The spiritually informed executive: Advanced leadership that increases wellness, well-being and value

Paul E. Knowlton, founder of the Institute for Spirituality in the Professions at Mercer University in Atlanta, says workplace disruption often includes rapid and externally at peace in their actions. "What’s the point?" and, “Isn’t there a better way to operate?”

Fortunately, questions are the engines of thought and thought is the driver of innovation. What would it look like for innovation–authentic and fearless elevating the arc of human-trajectory innovation to provide that elusive but transformative answer to what’s wrong and what’s missing?

Gallup offers an intelligent starting place. In Gallup’s 2017 State of the American Workplace, Chairman and CEO Jim Clifton opens his introduction with, “The very practice of management no longer works.” After presenting the findings that merely one-third of American employees are engaged at work, 16 percent are actively disengaged, and the majority 51 percent are not engaged, he observes, “American needs to historically transform the practice of management…”

In my view we transform leadership and management follows. Further in his introduction, Mr. Clifton writes, “These figures indicate an American leadership philosophy that simply doesn’t work anymore.” He also writes, “One also wonders if the country’s declining productivity numbers point to a need for a major workplace disruption.”

Perhaps that disruption begins in the most unexpected place. Humans possess various kinds of intelligence. In addition to the familiar physical intelligence, cogitative intelligence, and emotional intelligence, there is spiritual intelligence. Spiritual intelligence, which is distinct and unrelated to the practice of religion or any kind of leaders described here possess a mature spirituality. I define spirituality as, “The nature of every person to possess an inner strength and trust, which in turn gives meaning to work and life.”

What might it look like to bluntly acknowledge and correct, that what’s missing in our organizations is our collective courage to acknowledge, recognize, and honor each other’s spirituality – the spark and core of humanity indelibly residing in each of us? What might it look like to finally recognize that we spend the majority of our days trying to build while simultaneously suppressing our spirituality within systems that foster mistrust and learned helplessness? What might it look like if this acknowledgment and correction began with executive and professional leaders, we gatekeepers primarily imbued with the power and resources to make and sustain meaningful change in our organizations? It would look like authentic and fearless elevating the arc of human-trajectory innovation. If that prospect is too overwhelming out of the gate, I’m okay with baby steps. With a nod to Mr. Clifton, let’s just call it “a major workplace disruption.”

Paul E. Knowlton is founder of the Institute for Spirituality in the Professions at Mercer University in Atlanta. Change if not chaos. What kind of environment is needed to create and support more of these kinds of leaders? The tendency is to look externally, but the majority of the clues that emerged from my exploration and research all suggest looking internally. Looking internally with enough curiosity and courage to see what’s wrong and what’s missing in our workplaces, either inadvertently or prejudicially, we find the kind of leaders described here possess a mature spirituality. I define spirituality as, “The nature of every person to possess an inner strength and trust, which in turn gives meaning to work and life.”

In a nutshell, my decades of pain-points and questioning are the basis and testing ground for my awakening and pointing to a new model of leadership, which I identify as the “spiritually informed executive.” For reasons introduced here and that I’ll write about in future essays, the spiritually informed executive is the future of leadership for every organization that expects to successfully navigate our increasingly deconstructed and flattened world.”

For example, what’s the point?; and, “Isn’t there a better way to operate?”

The spiritually informed executive recognizes that everyone in the organization is fully human. To be fully human means to be on a spiritual journey, some more than others by their choice. Spirituality was defined earlier. I define spiritual journey as: “The process of developing inner trust and strength, which manifests in being increasingly empowered and fulfilled.” The spiritually informed executive has learned that for most if not everyone, our careers and workplaces are the primary context in which our spiritual journey plays out. To separate one’s spirituality from one’s career and workplace is a primary source of internal dissonance, which leads to frustration if not failure. For this reason alone we need our work and the right organizations as much as our work and the right organizations need us.

Eventually, hopefully sooner than later, the spiritually informed executive courageously admits and begins to act on what he or she knows by experience and/or intuition. Namely, that he or she wants, is willing, and is always in the position to begin the process of becoming that elusive but transformative answer to what’s wrong and what’s missing, for the benefit of everyone involved.

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