Spirituality in Organizations

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In today's modern world, most people belong to one or more organizations. People work, find recreation, and seek education in organizations. Organizations produce most of the products we consume, and funds deposited in organizational institutions pay for the products. Organizations surround us and shape the 'warp and woof 'of modern society.

The fundamental essence of any organization is the human relationships that exist between members of the organization, and without these relationships, an organization does not exist. It seems obvious then that an understanding of the nature of human relationships is critical in every regard as we consider organizations. This is true for the social scientist who studies organizations, for creators and owners of organizations, for management personnel who are responsible for the success of the organization, and for consultants, coaches, and other professionals who provide ongoing assistance to the organization. Many colleges and universities offer graduate degrees in organizational leadership, organizational psychology, and organization management.

There is a myriad of books written on every aspect of organizations from such diverse viewpoints as economic, philosophical, psychological, financial, political, cultural, sociological, and historical. There are many books guiding the operation of organizations, such as creating organizations, managing, financial, human relations,

marketing, legal, and dissolution. Large organizations compose smaller functional organizations, often referred to as departments, e.g., the marketing department, the finance department, the human relations department. The smaller units, referred to as "small groups" in organizational literature, will be used as the 'unit of scale' to address organizations.

The focal premise is that organizations (small groups) exist only in the relationships between members of the organization. The relationships and interactions between members of the organization form a highly complex system, and out of this highly complex system of human beings the phenomenon of spirituality may arise as an emergent property. It is this fundamental truth that underpins all the knowledge amassed about organizations.

It is necessary to recognize that a member of an organization brings their entire self to the enterprise, and this is not as obvious as it might seem. The mantra of many organizations tells members to "leave their personal stuff at the door." The assertion is that the member is there only to produce; much like a robot, and that personal consideration would interfere with a high level of efficiency and production. This view is based upon a highly distorted understanding of human nature; first, that it is possible for a human being to compartmentalize oneself and only be partially present, and second, a lack of understanding that the so-called "personal stuff" is the source of creativity and productivity.

There is a constellation of traits common to all human beings. Spirituality is an emergent property arising from this constellation of evolved traits and is the most

complete description of human nature. Spirituality has a biological/psychological/ cultural basis and does not derive from natural or religiously explained sources. The strongest and most central of these traits is a deep drive for relationship, connection, and community. This strong trait is a central reason why so much human activity exists in organizations.

The following is a list of spiritual needs people seek to meet in organizations.

community	shared work	creativity
purpose	meaning	respect
self-worth	fulfillment	empathy
joy	support	validation
growth	appreciation	forgiveness
understanding	safety	love
compassion	kindness	stability

A number of factors may be present in an organization that will stifle spiritual needs of members. Most common are:

patronizing	demeaning	secrecy
fear	decisiveness	misuse of power
devaluing	withholding	splitting
prejudice	judgmentalism	greed
bureaucracy	dishonesty	

Research into every aspect of the universe, from human beings to astrophysics, reveals complex nonlinear systems. It is difficult to quantify and manipulate variable in complex nonlinear systems, so these systems are often simplified to assume a linear process. Practitioners responsible for the use and management of the system, may make assumptions that it is linear and engage in linear strategies as they seek to understand and control processes. This error is often prevalent in organizations and small groups. Relationships even at the level of two

individuals are nonlinear, and as we add more people to form groups, complexity increases rapidly. Stephen Strogatz writes, "Complex networks are the natural setting for the most mysterious forms of group behavior facing science today." (Strogatz, 2003, p. 232) While it would be daunting to quantify the variables that exist in a complex human organization, it would be beneficial for managers and group members to understand the complex nonlinear nature of their relationships and activities.

In recent years, a new body of approaches and disciplines with heavy reliance on advanced mathematics and computer modeling has rapidly moved to the forefront in scientific research. These new approaches called "The New Sciences" include quantum theory, chaos theory, complexity theory, and decision theory. A distinguishing characteristic of each of these theories is the rejection of the Newtonian clock-like universe and recognition of nonlinearity, diversity, interconnection, and randomness in every element of existence.

It is not surprising the disciplines of the new sciences have been applied to the study of small groups. Holly Arrow's book, *Small Groups As Complex Systems* begins, "This book presents a general theory of small groups as complex systems." (Arrow, McGrath, Berdahl, 2000, p. 3) Ralph Stacey writes,

In this book I invite you to explore with me how the newly emerging science of complexity might provide us with a more useful framework for making sense of life and organizations than the approaches that currently dominate our thinking and therefore our acting. (Stacey, 1996, p. 1)

What is complexity and how does it apply to small groups? Professor Scott E.

Page, in "*Understanding Complexity,*" teaches that to describe something as

complex, we mean that it consists of interdependent, diverse entities, and we assume

that those entities adapt–that they respond to their local and global environments. A

system may be considered complex if its agents meet four qualifications: diversity,

connection, interdependence, and adaptation. In addition, complex systems have the

ability to produce large events, or emergence. Emergent behaviors or properties arise

when a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions occur in an environment. The

emergent property will be different in size and kind from the underlying interactions.

(Page, The Great Courses, 2009)

Stacey and Arrow both view groups as complex adaptive systems. Arrow

writes,

> what is genuinely new, we believe, is the development of a comprehensive
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> theory of small groups that adapts, transforms, and integrates concepts from
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> dynamical systems theory in a way appropriate to thinking about systems that
>
> are themselves composed of complex systems–members whose actions are
>
> guided by goals, intentions, perceptions, and preconceptions that also change
>
> over time. (Arrow et al., 2000, p. 4)

Stacey asks how we can make sense of our experience of life and

organization, and answers that we need a new framework which is to be found in the

science of complexity. (Stacey, 1996, p. 19)

A small group meets the description of a complex system since it is comprised of individual members who are diverse, connected through their group membership, interdependent on each other for the work of the group, and adapting as members and the group learn and evolve. In this regard human groups share characteristics and dynamics of other complex adaptive systems. Flocks of birds and schools of fish are an example of such a system. The individual members are able to move in intricate and ever-changing forms without running into each other.

Human agents and the group of which they are members are engaged in an ongoing process of discovery, choice, and action. This process creates feedback loops, both positive and negative which affect behavior of individual members, the behavior of the members as a group, and the structure of the group itself. The results of this feedback process may be linear or nonlinear in its effect. Stacey describes it,

> The interaction of the agents creates and continually re-creates an organization as a whole, and that organization in turn influences the groups of which it is composed and the manner in which those groups are continuously re-created. This process of re-creation is what is meant by learning. (Stacey, 1996, p. 35)

Human systems differ from other types of complex adaptive systems in that human beings have internal structures whereas agents in other systems do not. Stacey identifies four ways in which human systems differ:

1. Human agents are affected by positive and negative emotions.
2. Human agents are able to choose their own individual mental purposes rather than shared ones.

3. Human agents are affected by power differentials, i.e., leader-follower dynamic.

4. Human agents are capable of systemic thinking, taking up the role of both participant and observer. (Stacey, 1996, pp.34-35)

These unique traits of human individuals add a level of complexity to human systems that do not exist in other complex adaptive systems.

Complex systems, including human ones, exist on a continuum from highly ordered to highly disordered. A highly ordered system is stable and in equilibrium while a highly disordered system is on the edge of chaos. The highly ordered system is marked by rigidity and lack of change and learning. Systems theory tells us that learning, change, and evolution occur in systems in the disordered zone at the edge of chaos. Stacey maintains that creativity only occurs at the edge of system disintegration. (Stacey, 1996, pp. 13-14)

Most research and schools of thoughts about small groups take place within what Holly Arrow calls, "the positivist-reductionist-analytic paradigm." (Arrow et al., 2000, p. 25) In this approach, the laboratory experiment is the idealized strategy. An attempt is made to identify dependent and independent variables, holding other aspects of the group constant and ignoring other factors. In addition, this approach looks at the group as a single entity removed from its larger environment and contexts. In contrast, the complex adaptive systems approach to groups recognizes the rich dynamics, contexts and states of order and disorder that exist within every

group. If we attempt to examine only parts or limited dynamics, we are no longer dealing with a real group.

Small groups that are rigidly organized and in equilibrium often seem dead. A high emphasis on stability, on "not rocking the boat," leads to a group that does not change, learn, and grow. As a group moves toward disorder, rules become less important and feedback increases because the relations between members, and relations between members and the group as a whole, become more dynamic. Stacey calls the situation "messy," and this is often an apt description. This is the phase in which group membership becomes more rewarding for its members and where new outcomes and results are to be found. Stacey writes,

> The creative process in human systems, therefore, is inevitably messy: it involves difference, conflict, fantasy, and emotion; it stirs up anger, envy, depression, and many other feelings. To remove the mess by inspiring us to follow some common vision, share the same culture, and pull together is to remove the mess that is the very raw material of creative activity. (Stacey, 1996, p.15)

Small groups as complex adaptive systems contain rich dynamic relationships and complex feedback loops with nonlinear effects. When the continuum from highly organized to highly disorganized structures is included, it becomes clear that long-term forecasts and predictions in small group behaviors cannot be made. Arrow writes, "Complex systems whose behavior depends largely on interactions among local elements are predictable only in the short run, and these predictions are for

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global variables, not local variables." (Arrow et al., 2000, pp. 56-57) Large general trends can be forecasted, but not specific instances. Stacey points out that long-term outcome are unknowable at the edge of chaos.

Scott Peck describes in detail the process by which a group may move to what he calls "true community." (Peck, 1987) Peck's descriptive model closely parallels the theory presented by Arrow and Stacey. The work of building community involves learning to discuss, challenge, debate, compromise, and find consensus. Members of the group must learn to suspend ego, set aside prejudices and preconceptions, actively listen and negotiate. They must continually ensure that the structure is sound, that individuals are safe and that all persons are respected. They must be aware that human nature errs and ensure that the salve of forgiveness is always available.

Chaos occurs periodically during this process of community building. Members argue, take sides, and question whether the process is worth the cost. It is at this time the group must ground itself in its fundamental commitments and agree to work through the chaos. If the group is successful, the emergent property of true community may develop. In true community, a high level of trust exists and members feel safe to be themselves. There is a spirit of cooperation, collaboration, and respect for the talents and experiences of each member. Peck's description of true community closely parallels the phenomenon of emergent spirituality. In true community, spiritual needs previously discussed are experienced by members of the group.

Peck relates that if a group is unsuccessful in passing through chaos, it will move to a state that he calls "pseudo-community." (Peck, 1987, pp.86-90) The state

is marked by superficial relationships and a lack of genuine cooperation and collaboration. A strong possibility is that the group in this state may splinter and dissolve. If the group remains together in this state of pseudo-community, it will exhibit factors listed above that stifle spiritual needs of members.

There are a number of questions that arise from this understanding of spirituality in organizations. Many of these questions are prompted by lack of understanding or misunderstanding of human nature.

First, is it incongruous to suggest that spiritual needs such as joy, fulfillment, and forgiveness are found in the work environment of an organization? Is membership in organizations an avenue to seek meaning and purpose in life? Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi addresses the question as he writes,

> On the job people feel skillful and challenged, and therefore feel more happy, strong, creative, and satisfied. In their free time people feel that there is generally not much to do and their skills are not being used, and therefore they tend to feel sadder, week, dull, and dissatisfied. Yet they would like to work less and spend more time and leisure. What does this contradictory pattern mean? There are several possible explanations, but one conclusion seems inevitable: when it comes to work, people do not see the evidence of their senses. They disregard the quality of immediate experience, and base their motivation instead on the strongly rooted cultural stereotype of what work is supposed to be like. They think of it as an imposition, a constraint, and

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infringement of their freedom, and therefore something to be avoided as much as possible. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, pp. 159-160)

Second, is spirituality weak, as opposed to the qualities needed to work in an organization? This view is based on a misunderstanding of human nature and the nature of spirituality. Existential questions about identity, origin, purpose, values, goals, and dreams are considered to be spiritual questions by most people. People who find answers to these questions are considered strong, not weak.

Third, is spirituality more likely to be experienced in church rather than in the work environment of an organization? This question is based upon a misunderstanding of the emergent process of spirituality. Spirituality is an emergent property of a complex dynamic system. For an individual, it is the evolved human traits expressed in the network of culture. For an organization, spirituality is an emergent property arising from the complex network of interactions of the members of the organization. In the typical church setting, people may be ritual participants for a limited number of hours in a week or month. This limited interaction typically does not create the interactive complex system necessary to allow spirituality to emerge.

What are the characteristics of an organization that allow us to call it "spiritual?" Spirituality does not come from a supernatural source, but is a descriptive term for the evolution of the highest human nature. Therefore, any stereotypical notions of what religious or supernatural spirituality is should be discarded. Spirituality describes people living, working, cooperating, and collaborating in community. It recognizes, draws upon, and celebrates the evolved traits that are

common to all of us. It describes meaning making, values, goals, and dreams, and love and joy experienced as individuals and as a community.

True spirituality is not "Pollyanna like" and utopian. Rather, it can be strong and tough-minded when needed. It recognizes the need for structure, discipline, and commitment in human affairs. In any organization, there will be disagreements, arguments, confrontations, and anger. Spirituality seeks compromises, resolutions, and solutions while always respecting and valuing members of the organization. Spirituality holds oneself and others to be responsible and accountable in the life of the organization.

The organization structured so as to allow spirituality to emerge will find that it is more efficient and productive in accomplishing its goals. It will recognize that members are whole persons bringing all their experiences, talents, and gifts to the work of the organization. Management and members will hold each other in equal respect and mutual trust will be the order of the day.

Members of an organization typically would not refer to the organization as spiritual or call themselves spiritual in their membership in the organization. It is likely that the majority of people on earth recognize legitimate spiritual needs, but do not see them as applicable in the "mundane" work and life of the organizations to which they belong. A twenty-first century view of spirituality as described must be added to the theory and practice of life in organizations. This expanded view of spirituality will further knowledge of organizations, and will be a major advance in

improving the human condition in the diverse and interconnected networks of people

in the twenty-first century.

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