

ENGAGEMENT

Fostering good karma a touchy subject

Spirituality is the 'last frontier' of workplace enlightenment, but WALLACE IMMEN finds interest is exploding

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When employees of Telus Corp. take breaks, they can retreat to a "quiet room" to practice yoga, tai chi, meditate or pray. The telecommunications company also operates a wellness program that encourages them to explore their "inner spirituality."

Such initiatives, Telus says, have raised staff satisfaction and engagement in work.

Meanwhile, a group of nurses and aides at Capital Care Group in Edmonton went through a program that included meditations, visualizations and discussions of how "we are connected to something larger than ourselves."

That program at the continuing care organization resulted in a turnaround in attitudes in a nursing unit that had continuing problems, and cut absenteeism in half.

While still rare in the material world of business, experts say results like these are creating an explosion of interest in programs that support the spiritual needs of staff.

Spiritual well-being is "the last frontier in the humanization of the office," says Martin Rutte, chairman of the Centre for Spirituality and the Workplace, established two years ago at the Sobey School of Business at St. Mary's University in Halifax.

While employers have created programs that help employees deal with their physical and emotional issues, they had resisted dealing with employees' spiritual needs. That's because the first thing people think of when they talk about spirituality is religion, he says.

"People have a lot of baggage about religion. Spirituality at work triggers fears of proselytizing, of being told what to believe," he says.

But spirituality is really about what makes people feel good about themselves and motivated to do their best, he says.

"It may be belief in some power larger than yourself, appreciating nature and your relationships with others, exploring your purpose in life or your ethical values."

And these are all connected to issues that arise in the workplace as never before, as demands rise on employees and job security becomes more tenuous, he says.

So Mr. Rutte suggests steering clear of religion and thinking of spirituality as "an ongoing quest for meaning and purpose, wherever people want to start to look for that." Once people get around to that definition, they become enthusiastic, he finds.

"Interest in spirituality in the workplace has just exploded," Mr. Rutte says. In the past three years, at least a dozen large conferences on spirituality in Canadian workplaces have been held. And independent centres on spirituality at work have formed in Toronto and Vancouver.

Employees have become more comfortable about publicly expressing their individuality, emotions and beliefs, observes Sherry Connolly, a doctoral student in theology at the University of Toronto who organizes seminars on spiritual topics in workplaces for the independent Centre for Spirituality at Work in Toronto.

And a majority of employees engage in spiritual practices in their private lives.

According to a Statistics Canada report last week, 60 per cent of Canadians report they feel either moderately or highly religious.

While only 32 per cent of Canadians say they attend religious services at least once a month, 53 per cent report they engage in a spiritual practice, such as prayer or meditation, on their own regularly.

But managers remain hesitant about setting up formal programs to let employees bring their spiritual feelings to work, and "I can understand the reluctance," Ms. Connolly says.

"Anyone who wants to open a dialogue on spiritual growth needs to be very secure about their own beliefs and place in the organization."

She suggests the hesitation will fade as the benefits for employees become clear. "At the base, it is about understanding our values and having respect and compassion for other people. All of these things deepen personal development and satisfaction in work," Ms. Connolly says.

That was certainly true for Telus, says Linda Lewis-Daly, Toronto-based manager of wellness programs for the Vancouver-headquartered company, which has 26,000 employees.

Over the past six years, it has been adding programs to help employees "explore their personal values and inner spirituality" as part of its wellness initiatives at all of its offices.

These include inspirational talks and discussion groups that have formed in some offices to discuss these matters in the workplace.

There are quiet rooms where people can retreat to pray or meditate, and lending libraries of books and videos on spiritual practices they can explore in their own time. Yoga, tai chi and chi gong instruction have become popular lunchtime programs.

Employees have responded enthusiastically, Ms. Lewis-Daly says.

"It's difficult to measure statistically because a lot of spirituality is intangible and personal," but in twice-yearly staff questionnaires, the company has seen continuing increases in scores for employee motivation, creativity and job satisfaction.

Other benefits employees cite are greater sense of community and better relations with colleagues and supervisors, Ms. Lewis-Daly says. Employees also appreciate the networking opportunities of getting together with co-workers in other teams and departments, she adds.

The benefits of focusing on spirituality can actually be statistically measured, says Phyllis Hempel, chief executive officer of Capital Care Group.

Nursing and support staff in one of the company's 11 units in Edmonton went through a one-day Spirit at Work workshop last fall and then did weekly one-hour follow-ups. These staff were compared with a similar-size group in another unit that did not take the programs.

Before the program, both groups had an absenteeism rate the equivalent of 10 per cent a year. Since the program was run last fall, the rate for the group that participated has dropped to 3.6 per cent while those who did not had a rate of 8.4 per cent, Ms. Hempel says. And staff turnover dropped among those who took the program, but doubled among those who did not.

What brought about the changes? The Spirit at Work course used exercises designed "to get people to open their hearts to others and appreciate the importance of the things they do and how kindness, gratitude and humility can enhance a spiritual life," says the program's creator, Val Kinjerski, director of Kaizen Solutions for Human Services in St. Albert, Alta.

Exercises included meditations and visualizations of what contributions people make through their work, what is special about their role and how it supports others. Then people were led through exercises to explore their inner needs and purpose in life and why the work they do matters to others.

Many of those who took the program have continued to follow up in their personal lives since the seminar program last fall, she says.

In fact, employees don't need a formal program to be spiritual on the job, says Eric Hellman, who runs a spirituality consulting business, Conscious Change, and is a board member of the Workplace Centre for Spirituality and Ethical Development in Vancouver.

"People still seem to think that spiritual practices have to be approved by the company, but they don't have to be."

The former executive director of the Recycling Council of Ontario and consultant for a recycling firm says he left the business world because he felt frustrated and feared ostracism if he spoke about his religious beliefs and spiritual path. "I realized it wasn't honest -- and that I was going to die metaphorically or literally if I didn't express my truth."

In the three years since he left business, he says he has been teaching business seminars that encourage employees to discuss spirituality and integrate it into their decision-making.

"I tried using every other name I could: sustainability, values, ethics, wellness, but finally I had to call it what it is." That led to a book, *Coming Out of the Spiritual Closet*.

"There are some people who resist and say they are not interested at all, and, to them, the answer should be 'that's fine, it's your choice,' " Mr. Hellman says.

But he predicts spirituality will become as important a measure of a healthy workplace as health and safety programs.

"The workplace shouldn't be a place where we only survive and can't express our true selves," Mr. Hellman concludes. "As a manager do you want people just going through the motions or being engaged and energized because their workplace is fulfilling their needs?"

The benefits of spirituality

Encouraging spiritual practices can result in many benefits to employees, experts say. Here are some of them:

Opening new ideas. If you are spiritual, you are more open to inspiration, which can unlock mental sources of creativity.

Moral awareness. Becoming sensitive to the needs of others increases awareness of ethical behaviour, which has become more highly valued after the corporate scandals that arose in the dot-com era.

Eliminates the split. It removes the division between personal and business life. People won't have to talk one way at home and another at work about their spiritual interests.

Deepens relationships. Understanding the need for personal connection creates sympathy and loyalty to others.

Raises self-esteem. Awareness of your purpose and interconnectedness increases dignity and respect from others.

Creates responsibility. Awareness of the effects of your actions makes you more responsible for them.

Encourages extra effort. If people feel they are appreciated and connected to community and part of a larger purpose, they will feel more motivated.

Retains talent. People want to remain where they feel supported and encouraged to meet their personal development and satisfaction.

Spirituality from the top

Spiritual initiatives can come from anyone in an organization but, ideally, they will be embraced at the top, says Michael Stephen, retired chief executive officer of Aetna Canada and author of *Spirituality in Business: The Hidden Success Factor*.

He says a chance comment from a colleague about how meditation could prepare him to meet leadership challenges changed his life.

"Meditation changed my whole approach to leadership," he says. "I started looking for the best in people rather than looking for their flaws."

Others responded and he noticed that, when they participated in more spiritual practices, "they appeared to be more settled and more engaged."

He began recommending meditation informally to his employees in his former role in the 1990s as CEO of Aetna Canada, now part of Maritime Life Assurance Co., and then as chairman of Aetna International, from which he retired in 2000 after it was bought by ING Group NV.

"You can't mandate these things, but my style was contagious," he says, and many employees became practitioners of meditation and spiritual growth.

"I think it worked miracles for us, in making employees more aware of the need for personal relationships and trust, adds Mr. Stephen, who lives in Oakville, Ont., and continues to speak on spirituality to business groups and in his coaching practice.

"There is a huge interest in spirituality today among executives because, if you are the leader of a large corporation, there is little opportunity for relaxation and personal reflection," he's found.

He contends that spirituality not only makes a leader feel better but will inspire an entire organization to improve.

"The leader's most important job should be to create an environment where people can succeed and want to do better," Mr. Stephen says. "That has to come from within, and what better way to do it than to encourage the growth of their spirit."

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