

Business and spirituality

can they coexist?



The greatest evil is not done in those sordid dens of crime that Dickens loved to paint. It is conceived and moved, seconded and carried and minuted, in clean, carpeted, warmed and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails, and smooth-shaven chins, who do not need to raise their voices.

These lines by the famous Irish literary figure C S Lewis articulate the most common beliefs held about successful business people. Greed, crass materialism, flashy perks, hunger for power, is what one sees in the lifestyles of the top executives. Charity or respect for ethical treatment of others is considered a façade to cover up the internal convenient disregard for others' survival. The recent corporate scandals and revelations of dubious financial practices have only reinforced the image of a successful corporate executive as "selfish and unethical".

Spirituality, no matter how you define it, does not have any place in this picture.

There have always been questions about if fortune and faith can coexist. Most people would believe that practicing spirituality in business is a sure road to failure. In a world where a go-getter attitude is sought after, climbing the ladder is expected to have other humans as steps; the "spiritual" practices may be looked at as a sign of weakness.

As the corporate world is establishing itself in post world war stability and increasing prosperity, the belief in combining spirituality and business practices is becoming commonplace. This is evident in the explosion of articles on workplace spirituality, clubs and organisations working for this goal, and the myriad of coaches available to preach spiritual practices for the workplace.

The question to explore: is it possible to mix spirituality and a successful business? The answer we propose: "absolutely", and this is how.

What is spirituality in the corporate world?

A common meaning of Spirituality is to involve oneself in activities that renew, lift up, comfort, heal and inspire both ourselves and those with whom we interact. Lifting up refers to going beyond the worldly things and going closer to a higher purpose. Often enough, spirituality is associated with

religious practices that are meant for putting a person in touch with the Higher Power.

There are two major conflicts that arise with this definition and business practices. The first conflict comes with the expectation of going beyond “worldly things” while for-profit businesses are supposed to be all about amassing wealth. The second conflict comes in with the implication of lifting up others which goes against the selfish and aggressive personality traits typically associated with successful corporate executives.

A frequently asked question is: is education from top B-Schools all about maximising salaries? Several corporate leaders will say, “No, a job should give deeper meaning to you”. It is interesting to observe that the goal most B-School students hold is indeed to use their skills to eventually acquire wealth and power, making placements the most significant factor in the B-School ratings. However, there is also a drive shown by some students to get involved in projects involving NGOs or other social services. There is a need to go beyond personal gains alone and towards upliftment of others.

As such students become successful and prosperous, the need for looking for a purpose in work beyond money and power grows. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs offers explanation for this change. Once the more basic survival, safety, self-esteem needs are fulfilled, there is a need for self-actualisation through a higher purpose. As society achieves more prosperity, individuals and hence corporations become more free to pay attention to social work and raising the standards of treatment of employees.

Some CEOs reflect their spirituality in their wish to discover the purpose of life, the passion in work. So does any prescription for spiritual bliss. Deepak Chopra, Osho, or any new age Guru, all attest that we are all

born with a purpose and once that purpose is found then the deeper meaning and getting in touch with God in us follows.

Some leaders derive their meaning in their work in the same way as a messiah would. A managing director of a company with 30,000 employees said that what gives him a spiritual experience in his work is the fact that he can influence the values and ethics of so many people. The money and the personal power are secondary.

Yet another manifestation of spirituality is the increasing awareness and emphasis on ethics in global businesses. Any religion and most spiritual practices are based on a set of morals and ethics. This is no more left as a personal agenda for an individual, but is becoming part of the B-School education. B-Schools have begun to include the word spirituality in the title of their classes on ethics. In the US, the Catholic and Jewish societies of corporate executives have formed to promote ethical practices based on their religious philosophies.

For Indian executives the notion of applying spiritual practice to their corporate aspiration may appear to impose a special challenge. Their heritage may come from the Vedantic nonattachment to the worldly pleasures or the Buddhist nonattachment to any craving or aversion. Any ambition or desire for material success may appear to be in contradiction with this. However, most modern scholars of Hindu and Buddhist philosophies make it very clear that the attachment to the desire is harmful, not the desire in itself! The ambition for material success is a perfectly acceptable asset, not only that, once they know their goal, purpose, or their “dharma”, they must do their best with utmost concentration, just like Arjuna in his archery. The warning is against the attachment to the outcome, the desperate and frantic anxiety it can create,

and inability to let go once your best job is done. The austerity of life style and giving up pleasures is a part of religious and cultural expectations, but they are not a part of the Vedanta philosophy. The way to mix faith and fortune is to have faith and focus and then fortune will follow!

Can spirituality be used for corporate gains?

Beyond mixing spirituality and business, the next step is to use the spiritual messages to make the business more successful by providing more meaning to the employees. Vedanta scholars such as Swami Parthasarathi hold corporate seminars on using Vedanta teachings in running the corporations. Thinkers such as Gurcharan Das have considered using Nishkama Karma as a motivator for higher productivity. Successful corporations driven by Christian values in the US report better employee satisfaction, while Management Gurus such as Ken Blanchard who wrote the One Minute Manager series, advise using “alone” time for daily spiritual contemplation so the workplace power struggle can be minimised. Meditation practices are prescribed for better concentration and clarity of vision.

For the first time today, managers have the privilege to focus on working on what they like doing while earning well. Practicing spiritual values and simultaneously being successful is a natural outcome of this privilege.

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