

The Emerald Research Register for this journal is available at
www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregister



The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
www.emeraldinsight.com/0953-4814.htm

JOCM
17,1

Defining spirit at work: finding common ground

Val M. Kinjerski and Berna J. Skrypnek

*Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta,
Edmonton, Canada*

26

Keywords *Workplace, Working practices, Working conditions, Surveys*

Abstract *Debate over the definition of "spirit at work" continues in both the popular and academic literatures. The lack of a clear, accepted definition has hindered the development of useful measures and has delayed research that would advance our understanding of the conditions/characteristics that influence the experience of spirit at work and the individual and organizational outcomes that result from spirit at work. To obtain a clearer understanding of an individual level construct of spirit at work, an exploratory, qualitative study was conducted. A total of 14 professionals, who not only experienced spirit at work, but whose work also involved researching or promoting spirit at work, participated through face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, or written surveys. Participants were asked about what is spirit at work and then they were asked to describe a personal experience of spirit at work. Although most people had difficulty providing a comprehensive definition for spirit at work, they found it very easy to recall and describe such an experience. These rich descriptions of their personal experiences of spirit at work revealed much consistency in experiences among individuals. Participants' descriptions revealed that spirit at work is a distinct state that has physical, affective, cognitive, interpersonal, spiritual, and mystical dimensions. This state involves physiological arousal, positive affect, a belief that one's work makes a contribution, a sense of connection to others and common purpose, a sense of connection to something larger than self, and a sense of perfection and transcendence. The usefulness of a clear, comprehensive definition of spirit at work to advancing theory, research, and practice is discussed.*

It seems that employees everywhere are seeking more than economic reward from their jobs (Lowe, 2000; Fairholm, 1997; Jacobson, 1994). Employees are questioning the relationship between spirituality and their work (Neal *et al.*, 1999) and are seeking work that is inspiring and meaningful (Fairholm, 1997; Leigh, 1997; Mitroff and Denton, 1999). Others are looking for work-life balance (Perry-Jenkins *et al.*, 2000; Duxbury and Higgins, 2002). Many employees are demoralized and experiencing spiritual disorientation as a result of the downsizing, reengineering and layoffs that occurred in the last two decades (Lee and Zemke, 1993; Leigh, 1997).

Facing the reality that downsizing and re-engineering did not accomplish what organizations had hoped for, corporations are looking for alternative ways to gain the competitive edge (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Leigh, 1997). This pressure is amplified by globalization, a shift to knowledge-based organizations, and growing employee demand for meaningful work and nurturing work environments (Caudron, 1997; Leigh, 1997; Lowe, 2000). Among the new approaches is the development of work environments that foster employees' creativity and personal growth (Brandt, 1996; Leigh, 1997).



*Journal of Organizational Change
Management*
Vol. 17 No. 1, 2004
pp. 26-42
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited
0953-4814
DOI 10.1108/09534810410511288

The assumption is that such environments will foster more fulfilling lives for employees and positive outcomes for organizations (Moxley, 2000; Fairholm, 1997, Milliman *et al.*, 1999). Surveys of leaders and mid-level managers confirm the need for workplace cultures, leadership, and work processes that acknowledge the whole individual with needs, desires, values and a spirit self (Fairholm, 1997; Jacobson, 1994; Mitroff and Denton, 1999).

“Spirit at work” is a term that describes the experience of employees who are passionate about and energized by their work, find meaning and purpose in their work, feel that they can express their complete selves at work, and feel connected to those with whom they work. The term is also used to describe an organizational culture that fosters autonomy, trust, cohesiveness, support, recognition, innovation and fairness through leadership and work processes. Both individual spirit at work and organizational spirit at work are believed to result in positive outcomes for individual employees and employers. Specifically, the experience of spirit at work is linked with increased creativity, honesty, trust, and commitment in the workplace, along with an enhanced sense of personal fulfillment of employees (Krishnakumar and Neck, 2002). Further, Tischler *et al.* (2002) make the case for spiritual intelligence and provide evidence of the development of spirituality and its effect on individual work success. We see a strong link between spiritual intelligence and spirit at work. While spiritual intelligence relates to one’s capacity or ability, spirit at work refers to one’s experience. One would expect a strong correlation between spiritual intelligence and spirit at work.

Although the phenomenon increasingly is gaining interest in both the corporate and academic worlds, investigations into spirit at work are just beginning and the bulk of this research has focused on organizational spirit at work. Studies have considered the appropriateness of integrating spirituality into the management of an organization (Mitroff and Denton, 1999), integration of spiritual values into organizations (Milliman *et al.*, 1999), spirituality and self-leadership (Neck and Milliman, 1994), organizational cultures that engage the best employees have to offer (Izzo and Klein, 1998), ways organizations can be religious or spiritual (Mitroff and Denton, 1999), and spirituality and transformational leadership (Jacobson, 1994). Unfortunately, much less is known about an individual level construct of spirit at work. First, there is no clear, widely-accepted definition of spirit at work in the literature (Tischler *et al.*, 2002). Without such a definition, it is not surprising that the development and widespread use of a measure by researchers and practitioners has not occurred. The lack of a widely accepted measure has delayed investigations of how individuals develop spirit at work, what factors enhance or impede spirit at work, and whether spirit at work positively impacts wellbeing and productivity as proclaimed by many organizational consultants. The first step to this research is to establish good conceptual and operational definitions of individual spirit at work.

1. Conceptualizing spirit at work

While the terms carry separate meanings, spirit and spirituality[1] are often used interchangeably in the literature as are the terms spirit at work and spirituality at work. Spirit (or spirituality) at work and spirituality in the workplace also appears to be used synonymously. This study has been guided by the following definitions. Spirit is “the basic feeling of being connected with one’s complete self, others and the entire universe”; everyone and everything is interconnected and has a purpose (Mitroff and Denton, 1999, p. 83). Spirituality is “an animating life force, an energy that inspires one toward certain ends or purposes that go beyond self” (McKnight, 1984, p. 142). It is “a continuing search for meaning and purpose in life; an appreciation for the depth of life; the expanse of the universe, and natural forces which operate; a personal belief system” (Myers, 1990).

The term spirit at work was chosen for this study for several reasons. It was the energy or life force of certain employees that caught the attention of the first author. There seemed to be an energy or spirit that inspired or motivated these people towards serving others or a cause in spite of the obstacles they faced. Use of the term “spirit at work” was also thought to be helpful in avoiding the religion/spirituality debate that is apparent in the literature. Although the expression of religion is seen as highly inappropriate in the workplace, spirituality is seen as highly appropriate for discussion (Mitroff and Denton, 1999). However, Myers’s (1990) humanistic definition of spirituality offered above incorporates the threads common to both spirituality and religion. Work is used to describe what one does as a career, calling, or job, while workplace refers to the place where an individual does his or her work.

An important advancement in the definition of spirit at work has been the differentiation between individual spirit at work and organizational spirit at work. Spirit at work is used to refer to experiences at the individual (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000) and organizational (Izzo and Klein, 1998) levels as well as a combination of both levels (Guillory, 2000; Gibbons, 1999). At the individual level, it refers to the desire of employees to express all aspects of their being at work and to be engaged in meaningful work. For example, at the individual level, spirit at work is described as “the recognition that employees have an inner life that is nourished by meaningful work, which takes place in the context of community” (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000, p. 137). It is said to be evident where employees can express their full creativity, emotions, and intelligence (Mitroff and Denton, 1999), and find opportunities to express many aspects of their being, not only the ability to perform physical or intellectual tasks (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000). Spirit at work at the individual level is the integration of one’s spirituality with his or her work (Gibbons, 1999). Even at the individual level, spirit at work is mutually beneficial as one’s spirituality contributes to one’s work, while one’s work contributes to one’s spiritual growth (Gibbons, 1999).

At the organizational level, Izzo and Klein (1998) use “corporate soul” to describe work environments that attract and engage the best that employees have to offer. They suggest that corporate soul embraces both the top line (higher purpose of the organization) and bottom line (the financial performance of the organization). Spirituality in the workplace has also been described as the “integration of humanistic principles, practices, and behaviors with sound business functioning” (Guillory, 2000, p. xii). In this definition, the spirit needs of the individual and the business needs of the organization are taken into account. Lastly, spirit at work has been defined as “a journey toward integration of work and spirituality, for individuals and organizations, which provides direction, wholeness and connectedness at work” (Gibbons, 1999, p. 6).

For the most part, research about spirit at work is at the early stages. Coming from the business field, previous studies have focused primarily on the organization as the unit of analysis. Most articles have been theoretical in nature, addressing the changing work paradigm, the value of spirit at work, leadership and organizational transformation, and to a lesser extent, concept clarification. Little research has been completed with the individual as the unit of analysis or where the research question focused on the meaning of spirit at work at the individual level. While most articles provide short definitions based on theoretical notions and a consultant’s particular experiences, a comprehensive definition of spirit at work has not yet been adopted by the spirit at work community.

It seems to us that spirit at work starts with the individual and research must begin with a comprehensive and measurable definition of the construct under study. We recognize that the experience of spirit at work is highly subjective and transcendent, making it difficult to describe in words. However, “the phenomena most difficult to articulate verbally often are those that may be the most critical for understanding..”. (Dreher, 1994, p. 291). Therefore this study offers a work in progress definition for individual spirit at work based on the expertise of professionals whose work involves researching or promoting spirit at work as well as their lived experience of spirit at work.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 14 individuals (four female, ten male) from Canada, the USA, and England participated in this study. In addition to one person who agreed to pilot the interview, purposive sampling was used to identify 19 individuals whose work involves researching or promoting spirit at work. Invitations to participate in the study were sent by e-mail to authors of articles or books on spirit at work and to individuals who consult and facilitate spirit at work seminars. In addition to published articles, names were found on brochures advertising workshops and conferences.

While all individuals who received the request were supportive of the study, time limitations prevented some from participating, resulting in 14 individuals who agreed to participate. All were professionals. A total of 12 participants consult with or coach organizations, while eight counsel individuals regarding spirit at work. A total of 12 participants deliver courses or seminars on the topic; 11 write and publish about spirit at work. Eight conduct research regarding spirit at work. Six of the respondents are university professors, almost all from business faculties – one of whom is a minister.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with three local participants, two telephone interviews, and nine written surveys. Individuals were first asked “What is spirit at work and what elements are present when a person experiences spirit at work?”. Then they were asked to describe their experience of spirit at work. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

A combination of semi-structured interactive interviews and written open-ended surveys were used for this exploratory and descriptive qualitative study. Thematic analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994) was used to examine the data. Transcribed interviews and survey answers were read to get an overview of the responses. They were then re-read and first level codes were assigned according to how participants described their experience of spirit at work. Coding was conducted independently by both authors. These first level codes were then clustered into themes. The data were again reviewed to ensure that the content fit the identified categories. The themes were reworked until we reached agreement and all coded data fit into the identified themes. Six themes that described participants’ experience of spirit at work emerged:

- (1) physical;
- (2) affective;
- (3) cognitive;
- (4) interpersonal;
- (5) spiritual; and
- (6) mystical.

The definition that emerged from the data, including supporting quotes, was sent back to the participants to ensure that their experiences were captured in the definition provided. Those who responded indicated support for the definition.

2.3. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the soundness of qualitative research and is generally judged in terms of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility was established through researcher triangulation and member checking. With the intent of confirming

categories and themes, separate debriefing sessions were held with two professors from different faculties, providing researcher triangulation. Categories and interpretations were also shared with participants to ensure that their experience was captured. Dependability was enhanced through use of a pilot study, by audio-taping and transcribing the interviews verbatim, and by having a second person read and code the transcripts and surveys. Member checking, debriefing, and the use of a reflective journal assisted in establishing confirmability. Transferability was established through inclusion of “thick descriptions” from the data which will enable the reader to determine the applicability of findings.

3. Results

3.1. *Spirit at work defined*

Responses to the question about “What is spirit at work?” indicated that it is a complex and difficult concept to define. When asked for a definition of spirit at work, Betty[2] said, “This is just a hoot. We don’t define spirit in our workshops called Spirit at Work, nor do we define spirit at work”. Some participants even questioned the value of such an exercise. Ivan suggested that, “spirituality is so much a part of one’s life that it is impossible to extract a definition apart from the meaning that it provides”. Those holding this view believe that defining spirituality concretizes it and treats it like a scientific thing, which they argue that it is not. For example, Percy suggested that “as soon as you start to break it into components, you will destroy what you are watching”. Nevertheless, these same participants did appreciate the purpose for the study. In particular, many saw the significance of defining spirit at work as twofold. One participant suggested that, “for a lot of people the definition is not just to define this thing, but to quell their anxieties because they’re afraid that it’s going to be too intrusive” (Ivan). He advised that in his own research, people freely spoke about their fears and ambivalence about spirituality, particularly about the introduction of religion into the workplace. We found that we could not develop a clear definition based on participants’ responses to explain, describe or define the construct.

3.2. *The experience of spirit at work*

Although most individuals had difficulty providing a comprehensive definition of spirit at work, they found it very easy to recall and describe such an experience. While participants’ description of what spirit at work means to them was personal and individualized, the descriptions of their experiences of spirit at work were strikingly similar. These rich descriptions of their personal experiences of spirit at work reveal much consistency in experiences among individuals. Six dimensions of participants’ experiences of spirit at work emerged in their descriptions. These included physical, affective, cognitive,

interpersonal, spiritual and mystical dimensions to the experience. A discussion about each dimension follows.

3.2.1. Physical experience: physiological arousal and energy. When spirit at work is present, the experience was described as extraordinary. Many participants referred to a physical sensation that was characterized by a state of arousal or energy. They described the experience as a peak experience, a natural high, fun, total bliss, and as being in a flow state or in the zone. For example, one participant said that “it was like a burst of excitement in my body” (Phil). Jim’s description was an eloquent illustration, “I was ‘in a flow state’ so that I felt pulled along in something that I had only partial control over . . . like riding the rapids of a fast-flowing stream”. The physical sensation was also linked to positive affect, for example, “You have a natural high, so that you almost don’t come down for a while afterward, because it feels so good” (Kelsey).

3.2.2. Affective experience: positive affect characterized by well-being and joy. Participants described profound feelings of well-being and joy. Most participants spoke of love, and of work being joyful and peaceful. Phil said that the experience was one of:

. . . feeling loved and loving the team . . . The love bit was different. We created a lot of trust and common purpose on the team.

Another participant spoke of the joy, excitement, and gratitude:

There’s a real sense of joy about it, a real sense of excitement, and a sense of gratitude to be part of something that’s so significant and so important (Frank).

Kelsey summed up the experience by saying:

It was the most fun I’ve ever had when I’m working . . . It’s almost past describing because it feels so good. It’s just one of the best feel-good things there is going.

3.2.3. Cognitive experience: authenticity, alignment, and making a contribution. It was clear from participants’ descriptions of their experiences that a distinct set of cognitions was part of their experience. According to participants, spirit at work involves cognitions or awareness of authenticity, of alignment between one’s values, beliefs, and work, and of engaging in work that has a higher purpose and is meaningful to one. A discussion on each of these three themes follows.

3.2.3.1. Authenticity – expressing oneself completely at work. Authenticity is about being who we are all of the time, even at work. It means speaking our truth and living with honesty and integrity. To be authentic, our actions are congruent with our inner values and beliefs. The opportunity to be authentic and integrated at our work was a strong theme underlying the experience of spirit at work. Often referred to as “bringing your whole person to work”, it involves integration of an individual’s physical, mental, emotional and spiritual energies at work. This integration of the body, mind, heart, and spirit promotes

wholeness rather than fragmentation of self so often experienced by dispirited employees. In describing his experience, Myron said, "It felt 'right' and it felt as though my whole person was able to respond". Kelsey was clear that:

I'm the same person all the time. I'm not one person at work, one person at home, one person while I'm playing. I'm the same person . . . so I don't have a work face, which lots of people do.

Another participant described what happened when the people he was working with got to know one another in an intimate way:

We got to know each other in a very intimate way . . . they got to know me much better as a person . . . When we got together and when we shared more of ourselves and who we were as people and what was really important to us as individuals . . . that just seemed to fuel our energy . . . so it allowed for people's, I guess, true selves or perhaps the spirit part of them to become more of their conscious behavior (Frank).

Although a key component of spirit at work seems to be the ability to bring our whole selves to work, several participants pointed out that, as spiritual beings, it is impossible not to take our spirit wherever we are. It is an illusion to think that we can separate our spirit from the rest of ourselves. Supporting this notion, one participant said:

I actually now don't believe that you can show up anywhere without your spirit . . . We, as spiritual beings, cannot not take our spirit wherever we are. It's an illusion that we think we can do one thing at work and one thing at home, because we are the same person. It's a peculiarly North American concept that you could divide it (Betty).

Expressing our complete selves at work allows us to be all of whom we are as employees, thus facilitating our passion and creative expression. Betty described her work environment: "Around here, I see people having the opportunity for creativity, I see laughter, I hear people singing at work, and that's a bring your whole self to work".

Most participants suggested a relationship between opportunities for autonomy and freedom to do their work and increased capacity for creative and innovative solutions. When asked what was different about the time he experienced spirit at work, Norman said: "What was different was the autonomy I had to create the learning experience that would truly help people". This was echoed by Frank:

What's really been common here is, there's been autonomy, so people weren't constrained in looking at solutions or in considering all kinds of possibilities to address issues that they were facing. It allowed things to happen, such as creative ideas, different strategies, bringing in other people.

Part of being authentic is an awareness and acceptance of our intuition. Integration of our spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical dimensions opens the doors to intuition as a way of knowing. Being intuitive involves being open to the guidance and wisdom that is available to us. Some referred to an inner voice, others had gut feelings, while others spoke of a knowing that it is right. Don claimed that what facilitated his experience of spirit at work was

his “courage to find and listen to [his] own voice”. On the other hand, Phil said: “For me, sometimes it happens when a person stands up and speaks the truth. Everything changes”. Intuition is only available to us if we are in touch with that particular way of knowing. It goes hand in hand with being integrated and expressing our complete self at work.

3.2.3.2. Alignment – congruity between one’s values and beliefs and one’s work. With respect to spirit at work, alignment refers to the fit or congruity among our values and beliefs with the work we do, the people we work with, and ultimately the organization we work for. In particular, individuals who experience spirit at work spoke of their work as being aligned with their higher purpose. Norman said:

This alignment allows me to bring my whole self to work and to pursue work that is meaningful to who I am.

Betty spoke of being in alignment with those she worked with, drawing an analogy to a tuning fork:

And one of the analogies that came to me was like a tuning fork, as I understand tuning forks . . . what I know is if it’s in tune, when you hit the note that’s in tune, the tuning fork starts to sing . . . the frequencies are close enough together that they are in harmony, and so one makes the other one start to resonate . . . and as I think about who’s around me now . . . there is a compatibility or a something where it’s harmonious or you could have synergy.

She goes on to say that:

I’m much more inclined to go where it’s easy . . . the test is, if it is easy, it’s the right thing to do . . . and I’m getting better at being able to tell the difference between a struggle and a challenge – the challenge that stretches us . . . but with enough support so there’s an element of joy or laughter or excitement of something that feels different than the struggle that’s frustrating.

When everything is in alignment, work is said to “flow”, to be easy and joyful. For example Kelsey described her work situation by saying, “Here, pretty much everything is in alignment and it flows, it flows”. Participants have pointed out that this sense of alignment could also be used to indicate a mystical dimension, a clear indication that the dimensions are not mutually exclusive.

3.2.3.3. Making a difference – a belief in work as a higher purpose. Spirit at work is about making a difference, a contribution. It involves having a higher purpose, having meaningful and purposeful work, and serving others. Spirit at work reflects a “sincere belief to serve others by giving gifts like love, power, authorship and significance” (Bill). Most participants who experienced spirit at work spoke about “a sense of accomplishment and making a difference” (Phil). Individuals described their work as part of their personal mission as is stated by Don:

This is my life’s work. I cannot not be doing this. It has found me as much as I have found it.

They have a sense of a higher purpose to their work. For example Frank spoke of his experience:

We had a real sense of almost a higher purpose. We all had this real feeling like we were really doing something unique and historic and beneficial.

When spirit at work is experienced, the contribution is viewed as for the greater good of all and is larger than each of the individuals. It is making sure that whatever work is done, whatever the topic is, that the ultimate purpose is that the work is being done with the intention for higher good. Betty described how, in their work, she and her partner prepared to contribute to the greater good:

We consciously do our intentional work, that is, making sure that whatever it is we do, whatever the topic is, whatever the official deliverable is, that our ultimate purpose is that we are doing something that is for the highest good of all.

It is not only important that people are engaged in meaningful work, they must also feel that what they are doing is meaningful. Kelsey's belief was that:

The individual has to see the meaning and the purpose in it for the spirit part to work. Lots of people don't link their work to the greater good or highest good for all. I went into my role very much believing that I was a public servant . . . I'm doing this because I believe in the work I am doing and that it will make a difference, that it [i]s meaningful work, it [i]s going to make a contribution.

It is then that this sense of meaning and purpose leads to the feeling that what they are doing makes a contribution that is larger than themselves. For example, Rose said:

Recognition of each employee and his or her workplace contribution promoted a sense of purpose, meaning, and mission. I felt my work with the organization was contributing to an enterprise much larger than all of us.

3.2.4. Interpersonal experience: sense of connection to others and common purpose. Being connected with others, whether it is our colleagues or the people we work for is a theme that ran through the interviews. Recognizing that everyone needs to work together to achieve common goals, individuals shared a sense of connection and common purpose. This connection, often referred to as a sense of community, involves trust and respect and sometimes, even intimacy and love. When a sense of personal connection and trust is present, we are able to be authentic and say things that are really important to us. In response, we feel heard, affirmed, and respected by others. Frank's description of his experience is illustrative of the participants' responses:

None of us as individuals were in a position or had necessarily the inspiration or support or creative ideas to do all the stuff that happened, by ourselves . . . It became pretty apparent that we all needed to work together to achieve the goals we all shared in general, so we developed a sense of community and common purpose that was inspiring, I think, for all of us . . . It feels to me that at some level we all shared a love with each other and for each other and for the purpose why we were together. And love isn't too strong a word . . . there was a real

sense of personal connection and trust . . . [T]hey could say things that were really important to them and have them saying that, being heard and respected by others and acted upon and affirmed.

Connection with others is needed for the achievement of mutual goals. Those who experienced spirit at work recognized that they were part of something that was larger than any of them as individuals and that they needed each other to be successful. Through this connection, success was experienced that was not previously available to the individual or organization. This pull together toward a common purpose was also experienced “as ‘esprit de corps’ where all participants work with cooperation, understanding, and harmony” (Harry). However, these moments of deep connection with others can be so strong that it is felt even when one is working alone. One participant said:

I’ve also felt like I was accompanied by lots of people – like I was only one of many people who shared this idea/experience/dream, although I was actually acting alone at the time (Jim).

3.2.5. Spiritual presence: awareness of connection to something larger than self. Along with the sense that one is contributing to something larger than self, individuals who experienced spirit at work were aware of a connection to something larger than self. Participants generally reported that a higher power was present when they experienced spirit at work. This presence, however, was experienced in different ways. For example, some felt spirit as coming through them from another source:

We just basically see ourselves as portals almost for the universe to work through, because I know it is not me; I just happen to be the vehicle (Kelsey).

Others spoke of being guided:

It just seemed like we received some inspiration . . . and it felt like there was something happening in the room . . . that was guided in some way (Frank).

For some this presence meant God or the supreme being, “A truly emotional moment where I felt God was present” (Bill). “I wasn’t alone – unseen hands were guiding me” (Harry). For others, it meant God within, and yet others meant God-like. Some referred to the creator or universal source, for example:

There is the capital S Spirit working through us, in us, about us. You can use God or Creator or the Universal Source or whatever your language, that spirit is always at work (Betty).

While one participant acknowledged a relationship with the Divine, he related this to a connection to a force that is larger than self:

I immediately discovered Spirit – a true relationship with the Divine . . . not the religious ideal but the personal experience of being connected with some force that we might call God or Goddess or Nature or All That Is (Jim).

Finally, one respondent distinguished between work and spirituality and work and spirit, advising:

I don't believe in spirit as a theological or supernatural entity . . . I define it in psychological terms – the whole of emotions, energy and vitality, body and values (Phil).

Regardless of the varying interpretations, all participants spoke to a connection with something larger than self. While the presence of a higher power was acknowledged by most respondents, others spoke of a strong connection to humanity or nature.

3.2.6. Mystical experience: a sense of perfection and transcendence. Participants' descriptions of their experience of spirit at work included a mystical dimension that was characterized by a sense of perfection and effortless energy. Being present and living in the moment was a common theme expressed by most individuals experiencing spirit at work as was described by Bill:

It was total bliss, as if everything was perfect, which it was . . . I was feeling as if I was "in the moment" not being hurried by tasks, deadlines or activities, but by a connection with a greater source that had a wonderful effect on the workplace at that moment. It was genuine, authentic, and everything seemed to make sense and I actually felt like I saw a much bigger picture of work and how all the various aspects fit into one.

It was a moment when I felt that I was totally present to the class and the topic. It was not an "aha" experience but the culmination of a series of successful interactions with the students . . . It just seemed to flow and I did not feel forced or out of my depth (Myron).

The experiences of spirit at work were also awe-inspiring, mysterious, or sacred, and had a transcendent nature to them. Jim described his experience as, "I was in 'a flow state' so that I felt pulled along in something that I had only partial control over". Other participants said:

The experiences were just extraordinary, like peak experiences . . . It feels like it wasn't a job; it wasn't work. I was doing something really important, and as a bonus, I was getting paid for it (Frank).

It was like being in the zone, putting out 110 percent, seeming to know the what, why, how, where, when, who in order to tackle whatever problem hits the fan (Harry).

3.3. Defining spirit at work

Based on participants' responses, we developed the following definition of spirit at work:

Spirit at work is a distinct state that is characterized by physical, affective, cognitive, interpersonal, spiritual, and mystical dimensions. Most individuals describe the experience as including: a *physical* sensation characterized by a positive state of arousal or energy; positive *affect* characterized by a profound feeling of well-being and joy; *cognitive* features involving a sense of being authentic, an awareness of alignment between one's values and beliefs and one's work, and a belief that one is engaged in meaningful work that has a higher purpose; an *interpersonal* dimension characterized by a sense of connection to others and common purpose; a *spiritual* presence characterized by a sense of connection to something larger than self, such as a higher power, the Universe, nature or humanity; and a *mystical* dimension characterized by a sense of perfection, transcendence, living in the moment, and experiences that were awe-inspiring, mysterious, or sacred.

3.4. Spirit at work by another name

A variety of terms are used instead of spirit (or spirituality) at work, perhaps to get away from the religion/spirituality debate or because they are more tangible. Other terms suggested by participants included: meaning and purpose, stewardship, heart and soul, vitality, character of virtue, sentiments of mankind, the influence and authority of conscience, harmony, working together, laughter, fun, trust, integrity, cooperation, respect, honesty, compassion, congruence, vulnerability, character, integrity, risk-taking, gifts from the soul, political reform, freedom, redistribution of power, autonomy, creativity, collectiveness, authenticity, empowerment, truth, intention, intuition, and energy.

While some people chose words that do not have a religious connotation, others found that religious terms best captured the idea. One respondent noted that in his own research that some people used the words, God, Holy Spirit, or Guardian. While use of these words may bring a lot of baggage, the use of new words comes with problems of its own. For example, many of the alternative words carry varying interpretations resulting in misconception and the need for further defining. Myron suggested that, "There is a tendency to either sound extremely evangelical or on the other hand to choose words that have an overly 'new age' ring to them". He proposes that, "terminology may be the most perplexing problem dealing with spirit at work issues".

3.5. Spirit at work: an individual or organizational phenomenon?

While this study focused on individual spirit at work, it is apparent that spirit at work also occurs at the organizational level. Spirit at work at the organizational level is about the purpose and functioning of the organization. It is said to be evident when there is congruence between what the organization says they are about and what actually happens day-to-day. The work of the organization is measured against its higher purpose, that is, the stated mission and values of the organization. One participant described this as:

The spirit of the foundation . . . that is the mission, vision, principles and values of the organization. And so it depends on whether or not that's solid and congruent with the day-to-day activities that go on in that organization (Kelsey).

Participants suggested that individuals could be spiritual while the organization is not or the organization can be spiritual and the individuals are not. For example, a participant said:

I believe that if you are truly a spirited person, a grounded person who believes that they're doing the right thing or that they're achieving their life purpose or they are working toward their mission, you can live inside that toxic environment quite nicely . . . because you choose how you react or operate in any situation. We each make a choice (Kelsey).

However, a group of spiritual individuals working together does not mean that the organization is spiritual. Some suggest that for both the individual and

organization to be successful, a combination is required. One participant concluded:

[It is] an organization or individual who gets it that says, "We want to make money and be profitable, but we want to be whole; we want to have it more humane; we want to have an organization that's run by deeper and better values" (Ivan).

4. Discussion and implications

The spirit at work area has lacked a widely accepted definition that could be used to create a measure of individual spirit at work; determine how individuals develop spirit at work, including an identification of factors that enhance or impede spirit at work; and to ascertain the impact of spirit at work on wellbeing and productivity. We believe that we have generated a comprehensive definition of spirit at work that is grounded in individuals' experiences, is consistent with relevant substantive theories of self-transcendence, self-actualization and peak experience, existential meaning and personality development, and is compatible with existing literature on spirit at work. In fact, our definition of spirit at work may help bridge the different views of spirituality typically identified in the literature by capturing the commonalities of the experience despite one's spiritual orientation.

Spirit at work has many dimensions, but as participants were quick to point out, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Spirit at work is not about any one dimension, but the whole of all the dimensions collectively. Even though we "broke it down" to explore the different aspects and to understand it more fully, spirit at work is a holistic experience where individuals share a sense of interconnectedness and common purpose, authenticity, alignment between their values and actions, feel good about what they do, are aware of a spiritual presence, sense that they are contributing to the common good, and enjoy mystical moments.

Spirit at work may be an antidote to the spiritual disorientation experienced by many, particularly those who are looking to their work to fulfill that vacuum. For example, individuals who experience spirit at work report a sense of alignment between their values and beliefs and their work, feel a strong sense of interconnectedness with others as well as a shared purpose, and find meaning in being engaged in work that has a higher purpose. Often referred to as "serving others", spirit at work has a transcendent nature. Engaging in work that has a higher good and serves others is consistent with Frankl's (1966) theory of transcendence which posits that deeper meaning can only be realized by transcending self-interests.

A concept that seems to be accepted in the literature is that spirit at work involves "bringing one's whole self to work", including one's spirit. However, if

one views spirituality as a basic human phenomenon, then one would have to agree with the observation made by several participants in this study that it is impossible not to take one's spirit to work. More accurately, it is suggested that spirit at work involves the ability to express oneself completely or fully at work, including one's spirit.

Other research (Mitroff and Denton, 1999) showed us that many believe that spirit at work is about promoting religion in the workplace and fear its inclusion. What became apparent in this research is that individuals who experience spirit at work share a common ground, in spite of their spiritual or religious beliefs. What seems to be important is a connection to something larger than self, not one's particular religious or spiritual beliefs. While religion is an important factor to some individuals who experience spirit at work, a connection to a broader spirituality, humanity, or nature is just as relevant. It seems to be the strength of this connection that influences the experience of spirit at work.

The mystical dimension, that sense of perfection, living in the moment, and transcendence, to the experience of spirit at work seems congruent with what others call peak experiences or higher levels of consciousness (Maslow, 1968). Perhaps it is the mystical and spiritual dimensions that set the experience of spirit at work apart from other work experiences that are satisfying, enjoyable, and meaningful.

In addition to focusing on the spirit of the individual at work, one must not lose sight of the spirit or energy of the organization. It was suggested that when spirit at work is operating at both the individual and organizational level, the work environment becomes a place where employees' creativity and total self can be expressed. This research supports the differentiation between organizational and individual spirit at work that is emerging in the literature. Further research is required to differentiate individual and organizational spirit at work and to find the linkages between them.

While this definition is a "work in progress", it serves as a starting point for a discussion about what the construct is and isn't, based on the actual experience of those who enjoy spirit at work. We hope that provision of this definition will:

- further our understanding of the construct;
- lead to the development of an instrument to measure spirit at work;
- stimulate research to identify personal and organizational factors that foster or impede the experience of spirit at work;
- stimulate research to explore personal and work/organizational outcomes related to spirit at work; and
- have practical application in work settings.

Notes

1. Spirituality can be described in three ways: religious, metaphysical, and humanistic (Twigg *et al.*, 2001). Referring to religious spirituality, the focus is on the connection with God. Metaphysically, spirituality is seen as a belief in a force greater than oneself (Witmer, 1989). In humanistic (or secular) spirituality, the interest is in searching for meaning of experiences outside of a religious view (Paloutzian, 1997) or in terms of fulfillment (Frankl, 1969). Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) offer a similar description of spirituality: intrinsic-origin, religious, and existentialist views. While these differentiations are useful, the overlap is obvious, highlighting the ongoing debate regarding definition (Wong, 1998).
2. Pseudonyms are used to preserve anonymity of participants.

References

- Ashmos, D. and Duchon, D. (2000), "Spirituality at work", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 134-45.
- Brandt, E. (1996), "Workplace trends: corporate pioneers explore spirituality", *HR Magazine*, April.
- Caudron, S. (1997), "The search for meaning at work", *Training and Development*, Vol. 51 No. 9, pp. 24-32.
- Dreher, M. (1994), "Qualitative research methods from the reviewer's perspective", in Morse, J.M. (Ed.), *Critical Issues in Qualitative Research Methods*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 281-97.
- Duxbury, L. and Higgins, C. (2002), "Work-life balance in the new millennium: where are we: where do we need to go?", Executive Summary, Carleton University School of Business, Ottawa.
- Fairholm, G. (1997), *Capturing the Heart of Leadership: Spirituality and Community in the New American Workplace*, Praeger, Westport, CT.
- Frankl, V. (1966), "Self-transcendence as a human phenomenon", *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Fall, pp. 97-106.
- Frankl, V. (1969), *The Will to Meaning*, Plume Books, New York, NY.
- Gibbons, P. (1999), "Spirituality at work: definitions, measures, assumptions and validation", available at: <http://spiritatwork.com/university/Gibbons1999.htm> (accessed April 27, 2001).
- Guillory, W. (2000), *The Living Organization: Spirituality in the Workplace. A Guide for Adapting to the Chaotically Changing Workplace*, Innovations International, Salt Lake City, UT.
- Izzo, J. and Klein, E. (1998), *Awakening the Corporate Soul: Four Paths to Unleash the Power of People at Work*, Fairwinds Press, Vancouver.
- Jacobson, S. (1994), "Spirituality and transformational leadership in secular setting: a Delphi study", an abridgement of an unpublished dissertation, Seattle University, Seattle, WA.
- Krishnakumar, S. and Neck, C.P. (2002), "The 'what' 'why' and 'how' of spirituality in the workplace", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 17 No. 3, pp. 153-64.
- Lee, C. and Zemke, R. (1993), "The search for spirit in the workplace", *Training*, Vol. 30 No. 6, pp. 21-7.
- Leigh, P. (1997), "The new spirit at work", *Training & Development*, Vol. 51 No. 3, pp. 26-41.
- Lincoln, Y. and Guba, E. (1985), *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Sage, Beverly Hills, CA.
- Lowe, G. (2000), *The Quality of Work: A People Centered Agenda*, Oxford University Press, Don Mills, Ontario.

- McKnight, R. (1984), "Spirituality in the workplace", in Adams, J.D. (Ed.), *Transforming Work*, Miles River Press, Alexandria, VA.
- Maslow, A.H. (1968), *Toward a Psychology of Being*, D. Van Nostrand, Princeton, NJ.
- Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1994), *Qualitative Data Analysis*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Milliman, J., Ferguson, J., Trickett, D. and Condemni, B. (1999), "Spirit and community at Southwest Airlines: an investigation of a spiritual values-based model", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 221-33.
- Mitroff, I. and Denton, E. (1999), "A study of spirituality in the workplace", *Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 40 No. 4, pp. 83-92.
- Moxley, R. (2000), *Leadership and Spirit: Breathing New Vitality and Energy into Individuals and Organizations*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Myers, J.E. (1990), "Wellness throughout the lifespan", *Guidepost*, May.
- Neal, J.A., Lichtenstein, B.M.B. and Banner, D. (1999), "Spiritual perspectives on individual, organizational and societal transformation", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 175-85.
- Neck, C. and Milliman, J. (1994), "Thought self-leadership: finding spiritual fulfillment in organizational life", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 9 No. 6, pp. 9-16.
- Paloutzian, R.F. (1997), "Spiritual well-being: a psychological perspective", *Aging & Spirituality*, Vol. IX, pp. 1-3.
- Perry-Jenkins, M., Repetti, R. and Crouter, A. (2000), "Work and family in the 1990s", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 62, pp. 981-98.
- Tischler, L., Biberman, J. and McKeage, R. (2002), "Linking emotional intelligence, spirituality and workplace performance: definitions, models and ideas for research", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 17 No. 3, pp. 203-18.
- Twigg, N., Wyld, D. and Brown, G. (2001), "Quest for fire: a redefinition and reconceptualization of spirituality at work", *Insights to a Changing World Journal*, available at: <http://spiritatwork.com/uversity/Twigg%20Wild%20Brown.htm> (accessed April 27, 2001).
- Witmer, J.M. (1989), "Reaching toward wholeness: an integrated approach to well being over the life span", in Sweeney, T.J. (Ed.), *Alderian Counseling: A Practical Approach for a New Decade*, Accelerate Press, Muncie, IN.
- Wong, P.T.P. (1998), "Spirituality, meaning, and successful aging", in Wong, P.T.P. and Fry, P.S. (Eds), *Human Quest for Meaning: A Handbook of Psychological Research and Clinical Applications*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.