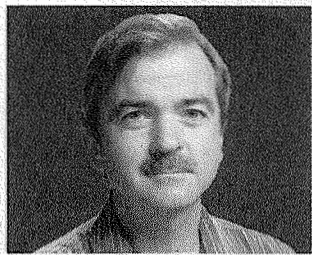


THE DAILY SPECIAL

ETHICS AT WORK

SPIRITUALITY |

Movement toward more respectful workplace is here to stay as employers begin to recognize its value to the bottom line



BY DOUGLAS TODD
VANCOUVER SUN

The burgeoning spirituality-in-the-workplace movement was meant to be about mutual respect and higher purposes.

But for Ann Coombs, one of the early leaders in this North American-wide attempt to bring ethics and dignity to the workplace, it led to utter frustration and disappointment.

The author of the best-selling book, *The Living Workplace: Soul, Spirit and Success in the 21st Century*, was brought in as a \$100,000-a-year consultant to a major company to help the CEO heal what he realized was a toxic, unproductive work environment.

Coombs, based in Vancouver, studied the corporation, encouraged staff to honestly assess their colleagues and leaders and wrote a detailed report — which happened to cite one senior executive as an abusive tyrant.

Trouble was, the executive in question was a friend of the CEO. The CEO took it upon himself to chop out of Coombs' report all negative remarks about his troublesome pal.

Coombs was shocked. She protested to the CEO. She hasn't worked for the company since.

After more than five years of passionately promoting more spirit-filled, balanced workplaces, Coombs had to take off almost a year to weigh what she was doing.

"I couldn't stand it. I had to leave the corporate world to reflect on what was really important in my work. The message I was getting was I had to compromise myself to keep my contracts. But I won't work in the corporate world under those conditions, at any price."

Despite her rude awakening to what she considers the dark state



PETER BATTISTONI/VANCOUVER SUN

Ann Coombs, a leader in the spirituality-in-the-workplace movement, believes in a higher purpose.

of much of North American corporate existence, Coombs still has hope for the spirit-at-work movement, which in the past decade has spawned roughly 500 books and countless seminars, retreats and consultations.

Along with a number of other Canadian specialists in spirit-oriented workplaces, Coombs believes the expanding movement needs to be re-assessed. The spirituality-at-work movement can be defined as an attempt to bring holistic attitudes to offices, job sites and boardrooms.

It means fostering ethical values in the workplace — such as respect, integrity, openness, diversity, caring and fairness.

This loose spiritual movement has not been about bringing explicit religious expression to the workplace (although that's in part what it has meant in the U.S., where office prayer and meditation groups are more common than in Canada.)

For most of North America, the ultimate goal of the spirituality-in-the-workplace movement

is to help people recognize they can achieve a higher purpose in their careers, whether they see it as serving a Supreme Being, other people or the planet.

For companies, the spin-off benefits of the movement are happier staff who are less likely to threaten the bottom line by either slacking off or taking off. Canadians, however, appear to have a long way to go to make their workplaces more holistic and satisfying.

A University of Western Ontario study found four out of five Canadians don't look forward to work on Monday.

As well, 76 per cent of Canadians feel disengaged from their workplaces, with many actively opposing what their company does.

Where has the spirit-at-work movement failed?

The specialists' over-riding observation is that many executives — whether in government, non-profits or private enterprise — pay lip service to the idea of respectful workplaces, but don't give up their autocratic habits.

The spirit-at-work experts also find too many corporate leaders are looking for quick fixes; dreaming they can magically turn their staff into tireless worker-bees through a brief spiritual seminar.

Another problem is corporate culture's demand for ever-higher profits; it's fomenting unprecedented workplace stress, leading to burned-out staff and managers.

There is nothing wrong with corporate North America being led by the profit motive, says Coombs. But when it descends to greed and ruthless behaviour, it becomes counter-productive.

Beyond the bad news, however, what's been successful in the spirit-at-work movement?

The specialists say any attempt to help staff, especially managers, learn about themselves has proved effective in creating healthier workplaces, where staff feel like they serve something more than money.

It is also now more difficult for managers to ignore or disguise a toxic workplace. Bullying leaders

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PAYS DIVIDENDS

are less likely to go unchallenged. And even though most workplaces remain far from perfect, some staff and managers are making strides as individuals, learning how to integrate their whole being into even challenging workplaces.

Finally, a few companies and non-profits have really grasped what it means to foster spirituality at work. They've discovered profitability improves when companies implement work/life/spirituality programs.

They've enjoyed a rise in staff loyalty and drastic declines in turnover, leading to cost savings. And, as studies show, some have seen productivity increase by 20 per cent.

Firms mouth the words

It's been difficult for many businesses to get to that promised land, however. The seeds of a more spiritual workplace often fall on fallow ground.

Coombs can't count how many times she's heard executives say: "People are our most important asset." Yet too often, when feeling under siege, the managers end up, in effect, conceding, "that is, until we don't need them."

Edmonton-based Val Kinjerski, who completed her PhD in the field of what she calls "spirit at work," says she often runs across companies that have developed truly inspiring mission statements.

Which they ignore.

"Some managers aren't really serious about their intention to bring the spirit into the workplace," says Kinjerski.

"They may come up with a wonderful vision statement. Then they revert to their autocratic ways. They don't involve staff in decision-making or hold them in regard."

Not surprisingly, the spirituality in the workplace movement has also run smack into the corporate push to maximize production and profit. Statistics Canada recently reported the average Canadian now works 49 hours a week, compared to 41 hours a week in the early 1980s. Wages for many people remain low.

John Izzo, one of the first teachers to emerge in the spirit-work movement, says two paradoxical trends are happening in the North American workplace.

One is the deep need he says people have felt to find meaning, or spirituality, in their workplace.

The other, says Izzo, is an unquenchable corporate hunger for larger profits, brought on in part by globalized competition.

Izzo, who lives in Vancouver but gives more than 60 workshops a year around the continent, says there's no doubt the drive for higher returns is putting greater stress on workers and managers, contributing to depression, addiction and family breakdown.

He cites a study showing the typical two-income couple now spend an average of only 20 minutes together a day. "There's this feeling we're all spending more time in the workplace and the sacrifices of making a living might not be worth it," he says.

"There's a backlash. It's on peoples' minds — and that's going to make a difference in the future, because conversation always precedes action."

The spirituality-at-work movement, Izzo says, doesn't directly promote family-friendly policies — including flex time, on-site



John Izzo is a leader in the spirituality-in-the-workplace movement.



Harvey McKinnon: Firm's staff decide how to devote portion of profits to philanthropy.



Val Kinjerski is a Spirit at Work coach and consultant from St. Albert, Alta. She has a PhD from the University of Alberta in the study of spirituality in the workplace.

daycare, paid volunteering, telecommuting and elder-care programs. But Izzo sees the emergence of such work-life programs as signs a company is sincerely trying to create what he now likes to call, to be provocative, a "loving" workplace.

Movement is here to stay

Despite setbacks, there are solid indications the spirit-at-work movement is paying dividends in some quarters.

No matter how trivial a workshop might seem to some cynics, Kinjerski says it will always be valuable for a company if its managers and staff learn more about who they are.

Harvey McKinnon, who heads a Vancouver-based company that helps charities do fundraising, says research shows staff members act out in the workplace the old emotional conflicts they have with their own families of origin.

The spirit-at-work specialists believe there's no better way to

calm down a toxic workplace than to help staff understand, on one hand, their neuroses — and on the other how they could connect their jobs to their deepest ideals.

Coombs, Kinjerski, McKinnon, Izzo and their ilk are masters at telling stories that can inspire both bosses and staff to inject their whole being — mind, body, emotions, spirit and soul — into their work.

Izzo describes the electronic-banking clerk who helped stop a customer from committing suicide. Kinjerski talks about the parking-lot attendant who gave out candies to children who had to go into hospital. She can become enthusiastic about the importance of the work performed by bus drivers.

What do you do with chronically jaded employees? Kinjerski says you ask them to recall a moment when their work actually served a higher purpose. You assist them in coming up with their own inner answer to the question: "What gets you up

in the morning?"

In addition to personally trying to follow the advice given in his own books, including *The Power of Giving: Creating Abundance in Your Home, At Work, and In Your Community*, McKinnon says each year he asks his dozen or so staff to decide how to devote five per cent of the fundraising company's profits to philanthropy.

"It's the most highly anticipated time of the year. It gives staff a really good feeling. They get to give away money to something they really believe in. It certainly doesn't hurt their overall creativity," he says.

But some bosses don't know how to inspire. As Coombs says, "There will always be crummy leaders." Harvey also acknowledges it may be easier to inject spirit into a smaller office than a giant corporate ship stuck in stormy financial seas.

So some spirit-at-work specialists are starting to concentrate less on wholesale corporate makeovers and more on helping individuals bring their hearts, intuition and spirit to work, so they don't necessarily have to wait for their bosses to humanize soul-crushing environments.

At the same time, another positive offshoot of the spirituality in-the-workplace movement, says Coombs, is that it has made it more difficult to ignore or disguise systemic toxicity.

"You still have your autocratic leaders, but now they're more likely to be challenged on it," says Coombs. Employees' expectations are growing. It's harder for a boss to get away with prodding staff with fear, rather than luring them forward with inspiration.

Finally, some companies, to put it simply, are just getting it.

They understand what it means to bring spiritual values into a workplace.

"The Vancity Credit Union model is being held up time and time again," says Coombs, referring to the large B.C. non-profit that keeps winning best-company awards. "It's honouring people."

Coombs and others also cite the spirit-supporting practices of Happy Planet, the medium-sized fruit-juice company run by recently elected high-profile B.C. NDP MLA Gregor Robertson. For more signs of the movement's success they suggest looking at the companies and non-profit organizations that have received B.C.'s Ethics in Action Awards.

With early corporate resistance declining to words such as "spirit" and "soul" being in the workplace, the specialists say the movement is maturing.

"I think it's only going to grow," says McKinnon, "because people are realizing they spend half their lives in their workplace, and they want more meaning out of it."

Despite being forced to temper her early idealism, Coombs has returned, on her own terms, to a vibrant career: Another book, individual life-work coaching, consulting on the future of workplaces and preparing to chair the 2006 International World Futurist Conference.

As Coombs puts it, despite the many roadblocks that have been thrown up against the creation of holistic and respectful workplaces, the movement is here to stay. "The spirit-at-work movement is for real," she says. "It's that desire people have to work while serving something larger."

How to Cultivate Spirit at Work

1. **Be mindful:** Engage in a reflective practice.
2. **Know what matters:** Find your passion.
3. **Seek alignment:** Ensure a match between what matters and what you do.
4. **Listen** to your inner voice.
5. **Be authentic:** Express your whole self at work.
6. **Connect** with others from the heart.
7. **Live** on purpose. Be intentional.
8. **Make** conscious choices.
9. **Transcend** self. See your work as a service to others.
10. **Actions** that make a difference.
11. **Express** appreciation for yourself and others.
12. **Refill your cup:** Take care of yourself in ways that are meaningful to you.
13. **Be** 10 times bolder.

Source: Val Kinjerski

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