

## **Spirituality in the workplace - a trend in global consciousness and citizenship**

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This column is not about religion in the workplace. Rather it reports on a worldwide trend of people asking fundamental questions about and seeking answers to the meaning of life and the place of work in their lives.

The aging of the baby boomers has certainly advanced the interest in spirituality. However, recent corporate scandals, excesses in the financial sector and now a global recession have fuelled a wider interest in examining the core personal and societal values and ethics that underlie everyday living and work.

There are many avenues for personal contemplation and the sharing of this, but the workplace until recently has been not one of them. That is why the establishment of the Centre for Spirituality and the Workplace in 2004 and housed in the Sobey School of Business at Saint Mary's was the first such academic centre in Canada, though there are centres in the U.S. Its vision is to re-inspire the world of work, not just in Canada, but globally.

To date it has focused on the interplay of life and work with public lectures, active research programmes and outreach activities into the business community. The Sobey School also offers elective degree courses. In the lecture series and quarterly learning labs, business and other leaders have shared their thoughts and beliefs that have shaped their leadership and business dealings, particularly in terms of the purpose and fulfillment in work and employee engagement.

Indeed there is a growing international empirical literature to link developing a shared karma of integrity, creativity and respect to organizational success.

An example of the raising of the consciousness of spirituality outside of North America comes from my recent visit to China to attend the annual Boao Forum for Asia whose theme was "managing beyond crisis." Delegates were invited to attend an open air evening panel discussion on spirituality, which was not part of the formal programme. I was intrigued by the prospects of drawing parallels with the Sobey centre and I was not disappointed. The Chinese panel included a film star, a successful real estate developer and a range of other business and community leaders. The event attracted several hundred participants.

The main theme of the session was to reflect on the effects of the current economic crisis on the lives of many Chinese. For the past 30 years or so China has gradually opened up its economy to market forces and has enjoyed increased prosperity, particularly in the coastal areas and major cities through export-led growth manufacturing industries.

The recession has now taken its toll and the double digit growth rates are something of the past, though still strong by Western standards. Many plants have closed with the resulting unemployment of millions of workers and dark prospects for the newly graduating students.

It was clear from the discussions that this crisis has caused many people to stand back and reflect and question the pursuit of wealth and consumerism. As someone who has witnessed firsthand the early moves of economic reform and the societal impact of this, I could relate to the concerns and questions raised, which focused on social responsibility issues, including the importance of education, health care and social spending.

This open inquiry and dialogue gave me insight into one part of contemporary urban Chinese society. More fundamentally I was witnessing an example of citizen engagement - a people dimension to the broader issues of the economy and society. Apart from language and cultural differences, I could have been part of almost the same discussions on the campus of my own university or any of the communities where we work and live as they were the same issues currently on the minds of Canadians.

What this Chinese experience has led me to conclude is that this is an example of the common and underlying concerns of humanity as expressed through global citizenship that we all share. While an increasing number of people are disengaged from the formal political process, they are still very passionate about particular societal issues. As a result we need more opportunities for citizen engagement in Canada and across the world. There has to be another way to develop a series of ongoing public debates, including in the workplace. We need to have opportunities to share our thoughts and values on the mega-issues that affect our planet as well as the more specific that affect our inner most thoughts and everyday lives, the communities in which we live and ultimately the future of the world.

Centres such as the one at Saint Mary's can provide one forum for such engagement across the world through the power of the Internet, including social networking. But there are many other international citizen networks and together we may all be in a better position to find greater purpose, peace and fulfillment in our lives and work.

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