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The Role of Spirituality in the Practice of Adult Education Leaders

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Abstract: Leaders defined spirituality as different from, but related to religion, part of their identity, and as a connection to a Higher Being, to others, and to nature. Spirituality provided a calling to profession, instilled an ethical framework and served as a resource in times of challenge. It influenced use of power, decision making, and communication with coworkers. Participants exhibited a variety of leadership styles reflecting individual perceptions of spirituality.

Reflecting a worldwide swell of interest in the topic of spirituality (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1990; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers, 2004) adult educators have begun to examine how spirituality affects the educational enterprise. Apps (1994), Dirx (1997), English, Fenwick & Parsons (2003), Fenwick and Lange (1998), and Zinn (1997) address the emerging trend and provide thoughts on how spirituality might affect adult educators in the classroom and in the workplace. While most of the authors seem to agree that the recognition and inclusion of spirituality can be a positive experience for all, we found very little empirical research (Groen, 2001; Tisdell, 2000) to support these claims.

Upon further exploration of the topic it became apparent that discussions of spirituality were occurring not only in the expected Religion and Philosophy departments (Ogilvy, 1981; Van Ness, 1999), but in a variety of academic disciplines, especially Management and Leadership Studies (Bolman & Deal, 1995; Conger, 1994; Fairholm, 1997). Upon reflection, that was logical for leaders of organizations are typically the ones who first envision radical change or at least would be the first to intuit a shift in the worldview of their followers and react to it. We began to search for leadership studies within adult education which examined the impact of spirituality upon the leadership relationship and found none. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the role of spirituality in the practice of adult education leaders. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do adult education leaders perceive and describe their experience of spirituality?
2. How do adult education leaders perceive and describe their experiences of a spiritually-influenced practice of leadership?
3. How do adult education leaders perceive and describe their style of leadership?

Research Methodology

This study was designed as a phenomenological inquiry to examine the role of spirituality in the practice of leadership within adult education settings. The fifteen participants interviewed were purposely selected from a collection of recommendations made by adult education professors, graduate students, and practitioners from a variety of subfields. The criteria for sample selection consisted of the following:

1. Participants were identified as reputational leaders within a field of adult education.

2. Participants would acknowledge that spirituality played a role in their practice of leadership.

3. Participants should be 35 years of age or older since studies on spiritual development (Wink & Dillon, 2002) suggest a deepening of spiritual understanding with age.

From the list of individuals recommended, possible participants were categorized by career and contacted in a specific order to prevent over-representation in any one subfield of adult education as well as to give voice to the understandings of those diverse in race, gender, ethnicity, and spiritual traditions. The fifteen participants worked in 5 subfields: Adult Literacy, Cooperative Extension, Higher Education/Degree Programs, Human Resource and Organizational Development (HROD), and University Continuing Education. There were 8 females and 7 males. Eight participants were Caucasian, 3 African American, 1 Hispanic, 1 Asian, 1 Arabic, and 1 Jewish. There was a variety of religious affiliations with 7 Protestants (2 Presbyterians, 2 Baptists, 1 Methodist, 1 Episcopal, 1 African Methodist Episcopal), 3 Catholics, 1 Jew, 1 Muslim, 1 Hindu/Buddhist, and 2 presently unaffiliated with any organized religion. Twenty potential participants were contacted by email with an informal letter which outlined the purpose of the study, criteria for selection, and contained an explanation of phenomenological interview procedures and any follow up expectations.

Fifteen leaders agreed to become participants. Data was collected through recorded semi-structured participant interviews (averaging 1 ½ hours each). Interview questions probed for the leader's definition of spirituality, the influence of spirituality upon practice, and a description of the leadership style he/she used. Physical documentation of items in the workspace which reflected the participants' spiritual beliefs were observed and recorded to provide a form of triangulation of data. Five follow up phone calls and three follow up interviews were conducted to clarify information gathered in the first interviews.

Data was analyzed using phenomenological research procedures (Merriam & Simpson, 2000; Patton, 2002). These procedures included epoche, phenomenological reduction (bracketing and horizontalization), the application of imaginative variation, breaking clustered themes into textural and structural components, and finally a process of synthesis.

All participants were emailed a draft of the findings and asked to respond to the accuracy of voice and interpretation. Thirteen participants responded with comments, possible additions, corrections, and interpretations. Participants took their role in this phenomenological research project very seriously, and truly became co-researchers in the process by offering advice, additional information, and constructive criticism.

Findings

Perceptions of Spirituality

How we define and perceive a concept determines how we understand and use it in everyday life. When there is an acknowledged agreement upon the exact meaning of commonly used terminology, members of a group are better able to communicate, and subsequently, can more efficiently achieve the goals of the organization. Since American English is such a fluid and ever changing language, misunderstandings can arise because of definitional differences. Until recently most Americans considered "spirituality" and "religion" synonymous, therefore, it was important to discover how adult education leaders presently defined the concept under investigation. What did the word "spirituality" mean to the participants?

Spirituality is a Sense of Connection

Spirituality was repeatedly explained or described in terms of connection. All participants understood spirituality as a relationship with a Higher Power which engendered a sense of connection to other people. Some also mentioned feeling connected to nature or to the cosmos.

Differing From, but Related to Religion

Are the words “spirituality” and “religion” synonymous? For participants in this study, the answer was a qualified “no.” Although three participants did not differentiate in the definition of the two words, 12 of the 15 adult educators defined spirituality and religion as distinct, yet interrelated concepts. Bill, a leader in the Cooperative Extension Service, stated, “Religion can be rote and dogmatic, but spirituality is deeper than that...it’s who you are and why you are here...your relationship to God.” The common understanding was that spirituality was better described as a deeply personal concept involving a search for identity and meaning while religion was more of a social construction, rules and regulations to govern behavior.

Although 12 of the 15 participants deliberately made this distinction between the spiritual (personal) and the religious (organizational), other statements they made belied the total separation of the concepts. Participants perceived the concepts as differing, yet very much related. For Ellen, a Jewish Continuing Education instructor, spirituality was “rooted in religion.” Henrietta, a Presbyterian Cooperative Extension agent, believed that her religion was “the implementation of my spirituality.” Fico, a Catholic leader in Adult Basic Education, stated that “Spirituality can happen without religion, but religion will help you nourish the spirituality within you.” Brahma, a Hindu/Buddhist professor of Higher Education, summarized this interrelatedness of the two concepts when he said, “Both of these [spirituality and religion] have common aspirations to understand self, origin of self, and purpose of self.”

Definitional Difference Justifies Inclusion of Spirituality in Workplace

Educational institutions and organizations must respect cultural diversity and remain sensitive to possible misuse of spiritually influenced leadership. This was reflected by 12 participants who were adamant in their support of the first amendment, saying that it was never appropriate for an educational leader to proselytize in the workplace. As Ellen stated, “I think to bring a particular religion into the workplace... fails to recognize and honor that there are other individuals in the community who practice something different than the predominant belief.” For the participants, making a definitional differentiation between the words “spirituality” and “religion” allowed for the practice of bringing one’s spirituality to work while saving specific religious rituals for one’s private life.

Spirituality Reflects Individual Identity

Thirteen of the fifteen participants offered perceptions of spirituality as being personal identity. They saw spirituality as integral to self identification and to their formation of an ethical framework. They also believed that this spiritually-influenced identity evolved over time, involved deep reflection and a conscious choice of spiritual beliefs, as well as provided a sense of calling or vocation to their life’s work.

Repeatedly participants made mention of spirituality being “who I am.” As Henrietta explained, “Spirituality is like the inner being who makes you who you are.” Shequethia, a Baptist Higher Education instructor, stated that spirituality is all “those things crucial to who I am.” Vanessa, a leader in the field of HROD presently unaffiliated with any religion, echoed that sentiment by saying, “I believe my spirituality is who I am.”

Spirituality Provides an Ethical Framework

All participants stated their identity as leaders involved having a moral code of conduct. They felt this ethical framework was instilled by individual study or religious instruction and that it guided their practice of leadership. Mike, a Continuing Education leader, makes this clear when he points out, "My ethical framework is based on things that are spiritually discerned." Berry, a leader in HROD, stated, "True leadership requires spirituality for no one can be a leader without a set of values and beliefs, without hope or vision."

Spirituality Evolves over Time, Requires Reflection and Choice

Another strong commonality that emerged concerning perceptions of spirituality related to the participants' sense of spiritual identity as something that evolves over time. Thirteen of the fifteen believed their understanding of spirituality was not something instilled solely by previous religious training, but was the result of conscious personal choice. Most participants, upon experiencing traumatic life events, had deeply reflected upon previous religious teachings and evaluated how meaningful those were in the present situation. They then made a conscious choice of whether to remain embedded in those beliefs or to switch to another belief system. Of the thirteen who questioned their beliefs, nine participants changed religious affiliations while four remained in the religion of their youth.

Role of Spirituality in the Practice of Leadership

Serves as a Resource in Times of Challenge

Leadership can be a lonely and humbling experience leaving one feeling vulnerable and inadequate to meet the demands of the role. Where does one turn to find aid in times of trial? All fifteen study participants viewed their spirituality as a resource. They felt their connection to a Higher Power prepared and sustained them as they faced the difficulties of the leadership role. In fact, Vanessa did not believe it possible to practice leadership effectively without a spiritual foundation. She said, "How can you be a great leader in your profession unless you have spirituality, that inner strength that keeps you going?" This concept of a leader's ability to persevere coming as a result of spiritual influence was echoed by nine of the participants.

Other participants credited spirituality with making them "calm" and "well grounded." It "provided stability" and "anchored the leader in times of crisis." Spirituality "reassured," "comforted," "gave peace of mind," and provided "hope," "inspiration," and "motivation."

Shapes the Leader's Perception of Power

According to the participants in this study, spirituality very much influenced their use of power in the leadership relationship. Ten of the participants saw power as something to be shared or even given away. Mike told me:

I started my career in leadership in the authoritative or power model of leadership [in the military], but my thirty something years of experience... and really my spiritual life... has taught me that leadership is really about serving others, not controlling others. It's not about power. It's about giving away power.

Brahma had a very similar outlook for he stated "a true leader has a servant's heart." For Ellen spiritually influenced leadership is "not the 'I'm your supervisor and you are my subordinate' type of thing...but just recognizing potential and leadership in other people and being able to share that leadership with them." Caesar said the type of leadership he "gravitated toward" "combined spirituality with service and political and social change."

Influences Decision Making

When the fifteen participants were asked to describe a leadership experience which demonstrated the influence of spirituality on practice, thirteen of the fifteen told stories related to making difficult decisions. Bowman believed that spirituality and religious training “can influence you a great deal...and will impact how you make decisions in a leadership role.” Frank, a professor in Higher Education, said that for those who are spiritually influenced “there is a Higher Power that is present in your thinking that guides you in making decisions.”

The participants spoke of a variety of ways in which decision making was affected by spirituality. They seemed to rely on a spiritually influenced ethical framework to deal with day to day administrative tasks, but most of the specific incidents described seemed to center around issues of social justice. While participants previously spoke of sharing the leader’s power in the workplace, it seems apparent that when situations arose concerning equity or the well being of others, these individuals did not hesitate to wield the leader’s power to make decisions which, in their mind, were for the greater good and remained true to their strongly held spiritual beliefs.

Impacts Communication with Coworkers

Leaders must be skilled in communicating their visions, goals, and directions to coworkers, and equally as capable of understanding the communication received back from them. Keeping open lines of communication and being able to encode and decode messages appropriately are vital to the success of any leader. Descriptions provided by the participants in this study helped me to realize that the leaders’ spirituality directly impacted how they communicated. For example, Robin told of a tense classroom situation where “I had to first get myself together spiritually so I could say what needed to be said, in the right way and in the right tone, so it wouldn’t offend anybody.” Although the standard model of ideal communication is linear and involves only a sender and a receiver, the model of communication which appears to be used by a spiritually influenced leader is more of a triangle with a connection to a Higher Being located between the two. We visualize this as spirituality performing the role of an uplink satellite through which communication is channeled. Spirituality serves as static filter, amplifier, possibly even translator for more effective transmission of ideas between the leader and others within the organization.

Styles of Leadership

Styles of leadership reported by the study participants varied. Servant, team, transactional, transformational, and situational leaders were all described. Leadership style seemed to reflect participants’ perceptions of spirituality. For instance, Robin, who described a transactional style of leadership, belonged to a fundamentalist church. Her God was loving, but stern. She seemed to duplicate that relationship with those she led. Brahma, a Hindu/Buddhist with a more abstract Deity, described himself as a reluctant leader interested only in serving others to achieve the greater good. Caesar was a “collector of religions” and seemed to be just as eclectic in leadership style. He reported using a variety depending upon followers and situations.

Discussion and Implications

One of the key arguments for the inclusion and further study of spirituality in leadership can be grounded by acknowledging the change of definition. Addressing issues of spirituality in the classroom or workplace no longer has to mean addressing individual religious differences. Adult educators now define spirituality as different from religion, as a connection to a Higher

Power, to others, and to nature, as well as an integral part of personal identity. Forman's (2004) study of spirituality also found a similar definitional change and stated "we may be witnessing a theological shift reflected in our language use, for when people use a word differently, they're starting to think differently"(p. 49).

The findings from this study suggest another way for educators to approach the spiritual component of leadership without stressing the religion/spirituality dichotomy. Participants described spirituality as being "who I am." They equated spirituality with identity. Already in leadership education there is a component which encourages developing leaders to discover more about themselves, to explore identity. Rather than just stopping with a cursory overview, this study implies that leadership curriculum should be redesigned to include an in depth study of identity development.

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