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Spirituality centre is Canadian first

'Nothing evangelical': Saint Mary's University follows international trend

Laura Fowlie

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When a board meeting in Halifax opened with a prayer, former advertising executive David Hawkins was not surprised. While not all companies feel comfortable in expressing their spiritual principles in such an overt way, he says many others are "quietly praying for alignment between their humanistic feelings and their corporate work."

"Spirituality at work is a big topic, and one that seems to be a lot easier to have the conversation about today than it was 10 or 20 years ago," Mr. Hawkins says. "In an increasingly liberal, humanistic society, you are seeing individuals who really want to bring their whole being to work, including their spirituality. They also want others to be able to express their spirituality in appropriate ways -- without being evangelical about it."

Spirituality at work, which can take on many forms from meditation to bereavement programs, is rapidly gaining currency among business leaders, consultants and academics, partly as a response to the ethical concerns that have surfaced in the wake of corporate governance scandals.

While companies for years have created mission statements, credos and codes of conduct to express their corporate ideals, consultants say there is a difference between saying it and really meaning it. Where corporate spirituality exists, they say, companies make a subtle shift from being exclusively bottom-line-driven to simultaneously pursuing profit and a higher set of values.

This fall, the Frank H. Sobey Faculty of Commerce at Saint Mary's University in Halifax became the first business school in Canada to launch a full-fledged centre devoted to the teaching and study of spirituality at work. Saint Mary's is following the example of similar centres that have sprung up in the United States, and overseas, most notably at Harvard Business School.

Rather than religious dogma and theology, spirituality at work is about "creating better workplaces," says Allan Miciak, dean of Saint Mary's business school.

"The people issues of business are becoming more and more the most complex issues, and there is a growing recognition that paying attention to the people issues has a really big payoff," Dr. Miciak says. "I admit, spirituality in the workplace is a bit on the fringe, but we are trying to bring some academic rigor to a very new, emerging topic in business."

The surge in interest around spirituality at work is, in large part, a function of basic demographics, says Martin Rutte, co-author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work* and a speaker at a Saint Mary's conference on the topic. At a time when Baby Boomers are hitting mid-life and beginning to question their true purpose and legacy, the corporate world has offered them fewer answers than ever, he says.

"Over the past several years, there have been dramatic changes in the world of work, such as corporate downsizing, that have forced people to do more with less, and technologies that have replaced people," Mr. Rutte says. "These things have broken the feeling of security that came with work and changed people's attitudes about their jobs."

The result, Mr. Rutte says, is "fertile ground" for a search for greater meaning at work. He says corporations would be wise to support the kind of spiritual inquiry that many of their workers are demanding.

"The benefits can be quite astounding," Mr. Rutte says. "Aside from offering people a sense of authenticity, [so] that they can truly be themselves at work, a more spiritual workplace can be very beneficial from a mental and physical health perspective."

Fostering a more spiritual, team-oriented workplace can have a direct impact on the bottom line, says Michael Stephen, a career coach and the former chairman of insurance and financial services firm Aetna International. After he began meditating more than 30 years ago, Mr. Stephen transformed himself from an authoritarian executive to a more inclusive, spiritual leader who focused on developing a "team spirit" within the organization.

"Statistics tell us that people in the workplace typically expend about 60% of their talent and ability at work," says Mr. Stephen, who has also written a book about spirituality at work. "I found that when people are trusted with more responsibility, and are given more accountability, they bring more of that talent and ability to their roles."

Spirituality in the workplace does not include a heavy focus on religion or ritual, consultants say. Because many people carry a fear of dogma or "childhood baggage" about religion, it is important that spirituality initiatives remain voluntary and non-threatening, Mr. Rutte says. As a result, many initiatives borrow from religion, but avoid religious language or ritual.

Dr. David Sable, one of the speakers at the Saint Mary's conference, for example, led workshop participants through an exercise designed to promote self-discovery through a form of meditation. The exercise, borrowed from Buddhist tradition, asked participants to think beyond their knee-jerk response to a question or statement, and to "engage others in genuine and creative dialogue."

Participants completed several minutes of breathing exercises, mulled the question over for several more, and finally responded in a thoughtful manner, with "fresh language" that carried no connotation or hidden meaning. In the fast-paced world of business, finding the time required to implement such exercises can be difficult, Dr. Sable admits.

"It's true that in the beginning, it takes some time to put into practice," says Dr. Sable, who points out that most major religious traditions employ some method of contemplation. "There may be a lot of people who say they don't have time for it, but when you are looking at business issues from the whole, from the big picture, it may just be the most efficient way to make a decision."

Most consultants say spirituality does not need to come as a grand gesture to have an impact on the organization. For example, before he sold his Moncton-based advertising business, Mr. Hawkins kept a paperweight on his desk with the word "kindness," a symbol of his commitment to "giving permission for people to bring their humanity to work."

"The only barrier to spirituality is when you wrap it in religious wrapping paper," he says. "Love and respect are universal concepts. As a manager, I took the position that everyone had access to infinite intelligence, goodness, creativity and energy. Sometimes that can be hard to follow, but it's well worth it."

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