

Soul and Work
Bridging the Gap

By Stephen C. Schoonover M.D.
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A Fortune Magazine cover story reports a “growing quest for spiritual renewal in the workplace.”

A group of middle-aged rebels in business suits meet to discuss how they can spend more time working from their “souls”.

The Washington Post says “Talk of soul and spirituality is flowing freely in the workplace these days.”

Executives at a business school conference meditate briefly as preparation for a discussion of “how to find one’s true calling.”

Fortune describes, “a counter culture bubbling up all over corporate America that wants to bridge the traditional divide between spirituality and work.” They quote a Harvard Business School research fellow who follows the topic and agrees; “spirituality in the workplace is exploding.”

Hearing all this, how should we as HR professionals respond? Is there a practical and acceptable way HR organizations can help people “bridge the divide between spirituality and work”? And should we even be trying to help people work “from their souls”? Is it appropriate for us, or our organizations, to get involved in something that is so uniquely personal for each individual?

We believe the answer to these questions is “yes”. Why? Because the need to address this “exploding” issue may be impossible, or impractical to ignore. And because there are some very practical and acceptable ways organizations can help people bring their souls to work. Also, Those organizations that recognize and respond positively to this emerging need will have more satisfied, more productive employees.

A new urgency

The new, more introspective trend may in part be a natural reaction to the booming, possessions-oriented 90’s. *Fortune* speaks of aging baby boomers starting to notice something is missing - beginning to feel a need that stock options and opulent life styles aren’t satisfying. Many are asking “Is this all there is?” One successful executive is quoted as saying, “You get to the top of the ladder and find that maybe it’s leaning against the wrong building.”

Now, with the added shocks of September 11 and additional rounds of downsizing, a new reality is setting in. The need to integrate what I do at work with a larger purpose that has personal meaning has taken on a new urgency, even among the twenties and thirties crowd who have never known anything but good times.

At first glance, already overworked HR professionals may be discouraged that another layer of employee need is coming down the pike. They may think, “Isn’t it enough that with an already overloaded schedule I now have to deal with downsizing and the morale of those who aren’t downsized?” “How can I deal with people’s spiritual needs, especially in a climate where most organizational leaders feel uneasy and at a loss to address their employees’ inner lives”?

While such a reaction is certainly understandable, there are some very practical ways to cope with these challenges. We’ve been developing techniques to help people bring their souls to work for over twenty years – and we’ve been implementing these programs in the toughest corporate environments. Invariably, the firms have benefited at the bottom line. These proven techniques have been used to help people who have been downsized as well as for building increased performance and job satisfaction among the rest of the workforce.

What we learned the hard way was that much of what we had did when we started our work was backwards. We had focused too much on the “outward” needs of the organization and not nearly enough on the “inner” needs of individual employees. It was only after observing what people who really succeed in their careers and lives do, with or without the help of their organizations, that we were able to build a truly effective process and tools to help others succeed.

Quiet revolutions

Through our work, we’ve been able to tap into and enable the higher aspirations of employees in Fortune 500 companies without setting off alarms. At GE’s no-nonsense corporate headquarters we introduced inner-needs focused career and performance development programs that were so successful GE exported them to its businesses worldwide. Part of this practical approach has included the development of models articulating what competencies distinguish successful people with tools for developing them. These competency-based tool kits have been applied successfully across a full range of large Fortune 500 companies and small organizations, for profit and non-profit.

Our roadmap for helping people find and succeed in jobs they love got started years ago when we were asked to help a large company deal with unexpected layoffs. While initial efforts to help showed limited success, we noticed that some individuals were enormously successful at helping themselves. While others fell apart, these individuals “took charge” and negotiated themselves into new careers, many more rewarding than the jobs they lost. There was a clear pattern in what they did. We started capturing and translating that pattern into tools and techniques that help others succeed.

From the beginning, we believed that it’s a myth that there has to be an irreparable split between spirituality and productivity at work. We have always found that the myth disappeared, or never came up, if we used a language that addressed both dimensions – and if the tools and techniques we proposed clearly enhanced both. It also helped that we based our action proposals not on theory, but on research and practical lessons from the trenches. Our research team has interviewed over 5000 people in large and small organizations worldwide.

Your Soul at Work

We’re not theologians but we highly respect those who are. We think people should work with their spiritual advisors to define “soul” in their own specific terms. Instead, we focus on a specialized definition that most people, no matter what their unique spiritual beliefs, can apply practically to their work lives.

For career purposes your soul is the inner you —the center of your being. It's that part of you that knows your deepest needs and aspirations and that's the source of your energy. If you leave your soul at home and have no time for it later, your job won't be very fulfilling.

If we define the issues in operational terms and look at what people really want in their work, the problem becomes a little less daunting. We've discovered most people's souls want four things at work. They want to:

- love their jobs and find jobs they love
- succeed in their work
- navigate successfully through predictable life stage transitions
- tie their work to a higher life purpose that has personal meaning for them.

We've learned that, to be effective, we have to address all four in our career and life planning process. To do this at a practical level we've developed a "taking charge" process that leads people through an integrated roadmap of discovery and decision.¹ This process includes:

- giving people a proven step-by-step roadmap for finding and marketing themselves into jobs they really like
- teaching them how to identify and develop the most important non-technical behaviors research shows distinguish those who succeed from those who don't no matter what their career specialties.
- providing criteria and a process for updating career and life plans through each life stage
- showing them how current psychological research and the wisdom of history's spiritual leaders can be applied to tie work into a higher life purpose that energizes and adds meaning to everything we do.
- providing a "Career and Life Workbook" with exercises and tools that can be used individually or in group learning experiences to help people implement each step in the roadmap.

The other end of the microscope

While our "taking charge" roadmap was designed for individuals on a career quest, it's also important to turn the microscope around and take a look at our own profession in light of what we've learned. In addition to providing practical steps and tools to help people keep their career on track, we've also found we have to address a number of myths that create false barriers to progress. These myths hinder people from seeking and finding rewarding work. Most of us wouldn't accept these myths if we really thought them through. But we don't take time and, often unconsciously, HR professionals and the people they counsel behave as if they were true. A few of the most common myths we encounter include:

Myth: Someone else has the answers for my life.

In the context of work, this translates as, "If I focus on my company's or my boss' expectations somehow this will eventually bring me satisfaction". Buying into this myth, even at the unconscious level, prevents people from defining their own self-expectations and needs. People who abdicate responsibility for their own career growth are unlikely to find satisfaction. If they fail to get in touch with their own inner needs and march solely to their company's drum, eventually their energy will flag and their productivity will suffer. That's as bad for the company as it is for the individual.

Myth: Meeting my company's success criteria will fulfill my needs

How many smart people seem to ultimately base their self-esteem on—or measure their personal worth by

- The same criteria their organization uses to measure its success (e.g. beating the competition into the ground at any cost)?
or
- Other criteria that may be implicit in one's corporate or peer culture (e.g., fast track movement up the organizational hierarchy is the ultimate value, you can never work enough hours)?

If talented people derail themselves by not getting in touch with their own more personal success criteria, again energy, motivation and ultimately even productivity will flag.

Myth: As the organization improves, my needs will be met.

Even when there is no conflict in values, people should not rely on any managerial hierarchy or human resource organization to meet their needs. Even the best-intentioned organizational leaders rarely have good career counseling skills and generally can only offer advice based on their own personal career paths and aspirations. It's much more productive to have a process in place that helps people define their individual, possibly very different aspirations.

When held by an individual, these myths are often self-defeating. When promulgated by an organization, however, they are Orwellian. Ask yourself, does your company really live by its values in its relations with employees? In the final analysis, will you feel that your work did more to liberate people's spirits and help them grow in jobs where their energies flows naturally or to manipulate them into adapting to the corporate agenda? Which approach do you think will have the highest ultimate payoff for the organization?

What is called for is a paradigm shift in how many HR organizations pursue the objective of aligning the workforce with business goals. HR typically expresses a philosophy of fostering employee satisfaction and fulfillment. However, the tools and processes used have often worked from the outside in: The company needs certain qualifications, competencies, or skills, and therefore is going to hire, train, or incentivize people to those standards. Often, this unintentionally results in making the square peg fit the round hole. Most everyone would agree that is not ultimately productive.

The whole person

We've found that challenging people to express and seek what they truly want in a career is critical. When we first started teaching people to march to their own drums, independent of their employer, many saw that as a risky tactic. In practice, however, individuals who seek their own fulfilling path tend to contribute more to the organization and are less likely to leave.

Similarly, the application of a clear process and practical performance development tools not only has enormous positive impact on individual careers but also improves the bottom line. Individuals get significantly increased satisfaction because the tools help them become more successful in whatever career paths they choose and their success makes them more productive for their employer.

It is important to note that we are not talking about spiritual or values-based programs introduced by management primarily to move employees in directions the organization wants them to go. Instead, we're talking about a program that stresses the importance of each individual getting inside his or her own head, doing some systematic personal soul searching, becoming very clear on their own unique values, and building a career around their very personal criteria for success.

“Soul at work” need not be an oxymoron. Companies that foster employees’ personal and spiritual growth find it makes them tremendously more productive. HR’s role in such a company is to provide an enabling environment and the practical tools to encourage continuous growth and learning. Rather than manage human resource piecemeal from outside in, career and performance development initiatives must address the whole person.

We’ve found that means giving people a process to help manage their careers from the inside out across the four dimensions we mentioned earlier. This includes providing tools that help them find jobs they love; teaching them what non-technical work behaviors research shows are critical to success in most career specialties; helping them update their plans through successive life stage transitions and supporting their need to put it all in the context of a higher life purpose.

While each person must navigate his or her unique career and life journeys, a time-tested, research-proven process with tools can help them plot the course much more effectively in directions they really want to go.

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¹ Based on our experiences, we recently wrote a book called *Your Soul at Work – Five Steps to a More Fulfilling Career and Life*. It outlines our “Taking Charge” process and contains a step-by-step Career and Life Workbook with the exercises, tools and checklists we’ve described. Additional information and sample excerpts/materials can be found on the book web site www.yoursoulatwork.com

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Brief Reflections for HR leaders

Our book contains a number of “brief reflections” to help individuals warm up to the larger project of later completing the Career and Life Workbook exercises. Here we suggest a few different reflections for HR leaders to stimulate self-examination around the issues we present.

- Do you feel your organization can and should play a role in helping people align work with their inner aspirations and values? Do you have what you consider an effective program in place to do this?
- Would you find resistance in your company, either from management or from employees, to the idea of an “inner-needs” oriented career and performance development program? Do you agree there is payoff for the company as well as the individuals in such a program?
- Do you feel a universalized lexicon using such phrases as “individual life values”, “inner aspirations”, “personal success criteria”, “larger purpose” and “life stage transitions” can be helpful in bridging the gap between corporate culture and the spiritual needs of employees?

- Does your organization use research-based competency models that define what specific non-technical behaviors distinguish successful from less successful performers in key functions? Are they available on line for easy use in self and 360 degree assessments?
- Have these models been incorporated into practical tools that can be used as the basis for an integrated performance development program? Are they being used for such things as selection, self-assessment, performance appraisal, development of training objectives, and career/life planning?
- What behaviors have you observed that help some individuals respond to career dislocation better than others? Do you have tools in place to define and teach these behaviors to others?
- Are your HR programs focused too much on the “outward” needs of the organization and not enough on the “inner” needs of individual employees? Are you doing enough to liberate people’s spirits and help them grow in jobs where their energies flow naturally?

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