The Place of Spirituality in Organizational Theory

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Abstract

Spirituality in the American workplace has been receiving increasing attention by the popular literature. However, the issue has received little consideration from management scholars. Although there are several definitions of spirituality, this paper discusses it as a cultural phenomenon that might influence organizational behavior. The investigation of spirituality in the workplace demands the examination of organization theory and some of its concepts. Open systems, institutional isomorphism, open fields, institutionalism, and neo-institutional theories are examined. Spirituality should not be neglected as a legitimate organizational topic of study, and more research on the impact of spirituality in the workplace should be conducted.

Introduction

The term spirituality infers a number of conclusions and may firmly imply some form of religious connotation. Several authors have offered a variety of definitions of spirituality: Some with atheistic and materialistic constructions (Dehler & Welsh, 1994; Mitroff & Denton, 1999a; Ashmos & Duchon, 2000), and others with pantheistic and deistic visions (Benner, 1989; Mohamed, Hassan & Wisnieski, 2001). To Griffin (1988), for example, spirituality is an inherent human characteristic that does not intrinsically infer any religious meaning:

Spirituality in this broad sense is not an optional quality which we might elect not to have. Everyone embodies a [sic] spirituality, even if it be a nihilistic or materialistic spirituality. It is also, of course, customary to use spirituality in a stricter sense for a way of life oriented around an ultimate meaning and around values other than power, pleasure, and possession. (pp. 1-2)

According to Mitroff and Denton, (1999a), spirituality is "the basic feeling of being connected with one's complete self, others, and the entire universe" (p.86). Dehler and Welsh (1994) defined spirituality as "a specific form of work feeling that energizes action" (p. 19). Ashmos and Duchon (2000) discussed spirituality in the context of community work, and Benner (1989) believed that spirituality involves the process of establishing and maintaining a relationship with God.

Mohamed, Hassan, and Wisnieski (2001), highlighted the fact that several scholars (Harlos, 2000; Shafranske & Malony, 1990) defended the importance of defining the conceptual differences between spirituality and religiosity. Thus, in their view, spirituality may be personal, inclusive, and positive, whereas religiosity might be external, exclusive, and negative. Supporting the recommendation of Mahamed et al., in a two-year empirical study based on both face-to-face interviews and survey questionnaires, Mitroff and Denton (1999b) found that 60 percent of the participants viewed religion as an inappropriate form of expression, whereas spirituality was interpreted as a proper subject for the workplace. In addition, their research indicated that employees expect organizations to cultivate some type of spirituality within their members in order to produce high quality products and services. However, taking a different direction, Mohamed et al. claimed that the attempt to differentiate between spirituality and religiosity is merely artificial. As an alternative to this unnecessary dichotomy, they proposed that the concept of spirituality should be added to the five-factor psychological model of personality, the "Big Five," as its sixth dimension. Their justification, nevertheless, attempted to find support in the facts that the concept of spirituality is not in opposition to other well-established psychological constructs and that the Big Five has already been linked to job performance. Mohamed et al. also speculated that spirituality, managerial behavior and, job performance are, to some extent, interconnected, which could explain some of the variances in job performance that have not yet been elucidated by the Big Five.

Although the literature has provided ample interpretations for spirituality, the definition used in this article, in a broad sense, refers to people's values and meanings, which sometimes might incorporate religious beliefs as well. Further, this premise also infers that spirituality might carry strong cultural connotations.

Discussion

A New Paradigm

In recent years, the place of spirituality in organizations has been increasingly considered by (a) managers, (b) executives, (c) employees, and (d) researchers to be essential to the organization's interactions with employees, customers, and the community (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Conger, 1994; Dehler & Welsh, 1994; Hansen, 2001). However, little attention has been paid in the literature to the investigation of spirituality as a cultural phenomenon that might influence organizational behavior and induce organizational change. Therefore, few change models that embraced some sort of spiritual element (Senge, 1990; Covey, 1989) became an alternative.

A number of studies (Graber & Johnson, 2001; Griffin, 1988; Hall, 1996; Hansen, 2001; Rifkin, 1995) indicated that changes in individuals, demographics, and organizations represent the major influencing forces forging a new workplace paradigm, which demands more integrative approaches to life and work. Founded on these change phenomena, Rifkin (1995) concluded that societies must devise a new labor contract featuring shorter workweeks, so people could dedicate more time to other parts of their life and place more value in the time allocated to volunteer and community work.

Hall (1996) predicted drastic changes in the organizations of the 21st century. He speculated that individuals rather than organizations would control careers and that success would be measured in terms of psychological fulfillment rather than financial accomplishment. In addition, he suggested that both managers and employees should start facilitating the transition to this new paradigm by putting more meaning on relationships in the workplace.

Besides the gradual importance on personal satisfaction highlighted by Hall, other relevant factors may also impose new challenges to the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. For example, the demographic changes that have been occurring in the United States for the last decades and, in particular, the rise of an ethnically diverse workforce might have influenced the reshaping of relationships in various organizational levels. According to Hansen (2001), a number of conditions have contributed to accentuate the human needs and desires for relationships, balance, and community concern, which also have led to a shifting on the emphasis from a dominating market standpoint to a more human-needs approach. As a result, some corporations have paid more attention to the needs of certain groups of employees for benefits such as childcare, long-term care, and wellness programs.

According to Palmer (2001), spirituality at the workplace has been trending up. To highlight his viewpoint, he mentioned that large corporations such as Intel, Wal-Mart, Xerox, Ford, Nike, and Harley-Davidson have supported spirituality in their work environments. Organizations could become more successful if they thoroughly meet their members' needs, which also include allowing individuals to express their spirituality. Supporting this premise, Mitroff and Denton (1999a) concluded that spirituality is fundamental to the human experience and therefore should make part of the organizational culture. They proposed a new organizational paradigm that (a) embodies concepts such as the existence of a supreme power, (b) pledges responsibility to multiple stakeholders, and (c) paves the path for businesses to take the evolutionary step of changing from values-based companies into spiritually-based organizations.

Organizational Theory and Spirituality

To investigate how spirituality integrates and influences organizational behavior not only as a personality dimension, as proposed by Mohamed et al. (2001), but as a reflection of people's values and meanings, this paper also highlights the theory of organizations and some of its concepts such as (a) open systems, (b) institutionalism, (c) neo-institutionalism, (d) organizational fields, (e) institutional isomorphism, and (f) culture. Another relevant reason for revisiting organizational models was offered by Yiannis (2002), who examined the relationship between organization theory and the practices of academics, managers, and organizational consultants in the sense that what can be verified in practical ways. As he put into context:

In the area of organizational studies, there is a pressing need to explore, understand and codify the relationship between theories, developed mostly by academics and popularized by consultants and gurus, and the actions of practicing managers. This is important because on it rests vital issues of management education and learning, and even more importantly, the basis on which business is conducted. Yet, the relationship between organizational theory and the practice of managers and other organizational participants has remained one of the most elusive and recalcitrant. (p. 134)

Organizational theory. Several studies (DiMaggio & Powell 1991; DiMaggio, 1998; Olivier, 1991) focused on how organizations influence their environments and how organizations actively contribute to the social construction of these environments. As a result, the process by which organizational environments are constituted, reproduced, and transformed has become a relevant issue for management research.

The open systems views of organizations. Organizations function like living organisms and prosper when all their subsystems support their strategic designs. Therefore, a major role for the leadership of these organizations is to align, or realign, strategy with the demands of their surrounding environments (Overholt, Connally, Harrington, & Lopez, 2000). In other words, the open systems approach views organizations receiving inputs from their environments, and in turn, affecting those environments by the transformed outputs that are the organizational products. The open systems theory is based on "the idea that the whole of a system is more important than the sum of its parts" (Senge et al., 1999, p.138). According to Overholt et al. (2000), the open systems theory possesses four basic principles:

1. Organizations are living systems that are ever-changing and adapting to their external environment
2. Organizations are dynamic internally, with all subsystems anticipating, responding, or reacting to changes within the organization
3. Organizations organize around their corporate survival strategy, exploiting and filling niches in the markets
4. Organizations must be internally congruent or consistent to maximize efficiency and effectiveness (p. 39)

Institutional isomorphism and organizational fields. Chang, Williams, Griffith, and Young (1998) investigated how open systems organizations create institutional isomorphism. They affirmed that churches, as open systems organizations, allow their external surroundings, which comprises (a) suppliers, (b) consumers, (c) regulators, and (d) social conditions, to permeate their internal environment. As a result, organizational behavior assumes here a major responsive characteristic to facing the conditions created in the external environments. The greater the interaction of the organization with the surrounding environment, the more likely its organizational model absorbs the structures, norms, and practices from the most central relationships in its environment.

According to DiMaggio and Powell (1991), the perennial feedback process between internal and external generates a homogenizing effect in organizations, which they termed "institutional isomorphism." In other words, institutional isomorphism refers to the phenomenon by which organizations lose some of their distinctive characteristics in terms of behavior, structure, and culture, and come to resemble one another (Stout & Cormode, 1998).

Organizations emerge in environments surrounded by other institutions that overlap, interact, and collide with them. Thus, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) proposed the concept of "organizational fields" to explain this larger world of surrounding institutions. Cormode (1998) explained that organizations

producing similar services and products, working with similar suppliers, and under similar regulatory conditions form an organizational field. Organizational fields and isomorphism both offer a theoretical basis to explain how organizations might influence each other.

Institutional theory and neo-institutionalism. Institutional theory has played a sine qua non role in explaining the processes by which distinct forms of organizing prevail within an organizational field (Cormode 1998, DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Stout & Cormode, 1998). Another significant contribution of institutional theory is the examination of how organizations adopt structures, processes, and ideas based on external influences rather than on efficiency (Lawrence, 1999). The study of institutional theory has been fundamental to explain the isomorphism of organizational fields and the establishment of institutional norms (Kondra & Hinings, 1998). The process of creating organizational norms occurs through normative, coercive, and mimetic processes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). In addition, values and beliefs external to the organization ultimately contribute to determine organizational norms. Thus, organizations may conform to the rules and requirements of their organizational field.

Recent contributions to institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; DiMaggio, 1998; Scott, 1994) discriminated between the old and new approaches of institutional theory. The old institutionalism emphasizes issues of conflicting interests and values, whereas the new institutionalism stresses the promotion of isomorphism and argues for conformity within a field (DiMaggio, 1998)

DiMaggio (1998), for example, distinguished three new forms of institutionalisms: (a) rational-action, (b) social-constructivist, and (c) mediated-conflict. Rational-action neo-institutionalism explains how organizational structures and norms influence the elements of individual rational actions, which are actors, interests, and preferences. Social-constructivist neo-institutionalism proposes that all elements of rational-action models are socially constructed. Mediated-conflict neo-institutionalism focuses on the way the government and other organizations mediate conflict among groups with distinctive interests. Selznick (1996) who expressed his concerns about the course and ethos of the new institutionalism affirmed:

The "new institutionalism" in the study of organizations has generated fresh insights as well as interesting shifts of focus. The underlying continuities are strong, however, because both the "old" and the "new" [sic] reflect a deeply internalized sociological sensibility. (p. 274)

The cultural factor. The term culture infers a number of conclusions. However, Brake, Walker and Walker (1995) defined culture as a set of value orientations that represents the central core of meanings in human societies. Value orientations dictate preferences in life and explain how people behave, think, and believe. These value orientations or underlying elements of culture are quasi-static patterns that people learn as they grow up and that interact in their social groups. Therefore, culture influences actions, decisions, modi operandi and vivendi, feelings, and thoughts. Further, culture plays a major role in configuring the perception mechanisms that allow individuals to interpret themselves, others, organizations, and the world.

Organizational Theory and Spirituality

According to Mohamed et al. (2001), organizational theories and models that ignore the spiritual dimension will remain deficient. As they put it into context: "Our current models of micro and macro behavior do not account for spirituality and

its affects and, as such, some of these models may be misleading or incomplete" (p. 647).

Graber and Johnson (2001) discussed the rationality of the spiritual dimension in organizational life. They concluded that the search for spiritual growth and fulfillment should not be separated from work because of the challenge of balancing personal, subjective, and unconscious elements of individual experience with rationality, efficiency, and personal sacrifices demanded by organizations. Other authors (Bickham, 1996; Conger, 1994; Marcic, 1997) also defended organizational designs that embody a sense of community and spirituality and discussed the leadership potentials of incorporating spiritual values into the management field. Bickham (1996) claimed that when spirituality is cultivated in the workplace, a creative energy is unlocked. Conger (1994) suggested that the definition of leadership should include the spiritual dimension. Thus, this expanded and new characterization of leadership could contribute to the development of a work life that benefits the organization, its members, and the community. Marcic (1997) recommended the incorporation of spiritual values into the modern theory of organizing as an alternative for reengineering and downsizing initiatives.

Mitroff and Denton (1999b) identified five different organizational models founded on religion or spirituality. The religious-based organization is either positive toward religion and spirituality or positive toward religion but negative toward spirituality. Evolutionary organizations begin with an affiliation with a particular religion and later adopt principles that are more ecumenical. The recovering organization works similarly to institutions like the Alcoholics Anonymous as a way to foster spirituality. In socially responsible organizations, the founders are guided by spiritual principles that they apply directly to their business. Philosophical principles that are not related to any particular religion or spirituality guide the founders and leaders of values-organizations. Mitroff and Denton suggested that these five models might offer major change alternatives for the organizational theory and for some of the recent management remedies, as each model is born after the occurrence of a critical event. Thus, the impulse to pursue spirituality comes from the desire to successfully overcome crises.

Conclusions

Recently, the issue of spirituality at the workplace in the United States has been receiving an increasing attention in the popular literature. A study (Mitroff & Denton, 1999a) indicating how Americans feel about spirituality in the workplace as well as several popular books on spiritual management and leadership (Bickham, 1996; Conger, 1994; Marcic, 1997) have been published. Many authors (Graber & Johnson, 2001; Griffin, 1988; Hall, 1996; Hansen, 2001; Rifkin, 1995) examined the factors that have concurred to the rise of spirituality in the American workplace   First, irreversible global changes contributed to forming the desires for a new workplace paradigm. Second, a workforce with multiple ethnicities brought new insights to the American workplace. Third, several studies (Conger, 1994; Marcic, 1997; Mitroff & Denton, 1999a; Mohamed et al., 2001; Palmer, 2001) suggested that spirituality is a critical human need and definitely should be part of organizational culture. Finally, organizations realized they could become more successful by meeting their members' needs and allowing them to express their spirituality.

Although spirituality in the workplace has become popular,

the subject has received little attention from management scholars. Nevertheless, the investigation of spirituality in the workplace requires a careful examination of organization theory and some of its concepts because essential topics of management and the very basis on which business is conducted lie in them. For instance, neo-institutionalism, based on social constructivism, proposed that all organizational elements are derived from and constructed by the social environments surrounding organizations. Another example is culture as a significant factor influencing how organizations adopt structures, processes, and ideas. It explains the behavior, way of thinking, and beliefs of social groups. The essence of culture is neither visible nor tangible, whereas it is the shared underlying assumptions that people use to understand others and themselves.

If the tenets of open systems, institutional, and neo-institutional theories hold, and if spirituality is a cultural phenomenon, then spirituality might influence organizational behavior and culture. As a result, organizational theories and models that ignore the spiritual dimension will remain incomplete. Although not based on the above hypothesis, other authors (Bickham, 1996; Conger, 1994; Marcic, 1997) defended new organizational paradigms that incorporate spirituality and a sense of

community. For example, Mitroff and Denton (1999b) identified five different organizational models founded on religion or spirituality and proposed a new structure embedded in spiritual values.

Spirituality should not be neglected as a legitimate topic of study. Current models and theories do not consider spirituality and its effects, and some of these models might be misleading or incomplete. Corporate culture should make a place for spiritual expression, which may take many different forms, resulting in benefits such as a better workplace, an improved quality of products and services, and a satisfied workforce.

Recommendations

Although, research on the impact of spirituality in the workplace has been lacking, future studies should consider a number of important issues. Future investigations should focus on the implications of spirituality for organizational behavior for example. Another important topic would be the study of spirituality as a cultural phenomenon. Further, it could be appropriate to examine the relationship between spirituality and personality.

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