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Workplace Spirituality and Leadership-Inspirations from *The Bhagwad Gita*

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Abstract

Workplace spirituality involves the effort to find one's ultimate purpose in life, to develop a strong connection to co-workers and other people associated with work, and to have consistency (or alignment) between one's core beliefs and the values of their organization. For the purpose of this paper workplace spirituality is being considered as having three important dimensions in any organization; namely; the individual, the group and the organization. Workplace spirituality at the individual level means meaningful work for the employees, at the group level, a sense of community and at the organizational level, an alignment with the organizations values and goals respectively.

The *Bhagwad Gita* is a text that is relevant across all cultures and religions as it urges a philosophy of life which if followed leads to ultimate peace and sublime bliss and a stress free life. Each Chapter of The Bhagwad Gita may be interpreted as a sutra of leadership and if practiced will enable leadership at three levels namely, individual (being aware and having control of one's mind and thoughts), at the team/group level (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration), and finally at the organizational level (managing the organizational environment and culture to align personal and professional goals, have a deep sense of duty and to accept responsibility of action).

Key Words- *Workplace Spirituality, Leadership, Bhagwad Gita.*

Workplace Spirituality and Leadership - Inspirations from *The Bhagwad Gita*

Today's competitive environment ushered in by globalization, deregulation and digitization poses a big challenge for the organizations both in terms of sustaining in business and

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growth (Dalken, 2014). Thus every organization strives to ceaselessly improve performance with an eye on contributing towards the improvement of the triple bottom line viz. Planet, People and the Profit of the organization. (Parthasarthy et al, 2016) Sustainable development which is inclusive is the call of the day. This quest, created stupendous pressures on leadership and workers at large, making the workplace stressful. The fast pace of growth and dynamism at the international level and the desire of the local institutions to compete with international giants led to a change in their framework in which they were functioning to suit the multinational requirement. All this created an imbalance at the workplace. The human touch among employees started diminishing and task orientation has become the order of the day. The challenge to balance the pressures at work and to create a sense of well being and content among the employees has led to the emergence of the concept of workplace spirituality. “Megatrends 2010” insists that spirituality is going to be the defining trend in the 21st century (Aburdene, 2010). This paper attempts to establish that in the current Indian scenario workplace spirituality is important for effective leadership (of self, team and organization) ; by referring to the *Bhagwad Geeta* which the author subscribes is a philosophy of life and is therefore relevant not only to the Hindus or India but is applicable worldwide.

Academically, workplace spirituality is considered a highly personal and philosophical construct, that involves a sense of wholeness, connectedness at work, and deeper values (Gibbons, 2000). Workplace spirituality involves the effort to find one’s ultimate purpose in life, to develop a strong connection to co-workers and other people associated with work, and to have consistency (or alignment) between one’s core beliefs and the values of their organization (Mitroff and Denton, 1999). Accordingly, workplace spirituality can be defined as “. . . the recognition that employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community” (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000). It is important to note that for some people spirituality at work involves a religious connotation while for others it does not (Neck and Milliman, 1994). However, for many others spirituality at work today does not involve a connection to any specific religious tradition, but rather is based on their own personal values and philosophy (Cavanagh, 1999; Mitroff and Denton, 1999).

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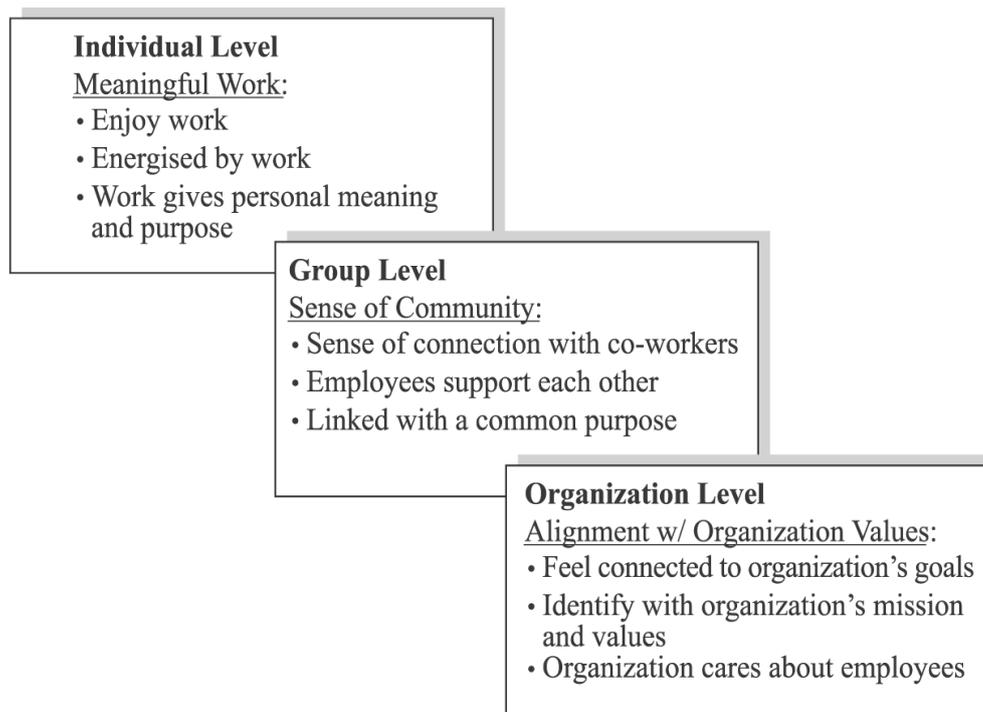
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For some people spirituality at work involves a religious connotation while for others it does not (Neck and Milliman, 1994). In fact, historically much of the interest in spirituality has been rooted in religion. However, for many others spirituality at work today does not involve a connection to any specific religious tradition, but rather is based on their own personal values and philosophy (Cavanagh, 1999; Mitroff and Denton, 1999). For the purpose of this paper workplace spirituality is being considered as having three important dimensions in any organization; namely; the individual, the group and the organization as suggested by Neal and Bennett (2000). The three dimensions have been conceptualized as three levels as given in Figure 1 (Milliman et al., 1999)

Figure 1.



Conceptualization of Workplace Spirituality at three Levels in the Organization

(Source: Milliman, J., et al.; 'Spirit and Community at Southwest Airlines:an Investigation of a Spiritual Values based Model'. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 12, No. 3)

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Workplace Spirituality and effective Leadership Embodied in *The Bhagwad Gita*

Essays on the Gita, published by The Aurobindo Ashram, brings out three fundamentals of the leader, namely;

- Strong need to lead by example
- Importance of developing a high degree of equanimity
- Understanding the need of mutual dependence.

Chatterjee (2013) contended and presented the eighteen chapters of the Gita as eighteen sutras of leadership. The sutras are as follows:

Chapter 1:	Leaders embrace discontinuity and death
Chapter 2:	Leaders create alternate reality
Chapter 3:	Leaders enter the timeless cycle of action
Chapter 4:	Leaders pursue purpose as the source of supreme power.
Chapter 5:	Leadership is the art of undoing
Chapter 6:	Leaders are the managers of their minds
Chapter 7:	Leaders are integrators
Chapter 8:	Decoding the meaning of life
Chapter 9:	Timeless leaders live in self organizing universe
Chapter 10:	Leadership is an adventure of consciousness
Chapter 11:	Timeless leaders have integral vision
Chapter 12:	Love is leader's essence, love is leader's presence
Chapter 13:	Leaders command their field with the eye of wisdom
Chapter 14:	Leaders harness the dynamic forces of nature
Chapter 15:	Timeless leaders discover their invisible source
Chapter 16:	Leaders negotiate the crossroads-the divine and the devilish
Chapter 17:	Leaders follow their faith – the journey of self giving
Chapter 18:	Leadership is transcendence – the unity of two wills

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This implies that the entire *Bhagwad Gita* throws light on building leadership qualities during the journey of life. It is also observed that the *Bhagwad Gita* gives inputs for spiritual leadership at all the levels of workplace spirituality i.e. at the individual level, the group level and the organizational level explaining the framework conceived by Milliman et al. (2006) and also proving the universality of the scripture - the sacrosanct *Bhagwad Gita*.

Self Development: Spiritual Leadership at the Individual Level

The *Bhagwad Gita* calls upon each individual, self leadership before leading others. This is done by removing the intrapersonal conflict which eliminates negativity within and enhances positive outlook towards life and duty. This in turn helps in building a positive culture within the organization. At the individual level it urges the leader to shed petty weakness of the heart and rise to the call of duty. It advises on the need to manage change and develop self awareness. Further, the *Bhagwad Gita* urges the leader to develop and exhibit control of the senses and mind; to carry out actions backed by Spiritual Intelligence (soul consciousness), show high levels of self-abnegation (surrender of action or doer ship); exhibit absence of desire for rewards, develop equanimity and calmness in mind and have dedication towards conferred work (swadharma) – an imperative for workplace spirituality.

Participating and Contributing: Spiritual Leadership at the Team Level

The entire *Bhagwad Gita* is a clarion call to shed the state of despondency and inactivity and to perform duty in the interest of the society at large and the organization of which one is a part. In essence, it is an embodiment of inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration and much more. This is the essence of workplace spirituality at the team level and must be practiced by leaders to improve effectiveness.

The *Bhagwad Gita* states that it is the leader's responsibility to communicate to the employees the right way of performing work. Every employee should be made to understand as to what is to be done, what is not to be done, what is to be feared, what is not to be feared,

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what is binding and what is liberating; and above all the leader himself should possess adequate knowledge to drive all this. (Parathasarathi, et. al, 2016)

The leader should connect and communicate with the employees in such a way that he shakes off fear in the employees, and instils the proper attitude that will free them from inordinate grief. (Chapter II, Verse 30) It is stated in the Gita that the connection between the leader and his followers should be such that it is free from discontent, hierocracy, duplicity, adultery, lying, oppression and prohibited activities. Hence, leadership in an organization should drive interconnectedness, seek welfare of all and share outcomes with others in the team. (Parathasarathi, et. al, 2016).

Idealised Influence

The *Bhagwad Geeta* (Chapter III, Verse 21) contains insights into how a leader should influence his followers. “Whatever a superior (leader) being does, followers imitate; his actions set a standard to be followed.” One who has reformed himself is able to reform others; practices of the leader are in fact a series of demonstrations for those who follow him. In organizations, the leader must lead by example as the employees tend to emulate him as follow the norms set and practiced by him. Whatsoever the position of the leader in the hierarchy, nevertheless, he must continue to observe the rules of right conduct and constructive action as a proper criterion to be emulated. When a leader articulates an attainable goal or vision, he becomes the referral point and followers watch and relate with how he (leader) get going about achieving the goal.

Inspirational Motivation

A leader has to provide an emotional appeal – “an intelligible voice of counsel” to increase the understanding of mutually beneficial goals of the “faltering devotee” or employee. Thus, the Gita (Chapter II, Verse 2) urges every man to rise above ‘impotency’ by coming out of ‘paltry faint-heartedness’ and ‘despondency’. An employee should identify with the goals of the organization and ostracize those that go against the interest of the organization.

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A spiritually backed leader inspires his followers with high standards, talks optimistically and enthusiastically and continuously provides encouragement and meaning for what needs to be done (Menon, Krishnan, 2004).

Intellectual Stimulation

By surrendering thyself (to the guru), by questioning (the guru and thine inner perception), and by service (to the guru), the sages who have realised truth will impart that wisdom to thee. (Chapter IV, Verse 34)

There are three ways of tuning in with the guru; by self surrender, by intelligent questions and by service. Thus, knowledge and guidance on a particular subject can be obtained by service and questioning the preceptor and leadership should commit to guide the employees of the organization to reinvent themselves during the journey of life to achieve excellence.

Intellectual stimulation is to encourage followers to question their old ways of doing things. The followers are supported for questioning their own values, beliefs and expectations as well as that of the leader and the organization (Chatterjee, 2013) leadership should persuade and influence employees to consider new points of view, to question old assumptions and to articulate their own views to ensure continuous improvement within the organization.

Individual Consideration

An effective leader takes into account the needs, capacities and aspirations of each individual follower in the effort to treat followers equitably. The *Bhagwad Gita* provides rich inputs about the interconnectedness and communing with one another (Chapter III, Verse 11). "He who enjoys benefactions without due offerings to them is indeed a thief" observes Sri Sri Paramhansa Yogananda in his commentary on the *Bhagwad Gita*. Leaders acknowledge the contributions of the employees and thus elevate their morale. Justice and even-handedness is practiced and observed by leaders who are effective. Leader must reveal the entire body of

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knowledge to the subordinate and urges him to internalize the same and do what he thinks is the best. (Chapter XVIII, Verse 63)

Managing Organizational Environment: Spiritual Leadership at the Organizational Level

Leadership should take initiative to manage the entire organizational environment and culture for continuous improvement. Leaders need to envision the future of the organization and develop processes which guide the organization. In this process, they not only become extremely capable learners but also take responsibility to improve the quality of the organizational environment.

The *Bhagwad Gita* clearly stresses on selfless work and aligning oneself to the sense of duty. The benefit of the society and righteousness must be kept in mind.

Conclusion

Thus, the *Bhagwad Gita* gives insights on workplace spirituality at all the three levels namely; individual, team and the organizational level. At the individual level, it urges employees to rise above fear and despondency, to become self-aware, to gain control over the mind, to develop spiritual intelligence, self-abnegation, to do away with the desire for rewards, develop equanimity and calmness of mind and dedication on conferred work. At the team level, it urges individuals to lead the team in the correct path with conviction and decisive thinking, interconnectedness with the humans and the supreme soul, seek welfare of all, sharing of outcomes with team members, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration. At the organizational level, it urges individuals to align personal and professional goals, accept responsibility and have a sense of responsibility for all that you do.

The findings in this study are limited by the understanding and perceptions of the author as the *Bhagwad Gita* is an infinite source of inspiration. Each reading enables new perspectives and understandings and fresh insights and cannot be contained in a few pages.

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