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Creating organizational conditions that foster employee spirit at work

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Abstract

Purpose – This study sought to identify organizational factors that foster an individual's experience of spirit at work.

Design/methodology/approach – Ten women and three men, ranging in age from 26 to 81, who were in full-time paid employment in a variety of occupations, and who self-identified as having high spirit at work, participated in in-depth, reflective interviews.

Findings – Inspired leadership emerged as central to influencing individual experiences of spirit at work and was strongly linked to six other organizational factors (strong organizational foundation; organizational integrity; positive workplace culture and space; sense of community among members; opportunities for personal fulfillment, continuous learning, and development; and appreciation and regard for employees and their contribution).

Research limitations/implications – Future research needs to investigate how each of these conditions is related to measured levels of spirit at work in a larger, representative sample, and how measured spirit at work is related to work outcomes.

Practical implications – Although this study did not investigate specific practices or strategies to increase spirit at work, results suggest that organizations wishing to enhance their employees' spirit at work could focus efforts on creating organizational conditions that encourage inspiring leadership and mentorship and the other six identified factors.

Originality/value – The paper raises awareness and highlights issues surrounding organizational factors that foster an individual's experience of spirit at work.

Keywords Organizational change, Morale, Employee attitudes, Employees, Leadership

Paper type Research paper

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Spirit at work, at the personal level, reflects a distinct state that involves profound feelings of wellbeing, a belief that one's work makes a contribution, a sense of connection to others and common purpose, an awareness of a connection to something larger than self, and a sense of perfection and transcendence (Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2004). Perceived as beneficial to employees, customers, and employers, spirit at work is being promoted by academics and organizational consultants. Organizations are introducing programs to increase spirit at work, however, research identifying organizational characteristics that directly cultivate an individual's experience of spirit at work is lacking. Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify organizational factors that individuals with high spirit at work perceive to foster their personal experience of spirit at work.



The changing nature of work

The past several decades has seen profound changes in the nature of work. These changes have led to work environments that are shifting and uncertain rather than stable and predictable (Betcherman and Lowe, 1997). Recent trends toward organizational downsizing and restructuring have negatively impacted employee morale and loyalty (Caudron, 1997). Many employees feel insecure at work, they are less committed to their employer, and their productivity has decreased (Duxbury and Higgins, 2002; Frone *et al.*, 1997; HRDC, 1997). The well-being of employees has declined. They report more stress, poorer mental health, increased absences from work, and decreased satisfaction with life and work (Duxbury and Higgins, 2002; HRDC, 1997; Schor, 1993).

At the same time, employees are experiencing an increased desire for meaningfulness and fulfilment at work (Mitroff and Denton, 1999; Cacioppe, 2000a, b). The more employees experience personal purpose and meaning at work, the more they are committed to the organization (Milliman *et al.*, 2003); thus employers are seeking ways to facilitate meaningfulness at work. Upon interviewing over 100 senior managers and executives, Mitroff and Denton (1999) concluded that what gives employees meaning and purpose at work is: the ability to realize one's full potential; being associated with a good or ethical organization; interesting work; making money; having good colleagues; serving mankind; service to future generations, and service to one's immediate community. Individuals are seeking employment with certain characteristics that give meaning to work (Brandt, 1996; Neck and Milliman, 1994).

In response to this changing nature of work and desire of employees for fulfilling work, organizations are looking for new ways to be successful. Researchers posit that in order for organizations to be successful, employees need to be committed to and passionate about their work (Fairholm, 1997; Moxley, 2000; Secretan, 1997) and call for workplace cultures, leadership, and work processes that foster such commitment and passion (Fairholm, 1997; Jacobson, 1994; Mitroff and Denton, 1999). The development of spirituality in the workplace is believed to be linked with increased morale (Leigh, 1997), increased honesty and trust in the organization, an enhanced sense of personal fulfilment of employees (Krishnakumar and Neck, 2002), positive employee attitudes, increased job commitment, and enhanced organizational performance (Milliman *et al.*, 1999). Empirical evidence demonstrating a relationship between spirit at work and positive individual and organizational outcomes is beginning to emerge (Kinjerski, 2004; Milliman *et al.*, 2003; Mitroff and Denton, 1999). Thus, some corporations are integrating spirituality into human resource and organizational development programs.

Whereas some of these initiatives focus on altering the characteristics of the organization (e.g. Tom's of Maine (Brandt, 1996) and Ceridan (Leigh, 1997) are based on spiritual values), the majority of these efforts seem to focus on interventions directed towards the employee. For example, the Bank of Montreal incorporated a spiritual component in their training programs (Brandt, 1996). Exxon introduced a "whole person" model and helped employees to link their purpose, principles, and values to personal and work goals (Leigh, 1997). Corporations like WalMart, 3M Corporation, and Proctor & Gamble are assisting employees to identify and then align their personal vision for the company with the organization's vision (Cacioppe, 2000a). Boeing and Xerox, Fortune 500 companies, have hired consultants to cultivate the spiritual energies of their staff (Harrington *et al.*, 2001). Such programs are being promoting as ways to increase employee spirit at work and positive organizational outcomes.

Spirit at work

Whereas spirit or spirituality at work is being promoted as a potential avenue for providing meaning and fulfilment at work, the factors that foster spirit at work have not yet been empirically identified. Moreover, a definition of spirit at work has not yet been widely accepted. Spirit at work (Cacioppe, 2000a; Fairholm, 1996; Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2004; Leigh, 1997), spirituality at work (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Brandt, 1996; Twigg *et al.*, 2001), spirit in the workplace (Lee and Zemke, 1993); spirituality in the workplace (Groen, 2003; Mitroff and Denton, 1999; Neck and Milliman; 1994) and workplace spirituality (Harrington *et al.*, 2001; Lips-Wiersma, 2003; Milliman *et al.*, 2003) are commonly interchanged and used to describe what seems to be a similar construct.

Institutes launched to foster understanding about the subject also use the terms interchangeably. For example, the Spirit at Work Association, University of New Haven, Connecticut refers to itself as “the professional association for people involved with spirituality in the workplace”. Spirit at Work, University of Canterbury, New Zealand, is “devoted to exploring work practices that engage people as whole human beings”. Finally, the Centre for Spirituality at Work, Toronto, Canada report that the centre is “for people who truly desire to deepen the connection between who they are and the work they do”.

These terms are also used to refer to experiences of individuals (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2004), organizations (Izzo and Klein, 1998), and a both, individuals and organizations (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003; Gibbons, 1999; Guillory, 2000). Incorporating both, workplace spirituality has been described as a:

... framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employee's experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003, p. 13).

At the organizational level, spirituality in the workplace refers to an organizational culture guided by mission statements, leadership and business practices that are socially responsible and value-driven, that recognizes the contributions that employees make to the organization, and that promotes personal spiritual development and wellbeing (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Guillory, 2000; Mitroff and Denton, 1999).

As an individual construct, spirituality 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, par. 25). It is said to be evident where employees can bring their whole selves to work, deploy more of 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). These definitions share the common themes of finding meaning and making a contribution through work, serving others, connectedness at work, and authenticity at work. Although Sheep (2004) puts forth a compelling argument for the existence of conceptual convergence, Kinjerski and Skrypnek provide the only empirically grounded definition:

Spirit at work is a distinct state that is characterized by cognitive, interpersonal, spiritual, and mystical dimensions. Spirit at work involves: *engaging work* characterized by a profound feeling of well-being, a belief that one is engaged in meaningful work that has a higher

purpose, an awareness of alignment between one's values and beliefs and one's work, and a sense of being authentic; a *spiritual connection* characterized by a sense of connection to something larger than self; a *sense of community* characterized by a feeling of connectedness to others and common purpose; and a mystical or unitive experience characterized by a positive state of energy or vitality, a sense of perfection, transcendence, and experiences of joy and bliss (Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2006, pp. 16-17).

Although a number of terms continue to be used to describe this experience, we have opted for "spirit at work" to describe the experience by individuals. The emergence of individual-centered spirit at work as separate from organizational-centered spirit at work (Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2004; Krishnakumar and Neck, 2002) has promoted research focusing on the individual. This research has revealed that individuals come to experience spirit at work in distinctly different ways and that personal traits, personal actions, and organizational features interact to foster its development (Kinjerski, 2004). Organizational factors set the context for and influence an individual's spirit at work. Yet, some individual's experience of spirit at work is more dependent on conditions in the workplace than is that of others (Kinjerski, 2004). This paper presents the findings of a qualitative inquiry into organizational factors that contribute to the experience of spirit at work for a group of individuals high in self-reported spirit at work.

Method

Research design

This research is part of a larger study investigating how individuals in paid work contexts develop spirit at work. As spirit at work is a relatively new concept and research is still in the exploratory stages, in-depth, face-to-face qualitative methods were employed.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals across the life span with varying characteristics and who reported high levels of spirit at work. A list of potential research participants who were either known to the first author, referred by colleagues, or identified from published stories in local newspapers about positive work experiences was developed. Identified individuals were contacted and informed of the study. The first author shared a general understanding of spirit at work (work is perceived as meaningful, feelings of making a contribution, a sense that their work was important) and why the individual was thought to have spirit at work. Individuals who self-identified as having spirit at work were asked to participate in an interview.

About 15 individuals (ten females and five males) ranging in age from 26 to 81 years were interviewed. Only individuals who were in paid full-time employment were included in the data analysis. This resulted in 13 participants. Of them 12 were Caucasian and one was Aboriginal. Their highest level of education included a high school diploma ($n = 2$), apprenticeship or special training ($n = 3$), two-year diploma ($n = 2$), undergraduate degree ($n = 2$), or graduate or professional degree ($n = 4$).

Occupations represented included: dentist, educator, hair stylist, landscape designer, medical doctor, organizational consultant, parking attendant, physiotherapist, police constable, professor, real estate agent, receptionist, and secretary. Participants worked for a variety of organizations ranging from small businesses, professional corporations, and not-for-profit agencies to large bureaucracies. All participants worked full-time,

reporting a range of income. Six participants reported incomes between \$25,000 and 50,000, three reported incomes from \$50,000 to 100,000, and four reported incomes over \$100,000.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Interviews lasted from one and one-half to two hours and some participants were interviewed twice or contacted a second time by telephone. All interviews were conducted by the first author who explained to participants why they were selected for an interview, e.g. "You seem passionate about your work."; "People mention your name when I describe spirit at work."; "You have spoken about always knowing what you wanted to do for work."; or "I read the story about you in the newspaper where you were described as ... (the elements of spirit at work)". After a general description of spirit at work, each participant was asked to rate him or herself on a spirit at work scale with 1 being low and 10 being high and to explain why they chose that rating. All participants rated themselves between 8 and 10 on the ten point scale.

Participants were asked to describe their work, what it was that drew them to their work, what a typical work day looked like, how often they experienced spirit at work, and how it felt. Participants were then asked to describe a time when they felt most alive, involved and excited about their work, a time when they felt good about their work. The conditions around that experience, including their contribution to the experience, were explored. The interview then moved to questions about how they came to experience spirit at work and those factors that fostered or stood in the way of the experience. (When it became apparent that personal and external factors were seen to foster participants' experience of spirit at work, the interview included questions that asked individuals to reflect on those conditions.) Participants' experience of work over time was explored, with a focus on when spirit at work was strongest, was not present, and the reasons for the change. This study reports on the organizational factors that participants perceived fostered their experience of spirit at work.

Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The first author read and assigned descriptive, first level codes, grouping the initial codes that appeared frequently into themes. Quotes supporting these initial codes were documented and grouped according to the emerging themes. Coding and themes were examined by the second author and the categories were reworked until all coded data fit into the identified themes and the two authors obtained agreement. Constant comparison enabled the linking of categories into a coherent framework. Memo writing, which involves a written record of analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), was one mechanism used to transform data into concepts and then to continually reflect on the research process and analysis of data. Once a central category became apparent, the researchers went back to the raw data to determine if the relationship among this central idea and all other categories was supported. Ongoing member checking, that is confirming interpretations and themes with the participants, throughout the interview as well as corroboration of emerging themes with subsequent participants occurred.

Findings

Participants' reports of organizational conditions that fostered their spirit at work clustered into seven categories: inspiring leadership and mentorship; strong

organizational foundation; organizational integrity; positive workplace culture and space; sense of community among members; opportunities for personal fulfilment, continuous learning, and development; and appreciation and regard for employees and their contribution.

Although a priority sequence among each of the categories was not evident, inspiring leadership emerged as instrumental in all of the organizational factors identified as fostering spirit at work and, thus, is shown as the hub of the wheel in Figure 1. Each of these themes is briefly described below.

Inspiring leadership

Participants' experience of spirit at work was enhanced through a particular kind of leadership, one that was perceived as inspiring. Inspiring leaders created a caring culture, practiced enabling leadership, and modelled behaviours that were consistent with the organization's philosophy and intention.

Culture of caring. Participants indicated that their leaders focused on relationships and were concerned about the welfare of all staff. Noreen[1] reported that both staff and leaders benefit from this type of culture because everyone is sharing with each other and feeling like they are contributing. Karla asserted that "a culture of caring and a culture where people or managers can manage from the heart and work with people" was a key element in fostering spirit at work. For Sandra, this culture of caring translated into a police detachment that was extremely close and supportive.

Enabling leadership. Participants reported that their leaders enabled, mentored, and supported staff to achieve the organization's purpose. In doing so, leaders regularly communicated the philosophy and priorities to staff, involved members in the organization's decision-making process, ensured employees had sufficient information to make decisions about their work, and release control, allowing employees to do the work. Shelia described her leader:

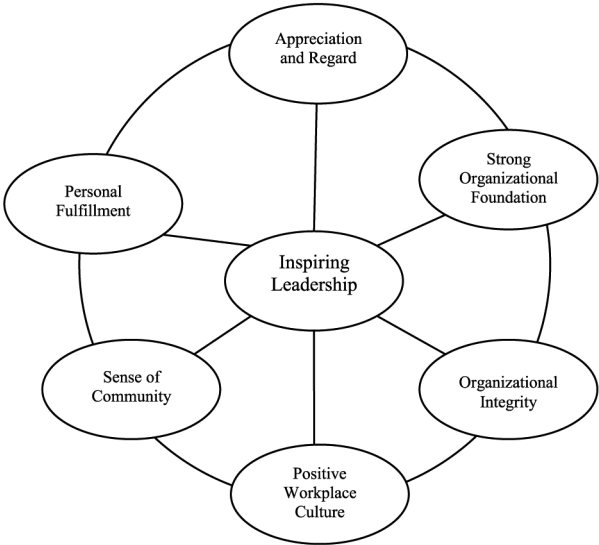


Figure 1.
Organizational factors
that foster spirit at work

... [She] delegates responsibility and trusts that you can do it ... She believes in challenging people ... She lets me take control. She does not interfere ... She's not the kind that will hover over your shoulder ... and check on everything you've done.

As leaders themselves, some participants saw their job as a "seed planter" planting seeds and thoughts, but leaving it up to the individual to bring it to fruition.

Modelling behaviours. Leaders and senior staff were reported to model and cultivate behaviours that were consistent with the mission and philosophy of the organization. Many participants stated that spirit at work "is determined by the leadership" of the organization because it is the leader "that gives it form". Ken discussed how a new dean changed his department:

The new Dean came in ... and he just changed everybody's attitude. He made everybody work as a team ... He walks around and talks to everybody. He knows everybody's name. He is inspirational ...

A strong organizational foundation

Participants reported that spirit at work was fostered when the organization was based on a strong foundation. This foundation generally included a shared vision, mission, values, purpose, and goals with an intention to contribute to the overall good of society.

Compelling vision. Participants reported that a compelling vision that served a higher purpose led to a strong organizational foundation. These organizations seemed to have the courage to "create a future". As Noreen observed, they were willing "to push the boundaries a little each time" and "dared to put a vision around what could be". The organization's vision and mission always had to do with contributing to the overall good of society. Moreover, participants reported sharing a common value base with colleagues that was related to the organization's vision and intention.

Clarity of intention. In addition to a compelling organizational vision, individuals advised that they had personal clarity about the higher intention and purpose of their organization. They described awareness of the organizational philosophy, why the organization existed, and to whom the services were being provided. Kelly reported that once individuals understand their organization's vision and mission, they are in a better position to see how they can contribute:

... A lot of businesses ... know what service they provide or what product they produce, but they don't necessarily know what business they are in. If they can understand their business in that broader context of what it means to other people ... it opens things up ... Then a petroleum company becomes an energy company ... Everybody understands what it means ...

Ben advised that his leader ensured that employees knew the priorities by "making sure that people remember why they are there".

Reflection and evaluation. Participants advised that a strong foundation was facilitated by employees undergoing a regular process of reflection and evaluation about the organization's vision and purpose. Given opportunities for reflection, participants were able to review the organization's mission, ascertain whether they made a difference individually and collectively, be reminded about why the organization exists, and determine where it is heading.

Organizational integrity

Participants reported that organizational integrity helped contribute to their experience of spirit at work. When there was alignment between the work of the organization and the organization's mission and purpose and when a climate of trust and honour permeated the organization, it was easier for individuals to be authentic, to have personal integrity, and to see how their work was related to their personal values and higher purpose.

Alignment. Participants also reported congruency between the organization's mission and purpose and their personal values and higher purpose. Kelly's description of her work, "... the work and the people and the projects ... were incredibly right" was an indication of alignment. A sense of alignment enabled Karla to remain focused on what was important even in a time of crisis because "it did feel right to be working in that area" and it was "something that I felt connected to ... [I felt] that it was a good fit". Whereas these individuals acknowledged the relationship between their work and what the organization stood for, other individuals recalled being helped to see how their particular work supported the purpose of the organization.

Trust and honour. Participants reported that their spirit at work was encouraged when their organization fostered trust and honour among its members and the people it served. This sense of integrity was evidenced through a presence of shared values which included being treated with kindness, dignity, trust, respect and acceptance. Like others, Shelia pointed to the role leaders have in creating an ethical work environment:

... [P]eople that are into ... capacity-building ... they practice what they preach ... People see how they work, see the work ethic that they have – the motivation, the commitment, the honesty ...

Positive workplace culture and space

Participants reported that positive working environments – where they felt good about going to work, had a sense of comfort in the organization, and were able to focus on their work – fostered their experience of spirit at work. Workplace culture tends to be reflective of leadership, relationships, opportunities, priorities, and how members are regarded. For example, care, collaboration, and support demonstrated and cultivated by senior staff was viewed as critical in the creation of a positive workplace culture. Participants reported that their leaders created an atmosphere that enabled them to do their best work. Ben advised that because his employer set-up the workplace to be peaceful and calm, he was able to be focussed in his work. Molly reported that the atmosphere in her workplace made everyone feel comfortable, whereas for Noreen, her workplace was opening and welcoming. Rowena asserted that organizations either portray "a culture of good or a culture of evil". These individuals reported working in a culture of good.

Finally, Kelly reported that her experience of spirit at work was impacted by the five senses of the work environment, "the sight, smell, ... taste in the air, the things you touch [and] hear". She was very conscious of the effect that the physical environment had on her and other's spirit.

A sense of community among members

Participants reported that positive connections among staff and a sense of community were promoted in their organizations. This was characterized by personal relationships, working collaboratively, and sharing fun times.

Personal relationships. Participants reported that, in their organizations, members knew each other as individuals as well as colleagues. Members “take time to connect and share with colleagues”. Co-workers and leaders “recognize when someone is struggling” and they “support one another through hard times”. Like many participants, Ken described his work environment “like a family”. Strong connections with each another gave participants a sense of belonging to a community. These personal relationships extended beyond colleagues to other individuals they worked with and included associates, referral sources, specialists, collateral resources, and those individuals they were in business to serve.

Value of team. Participants reported that these collaborative, cooperative, and caring relationships enabled them to work effectively as a team. Recognizing that they “couldn’t have gotten their on our own” participants spoke of the value of the team and how “they could learn from each other”. Molly advised that, “it is like someone has lifted the world off my shoulders”. As Rowena said, “it doesn’t always have to be you;” the work can be shared with others.

Playfulness. Having fun and being playful was an important factor in participant’s work experience. Karla reported that she “had so much fun [working] . . . that it felt like play” whereas others suggested that it was important to play with and share fun times with colleagues. Rowena posited:

If you never play with your team mates, your team isn’t a very good team – recognizing that none of us can do nearly the amount of work without the team.

Opportunities for personal fulfillment, continuous learning and development

Another way organizations created conditions for spirit at work was through the provision of opportunities for personal fulfilment, continuous learning and development. Participants reported that they were given opportunities to achieve professional and personal growth which came in many forms.

Engaging work. Participants reported that their spirit at work was enhanced through the ability to be involved in engaging work. Karla found her work to be engaging because it was interesting and had a problem solving component to it:

I would call it really engaging, so really totally into it so that you don’t notice the time, you are not really thinking about the time, you are not really thinking of anything else, you are quite full of the work itself . . .

What made work engaging was unique to each individual and ranged from police investigations, to writing one’s own music, to rescuing plants, to helping others problem solve, and developing programs for students. What was common was that opportunities were created for these individuals to be engaged in ways that had personal meaning.

Initiative and creativity. Some participants reported that employers encouraged an openness to possibilities and new ideas which resulted in positive outcomes. For example, Ben advised that his openness towards Chinese medicine, which was promoted by his leader, led to transformational change in his life, his work, and ultimately, his experience of spirit at work. Opportunities to take initiative gave participants an outlet for creative expression – participants valued the opportunity to experiment with new ideas, work with new concepts, and solve problems.

Flexibility and autonomy. Most participants reported having flexibility and autonomy to do their work. For some participants, this meant a choice in the hours they worked or how they scheduled their day or week. For others it was the freedom to make decisions or to determine how best to structure their work. Even though one participant was an employee, he had so much flexibility and autonomy that he advised, “essentially, I am working on my own . . . I am basically running my own business”.

Flexibility and autonomy also translated into participants being able to make decisions and influence outcomes. Sandra reported that when she was alone in the field, she had to make the decisions. “[The organization] put all of that onto us . . . to push ourselves and do our own thing. . . . They put a lot of trust in us to do everything”. Karla advised that it was important “to create opportunities for people to . . . be a part of [and] to have a voice in what they are doing and how they are doing it”.

Life-long learning. For some participants, it was important that the employer “create those times when we learn something new”. Several participants referred to training offered or supported by the organization. In some instances, this was directly related to work, but in other situations, it was related to personal growth. Karla described a program that a previous employer implemented that “got people to do some reflection and self-analysis” while exploring their skills, interests, and values. Other participants reported being supported to further their education.

Appreciation and regard for employees and their contribution

The final way organizations created conditions that cultivated spirit at work was to show appreciation and regard for its members and their contribution. They did this through valuing and recognizing the role and contribution of each person.

Valuing of each person's gifts and role. Participants indicated that it was important for organizations to “help members understand and respect their own worth” and to ensure that “each person is valued for their particular contribution”. Noreen spoke to the importance of:

... establish[ing] an atmosphere where everyone feels that they can contribute and they are there for a reason and we honour what they have to contribute.

Kelly posited that:

... if every person in the organization understands how they can contribute to the overall goal and how important each one of them is . . . organizations would fly.

This perception was exemplified by Shelia' story. She explained how her boss's belief in her and her potential to contribute resulted in her participating, as a secretary, in the development of the strategic plan. Being told, “You have a lot to offer . . . [Your] input is important” freed her to share her expertise.

Recognition of contribution. Participants reported that their work efforts were recognized internally and, sometimes, by outside sources. Even though these individuals were intrinsically motivated, Karla advised that:

It feels good when someone says, “Oh, you guys did great” . . . You knew that first and then it is kind of like the icing on the cake when they tell you.

Having others notice and appreciate your work felt good. Sandra indicated that, “[My organization] is astounding for making their employees feel worthy and [that they are] doing really good in their job”. In addition to being acknowledged for

their contribution, some participants reported being recognized through awards, appointments, gifts, bonuses, and trips. They all shared a sense of being appreciated and were recognized as adequately as needed. Being valued for one's particular contribution and role in the organization as well as being recognized in a way that is meaningful supports the view that appreciation and regard for members and their contribution encourages the experience of spirit at work.

These organizational features are similar to a strong organizational culture – it is the combination of these factors that is seen to foster spirit at work. In addition to fostering a strong organizational climate, the presence of these organizational features appears to promote a personal sense of purpose and meaning for employees.

The power of organizational characteristics

Shelia's story highlights how organizational factors can highly influence one's experience of work. She reported that the influence of her organization was so strong that she changed from being a caring and committed employee to one who was bitter and uncaring. She was only able to regain her spirit at work upon moving to a new organization.

Shelia described a time in her career where she felt a lack of respect, felt degraded and put down, felt that her services were not needed, was given no information, felt like she was blocked, and had no sense of belonging. She recalled becoming bitter and adopting an attitude of not caring:

I'm going on a coffee break, and I don't care if he calls, or "I'm taking a longer lunch, and I don't care," or "I'll just sleep in and be late" . . . I was developing an attitude, and it was no longer cooperative, it was no longer happy.

Being unhappy with who she had become, Shelia changed jobs. She immediately felt included, challenged, supported, respected, trusted, valued, involved in rewarding work, and recognized for her contribution. After three years in the new position, Sheila continues to experience high levels of spirit at work – she continues to be highly motivated and involved in her work and finds it rewarding.

You're so committed to doing well . . . that no matter what the problem . . . you're not going to give up on it . . . because you really want to see it succeed . . .

The person was the same. The organizational features were different. The outcomes were opposite.

Discussion

Our research revealed that individuals' experiences of spirit at work are associated with:

- (1) leaders and senior members who inspire employees through their leadership and their example;
- (2) a strong organizational foundation that includes a shared vision, mission, purpose, and an intention to contribute to the overall good of society;
- (3) organizational integrity and work that is aligned with its mission and purpose;
- (4) a positive workplace culture including a positive physical space for employees to work in;

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- (5) positive connections among all members and a sense of community in the organization;
 - (6) opportunities for members to pursue professional and personal growth and to fulfil their own personal mission through work; and
 - (7) appreciation and regard for the contributions made by its members.

Whereas these seven conditions all contribute to the experience of spirit at work, inspiring leadership stood apart from the other factors. Leadership was identified as the most important organizational component in the development of spirit at work and was seen to be instrumental in all of the organizational conditions identified as fostering spirit at work. Leaders were seen to cultivate a strong organizational foundation with a compelling vision and clear purpose. They influenced the tone and direction of the organization as well as the way work was completed. They exemplified personal integrity and promoted organizational integrity. Leaders demonstrated and fostered a culture of caring that contributed to a sense of community among employees. They supported and created opportunities for personal development and fulfilment through the provision of opportunities for engaging work, creativity and initiative, flexibility and autonomy, and life-long learning. Finally, leaders were in a position to inspire, appreciate, and reward those who contributed to the intention of the organization. Given the powerful influence attributed to the leaders in each of these conditions, it would be difficult for the other six conditions to occur without the presence of an inspiring leader.

Given the strong emphasis placed on leadership in this study, it is not surprising that visionary and inspiring leadership was found to be a critical trait in the top 100 best companies in the USA (Leiber, 1998) and identified as the most influential factor in fostering spirit at work (Cavanagh, 1999; Fairholm, 1996; Moxley, 2000). Inspired leadership, as identified in this study, has much in common with spiritual leadership as posited by Korac-Kakabadse *et al.* (2002). Moreover, it has been suggested that successful leaders will be spiritual leaders (Cacioppe, 2000b), who build shared values, set a common vision, create shared meaning, enable growth and transformation, help followers to feel powerful and influential, follow intuition to produce real change that matters, commit to service and servant leadership, and transform themselves, others, and their organizations (Korac-Kakabadse *et al.*, 2002).

This research pointed to the importance of a strong organizational foundation in fostering spirit at work. A shared vision, mission, values, purpose, and goals along with an intention to contribute to the higher good seemed to foster that sense of shared purpose among staff. Interestingly, a sense of purpose among staff was the second critical trait in the top 100 best companies (Leiber, 1998). It is reasonable to expect that alignment among the organization's mission and purpose and employees' values and higher purpose promotes organizational integrity, another factor identified in this study as fostering spirit at work. Moreover, clarity of personal and organizational values (Kouzes and Posner, 2002) and alignment between the two (Milliman *et al.*, 2003) is associated with increased employee commitment to the organization and decreased intention to quit. Thus, in addition to obtaining clarity about the organization's higher purpose, helping employees to identify their personal mission and values, and then to align their work with the organizations' mission and that which gives them meaning, is expected to increase the likelihood of being engaged in one's work. Engagement in work that carries personal meaning tends to have high intrinsic reward, and thus is motivating.

A strong connection with others and a sense of community often develops when a common purpose is shared among staff (Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2004). When collaborative and cooperative relationships are fostered, employees are enabled to work together effectively for the collective benefit of the organization. Moreover, a culture of caring and compassion can be cultivated as co-workers and colleagues get to know one another personally and have fun at work. This sense of community and culture of caring is expected to free employees to be authentic and express their whole selves at work, factors suggested as important in fostering spirit at work. Employees experiencing a strong sense of connection and sense of purpose report that they are more creative and innovative at their work (Harman, 1992; Hawley, 1993). It is not surprising that Milliman *et al.* (2003) found that as the sense of community increased, the employee's commitment to the organization increased and the intention to quit decreased.

A physical work environment with amenities to support employees was one of three critical traits found in the top 100 best companies (Leiber, 1998). It is reasonable to expect that a positive workplace culture, in which employees are supported, feel worthy, and treated with respect, will create an atmosphere where employees feel good about their workplace and are able to focus on their work. It is likely that a positive workplace space adds to employee comfort and the sense that the organization cares.

The number one thing that gives employees meaning and purpose at work is the ability to realize one's full potential (Mitroff and Denton, 1999). Providing opportunities for personal fulfilment, continuous learning, and development is expected to foster spirit at work because of this intrinsic reward. The more one experiences personal purpose and meaning in one's work, the more they experience intrinsic satisfaction (Milliman *et al.*, 2003). Encouragement to be open to possibilities and new ideas and to focus on positive outcomes likely offer an outlet for creative expression and passion. Moreover, the ability to be flexible and autonomous in one's work not only enables decision making and the opportunity to influence outcomes, but should encourage initiative, creativity, and self-expression, all of which are identified as factors that foster spirit at work.

Finally, showing appreciation and regard for employees and their contribution contributes to a sense that they matter and that their work is meaningful. It follows then that helping members understand how they contribute to the mission and intention of the organization contributes to the alignment of the employees' work with the organization's intention, a sense of community, a positive workplace, and an increased sense of personal intrinsic reward.

The factors participants identified as fostering spirit at work are consistent with the practices and programs of successful organizations discussed earlier. For example, the integration of spirituality into corporate programs (Brandt, 1996) facilitates that desire to find ultimate meaning and purpose in one's life. Exploration of working consciously at higher levels (Leigh, 1997) and introducing a "whole person" model (Leigh, 1997) fosters the development of an integrated, authentic, and creative self. Development of a shared vision for the organization and fostering alignment between personal goals and that vision (Cacioppe, 2000a) establishes a strong organizational foundation and promotes organizational integrity. Cultivation of the spiritual energies of employees (Harrington *et al.*, 2001) should promote personal fulfilment. Finally, emphasis on values, social responsibility and meaningful work (Cacioppe, 2000a) are

ways to give employees a sense of the organization's higher purpose. These are all strategies that have been employed by successful organizations to enhance employee wellbeing and to improve performance.

Implications

This study provides leaders and organizations with a set of organizational conditions (as identified by employees with high spirit at work) which may promote spirit at work. The importance of these organizational factors in contributing to spirit at work must be verified with a larger, representative sample. Future research is needed to explore the relationships among, these organizational features, and to investigate whether some of the organizational conditions are antecedents of spirit at work, whereas, others (such as sense of community) may be outcomes of spirit at work.

Note

- 1. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of participants.

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