offered a recipe for analysis, it is only recently that scholars have started using sensemaking to study organizational phenomena, including change in the U.S. intelligence community (Orton, 2000), as a device to understand how executives make sense of their professional lives (Parry, 2003), the use of virtue frames to study how university members made sense of the events of 9-11 (Rhee, Dutton, and Bagozzi, 2006), and as a framework for understanding organizational change (Helms Mills, 2003). More recently, critical sensemaking has been used as a heuristic for analyses of gender and resistance (Helms Hatfield and Mills 2000; Mills and Helms Mills, 2004), organizational disasters (O'Connell and Mills, 2003), business school rankings , and managerial decision making (Carroll and Helms Mills, 2005). Fields such as media, communication, and feminist studies have also applied a critical lens to sensemaking research (e.g., Shields and Dervin, 1993).

Given the need for alternate approaches to the study of workplace spirituality and the criticism of mainstream approaches for overlooking alternative narratives and critical perspectives in the area of workplace spirituality (e.g., Bell and Taylor, 2003; Driscoll and Wiebe, 2007; Forray and Stork, 2002), it seems likely that, given the scope of the applicability of sensemaking, that it can offer an important contribution to an understanding of workplace spirituality. Yet few have made use of such a perspective and none have specifically applied the properties to an analysis of the *processes* individuals engage in when trying to understand and enact spirituality in the workplace. Those who have used elements of sensemaking include Lips-Wiersma (2002), who looked at how individuals with spiritual beliefs attribute meaning to their work experience, and Lips-Wiersma and Mills (2002), who discussed how decisions about how

to express spirituality in the workplace are embedded in employees' sensemaking processes, as well as their relationships in their workplace.

### **Understanding Workplace Spirituality through a Sensemaking Lens**

It is our belief that sensemaking, because it explains the processes individuals engage in to make sense of events and the factors that influence these processes and individual understands, offers a unique way of making sense of workplace spirituality. Sensemaking is not concerned with definitions of spirituality, rather, it offers an explanation of how these different understanding come to be, in the first instance. By emphasizing the role of the individual, we can start to understand what is important to organizational members and why. Only then can we gain clearer insights into what types of phenomena should be studied. Not only is sensemaking generalizable to a variety of organizations and settings, but we believe that it allows for the richness of a qualitative study, which is not available through quantitative research. Sensemaking explores the social-psychological processes that take place in understanding, interpreting, enacting and even resisting workplace spirituality. Instead of focusing on the 'success' or 'failure' of spirituality, sensemaking allows us 'to make sense of the sensemaker', through which spirituality is understood and enacted.

### ***Sensemaking Triggers***

We would argue that rising interest in workplace spirituality has occurred because of the merging of two different sets of triggers; those at the organizational level and those at the individual level. At the organizational level the massive layoffs and reorganizations that occurred in many organizations during the 1980s and 1990s, which have continued into this millennium,

have been characterized as unprecedented (Tsui and Wu, 2005). Citing various sources, Tsui and Wu (2005) report that between 1987 and 1991 five million white collar jobs with Fortune 1000 companies were eliminated and between 2000 and 2003 an additional 2.7 million jobs were eliminated. When we consider that working conditions for those who have managed to retain positions have also deteriorated, the situation seems even more serious. Such massive job cuts and restructurings have had a negative effect on many employees – both in terms of their mental health and their social lives (Mohamed et al., 2004).

It has been suggested that these organizational events are responsible for triggering people's reassessment of their lives, the role played by work and their ultimate life purpose (Wrzesniewski, 2002). Furthermore, research done in the domain of management, spirituality, and religion suggest that individuals working within large organizations are struggling with their work identities and in particular with the meaning of their work lives. Specifically these sensemaking 'shocks' are raising questions about the amount of time and energy that should be devoted to work or even whether work should be interpreted as a 'calling'. In order to maintain a consistent and positive identity, employees have started to seek out alternate work arrangements; ones that complement their identities at all levels, yet many are either afraid to expose their spiritual side, are not sure how to 'practice spirituality', or scorn the idea altogether. Sometimes these fears are overcome when events such as a life threatening illness, death of a family member, friend or coworker, or financial crisis serve as shocks that trigger a profound sensemaking exercise in individuals. From their interviews with executives, Mitroff and Denton (1999, p. 88) suggest that such a shock often preceded an interest in workplace spirituality. As Pargament and Mahoney (2002, p. 653) tell us, "cris[e]s become spiritually meaningful, or even

opportunities for growth.” We will show how the sensemaking properties can be used as a heuristic to make sense of how these individuals are making sense of these issues.

### *Choosing to be Spiritual*

Based on in-depth interviews with 84 senior managers, Mitroff and Denton (1999, p. 87) reported that “most people wished ardently that they could express their spirituality in the workplace. At the same time, they were extremely hesitant to do so because they had strong fears and doubts that they could not do so without offending their peers. As a result, they felt a deep, persistent ambivalence toward spirituality”. Why do they feel this way? What makes them see spirituality as something that will be perceived as a ‘negative’?

As Ashforth and Pratt (2003, p. 102) point out “the locus of spirituality is necessarily the individual” and “people can selectively filter, block or distort material that threatens their sacred beliefs, practices and values” (Pargament and Mahoney 2002, p. 647). This supports our contention that identity construction is at the core of any sensemaking activity and plays an important role in how we make sense of our world. According to much of the workplace spirituality literature, it is clear that identity, particularly a complete and consistent identity presentation, is something that preoccupies spiritually inclined individuals and this has led to the surge in interest towards creating a spiritual workplace environment. Ashforth and Pratt (2003, p. 94) call this a need for “holism and harmony”, and they suggest that “the desire for holism and harmony is one reason why many people are unwilling to consign their spirituality to off-work domains.” Yet as we have seen many are still hesitant to show their spiritual side at work because individuals are very much aware that openly expressing their spirituality might not be well viewed by coworkers, so they actively hide this part of their identity (Lips-Wiersma and

Mills, 2002). This lack of consistency between what many organizational members aspire to be and what they in fact see themselves doing not only raises the question of whether individuals can reconcile their beliefs with a career in business (McCormick 1994), but it also raises questions about why they are fearful of showing this identity.

One of the reasons that we feel identity construction is pivotal to the sensemaking process is because the factors that contribute to our identity (i.e. strong religious beliefs, community, roles) strongly influence our retrospective sensemaking (i.e. past experiences), which in turn influence the cues we extract to give plausibility and legitimacy to our actions. For example, individuals with identities grounded in strong religious values will likely have a desire to carry their spirituality into the workplace and will focus on past experiences that strengthen that belief. This will lead them to seek out events in the past where they feel that spirituality has been of benefit to them and extract these cues to give plausibility (i.e. legitimacy) to their beliefs and actions.

According to Pargament and Mahoney's studies on spirituality (2002), listeners are more likely to distort their memory of the message to fit with their religious beliefs, as messages become more discordant. By focusing on and extracting cues that support their religious beliefs employees who view workplace spirituality programs as positive developments are more likely to focus on their positive aspects, while those who are not as accepting are more like to focus on negative aspects and concerns. This suggests that the presence of a God-factor, whether in a values statement or a sacred room, presents cues to those organizational members who might have previously attempted to compartmentalize their faith and work. Likewise, if workplace spirituality initiatives are secular in nature, non-religious people might see familiar cues.

However, sensemaking is also social and enactive of the environment and this may create tensions between individual beliefs and what is seen as socially acceptable in the workplace. If spirituality is not enacted by a critical mass of employees, others are less likely to display that side of them and might be less prone to showing their spiritual side at work. This creates an ongoing sensemaking that draws on cues that make this action plausible and legitimize actions that seem to contract identity construction. By understanding what factors contribute to the construction of individuals' identities, we are better able to predict how these may impede the acceptance and practice of workplace spirituality. In order to do that, some workplace spirituality scholars have suggested that managers are making sense of purpose and meaning at work by integrating personal and professional values, changing organizational values to fit with their spiritual and religious beliefs, and developing new cues such as "self-actualization", "legacy", "service", "vocation", and "higher order values" (e.g., Hoffman, 2003; Neal, 2000; Ray & Anderson, 2000).

### ***Choosing Spirituality Initiatives***

Identity construction, in particular religious or secular convictions, provides a lens for understanding the remaining properties and serves as a starting point for what is selected and focused on in making sense of what we are experiencing. That is, how spirituality is understood determines what types of spirituality individuals choose to believe in and choose to make plausible.

At one level, Ellul (1964, p. 220-221) has suggested that the "new spiritual situation" in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had led some people to believe that they will find happiness and meaning in life in producing and consuming and in constructing a "new religion of a rational and technical order

to justify [their] work and to be justified in it” (p.324). Whereas others, who have religious values, are cued by spirituality initiatives that use ‘spiritual’ concepts, which also resemble organizational development concepts, such as ‘empowerment’, ‘creativity’, ‘community’, and ‘values’. These concepts provide familiar cues, which have characteristics that reflect traits that we think of as complementing our identity, and are also reminiscent of work in the fields of human relations, social issues in management, human resource development, and organizational development, which lends a level of comfort and familiarity that gives legitimacy and plausibility to spirituality.

That sensemaking is enactive of the environment also helps to explain why certain sensemaking initiatives come to be seen as acceptable, while others are ignored or overlooked because they do not seem to fit with the sensemaker’s definition of what ‘fits’ and what doesn’t fit. For example, an organization whose mission includes being ‘faith-friendly’ might be able to legitimize certain types of socially irresponsible activities because of the God-sanctioned nature of the organization’s purpose and various ways that this is symbolized in the organization. At the same time, other equally meaningful activities may be overlooked because they don’t match the sensemaker’s notion of ‘faith-friendly’. In any event, our reliance on past experiences and our interactions with others helps determine what cues we extract to rationalize our choices.

Sensemaking properties give us insight into what is viewed as legitimate and plausible and why.

### ***Socialization and Spirituality in the Workplace***

Ashforth and Pratt (2003, p. 99) describe how “directing organizations” which openly promote spirituality often socialize new members using a process of “sensebreaking” and “sensegiving.” As Maitlis (2005) has said, both organizational stakeholders and organizational

leaders can influence other organizational members' understanding of workplace spirituality. We would suggest that this "directing" of organizations with a particular spiritual or religious ideology can be understood in terms of social sensemaking. The imposition of a belief system on employees and the active challenging of the existing beliefs of new recruits reflect the shared meaning that is enactive of the environment and culture that has been created by the current organizational membership.

The role of workplace spirituality experts as agents of sensemaking is also very important in the socialization and maintenance process. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of consultants, trainers, coaches, and other human resource professionals focused on introducing spirituality into the workplace. The corporate chaplain is another potential agent of sensemaking for spirituality at work. Corporate chaplains have described their role as "a kind of conduit for things that people would rather not say directly" (Overell, 2003, p. 11). Organizational leaders are another such agent as it has been suggested they can use stories "to develop new meaning for work and personhood by individuals and groups" (Boyce 1996, p.10).

From a critical perspective, Tourish and Vatcha (2005, p. 476) have warned about the impact of some of these formative contexts with respect to loss of identity.

Once people over-align themselves with a company, and invest excessive faith in the wisdom of its leaders, they are liable to lose their original sense of identity, tolerate ethical lapses they would have previously deplored, find a new and possibly corrosive value system taking root, and leave themselves vulnerable to manipulation by the leaders of the organization....

Through reinforcement and peer modeling, organizations are able to selectively present cues that make spirituality seem plausible and are able to cultivate the adoption of the new

espoused organizational beliefs. However, there can be problems with this socialization process if the cues that are presented do not mesh with the identity construction of new employees and contradict their past experiences. By understanding the sensemaking process of new employees, including understanding the influences on their identity, organizations might be better prepared for any problems that might arise with the implementation of the socialization process.

### *The Dark Side of Workplace Spirituality*

As we have seen, sensemaking is very much a social process that is enactive of the environment in which it is created. If enough employees can be convinced that workplace spirituality is in their best interests, it will eventually gain momentum. This has led to concerns that it is yet another tool to be used by management to control the worker (see Ashforth and Pratt, 2003; Bell and Taylor, 2003; Driscoll and Wiebe, 2007; Fenwick and Lange, 1998; Tourish and Pinnington, 2002; Zhuravleva and Jones, 2006). Ashforth and Pratt (2003, p. 96) suggest that, “some – with or without good intentions – are using spiritual strivings to co-opt the individual.” For example, the creation of sacred space, meditation rooms, and corporate chaplaincy offices might blur the boundary between work and non-work, thus enabling more workers to make sense of longer hours at work.

In addition, spirituality initiatives have also been shown to contribute to gendered and discriminatory practices. Mitroff and Denton (1999) identified organizations in their study that they categorized as “religion based organizations.” These organizations, such as Amway, Service Master and even Domino’s Pizza, clearly articulate and promote a particular view of Western Christianity. Pratt’s (2000) study of Amway provides a good example of how organizations can manipulate traditional Christian values and beliefs to create an “ideological fortress: a worldview

that is seemingly impervious to attack from those who oppose it” (Pratt, 2000, p. 35). Pratt highlighted that the roles of men and women in the Amway ideological fortress are very traditional ones. Pratt raises a valid concern about how such ideologies influence the creation of very gendered identities for men and women and particularly constrain women. Such ideological fortresses might also be used to exclude and therefore discriminate against other groups of people. For example, McCormick (1994) details one example where a business owner attempted to hire only born again Christians as managers for his chain of sports clubs.

There is also the possibility that workplace spirituality could be used as an ideology to justify certain actions. As Boje, Rosile, Dennehy, and Summers (1997) suggested, some corporations create and promote a storyline to justify their organizational re-engineering efforts. Some of the same themes are evident in the discourse about the benefits of workplace spirituality, namely that it is a means of achieving increased profits, organizational performance, and competitive advantage (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003; Klein and Izzo, 1996). Others are making equally grand truth claims of a somewhat different nature, speaking of organizations facing a “commitment crisis” (Klein and Izzo 1996, p.105). There are also dire predictions about the future of organizations that do not embrace spirituality, questioning their ability “to survive for long without spirituality and soul” (Mitroff and Denton 1999, p. 91). In the face of such strong rhetoric, it would seem to be difficult for “disbelievers” to question, let alone resist, corporately sanctioned workplace spirituality initiatives.

The success or failure of these attempts to “re-engineer the thought processes of employees” (Tourish and Pinnington 2002, p. 165) are important because, as Ashforth and Pratt (2003) point out, individuality in the form of idiosyncratic spiritual journeys can be a potential threat to the coherence of the organization. It seems that ultimately the belief system of the

majority dominates and organizations attempt to build a cohesive culture around it. Ashforth and Vaidyanath (2002) have described how organizations can displace individuals' spirituality through the development of an organizational (secular) sacred religion.

In terms of sensemaking, we can see how those who 'manage' spirituality link them to initiatives and ideologies that would reinforce and complement spiritual identities (whether faith-based or secular), so that employees would buy into them and see them as 'sensible' and viable options. In such a way, the strength of numbers would create a dominant and legitimate culture that might make nay-sayers question their own sensemaking. Yet, on its own, that is not enough to maintain spirituality in the workplace.

## **ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS**

While sensemaking offers us as a new methodology to understand the key elements of workplace spirituality, it does have some limitations. Weick (2001, p. xi) himself has acknowledged the shortcomings by saying that "a way of seeing is a way of not seeing". Generally sensemaking has been critiqued for its failure to take into account issues including power and context (Helms Mills, 2003). That is, it does not offer an explanation for whose voice is being heard and why. Even though sensemaking makes sense in context, it has been shown that one of the limitations of the concept of context is that there is an unequal distribution of power within given contexts, which is unexplained in Weick's model. For example, in the case of workplace spirituality, we get an understanding of the factors that influence how people make sense of spirituality and we can comprehend how they may choose to be silent or vocal about their beliefs. But, we don't get a sense of how some voices get to be dominant and we don't get

a full understanding of the influences that certain ideologies (such as traditional roles of men and women) have on workplace culture.

According to Covey (1990), the most productive organizations are the ones that attempt to match employees' sense of meaning to a noble organizational purpose. What is that purpose and who has made that decision? As Bell and Taylor (2003, p. 331) suggest, "Somewhat paradoxically, rather than enabling liberation from the constraints of work and modernity, workplace spirituality ensures that the search for meaning is harnessed to specific organizational purposes." That is why, in our retrospective sensemaking, we feel that a critical sensemaking approach would allow for more in-depth exploration of issues, such as the formative contexts that impact on identity construction, and it would enable us to gain further insights into the power relationships that exist in the choice and implementation of such programs. But for now, we feel that we have offered a different way to approach the study of workplace spirituality that allows for a study of the process, rather than a focus on the outcomes. On its own, one of the strengths of a sensemaking approach is its focus on ongoing individual identity construction in a social setting. But given the discussion of the 'dark side' of the workplace spirituality movement, both from a critical and a theological perspective, we believe that a sensemaking heuristic used in concert with a more critical and authentic approach to the application of organizational spirituality would be even richer because, according to McGee and Delbecq (2000, p. 96), "...a mature spirituality also looks at the dark side of life (the individual, the organization, and the systemic paradigm) and at the realities of imperfection, failure, and sin: greed, exploitation, environmental degradation, abuses of power, and failures of stewardship." Thus scholars will achieve what many are looking for in the workplace spirituality arena; "a way of talking about

spirituality in organizations that is critical, analytical, theoretical and not reductionist” (Benefiel 2003,p. 385).

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