

The Role of Spirituality in Workplace Health: A Case Study of Small Business Leadership

Joel B. Bennett, PhD; Wyndy W. Wiitala, MS; Camille Patterson, PhD

Workplace spirituality, a topic that has seen a recent upsurge of interest, may have significant implications for business health. Businesses are holding seminars on meaningful work, spiritual leadership, group vision, religious diversity, and some have even set aside a meditation/prayer room where workers can go during the work day. Popular business press titles range from research studies—*A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America*—to selling techniques—*Selling with Soul*—to everyday tips—*The Complete Idiot's Guide to Spirituality in the Workplace*. Articles have also appeared in *Fortune* magazine and the *Wall Street Journal*. For the most part, the focus has been on larger businesses and corporate America; much less attention has been paid to the small business operator and to the role that spirituality might play in small business health.

“Several things have led to an increased spiritual hunger among workers. Rapid change, uncertainty, and the demise of the corporate loyalty pact. The company used to take care of you and you did your job in return” explains Judi Neale, Executive Director for the *Center for Spirit at Work* at the University of New Haven.¹ “As the outer sense of stability has eroded, workers are looking for that inner center and returning to core values. The small business owner may be a key part of that trend. There is a renewed entrepreneurial spirit in the U.S., partly driven by workers who are disillusioned with larger companies that have put them in ethical dilemmas. With a small business, they have more opportunity to follow their own spirit and moral compass.”

¹ The learn about the center and the Association for the Spirit at Work, visit www.spiritatwork.org.

The Spirituality and Health Connection

The importance of spirituality to health has a firm basis in scientific research. In April, over 500 researchers and professionals in the health and medical fields gathered on the campus of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Washington DC, for the conference “Integrating Research on Spirituality and Health and Well-Being into Service Delivery.”² Hundreds of studies were reviewed in areas such as religious attendance and mental health, prayer and coping with stress, and spiritual faith and substance abuse. Over the past ten years, research has definitively shown that “religion and spirituality are surprisingly robust in predicting health-related outcomes” claims Peter Hill, PhD, one of the presenters at the conference. The NIH conference was a milestone because it shows that research funding is starting to move beyond basic studies to developing ways in which healthcare delivery can utilize the health-spirituality connection to prevent disease and improve patient outcomes.

Businesses may also stand to gain from learning about ways that spirituality relates to health. In fact, many businesses may already possess relevant qualities or practices. The ethical business leader who inspires a powerful vision, the work group with strong team spirit, coworkers who have Bible study during lunch breaks, or even the party or pay bonus that precedes a religious holiday (e.g., Hannukah, Christmas); each of these recognizes that quality of work-life includes a spiritual or religious dimension. Indeed, for the small business that cannot afford special seminars, these everyday or common practices may be an often overlooked foundation for worker health and well-being.

A Case Study of Small Business Leadership

As scientists, our bread and butter comes from formulating hypotheses and collecting data that will help us test those hypotheses. One of our research methods, the case study,

² The proceedings for all presentations at this conference can be viewed online (<http://www.icihs.org>).

allows us to explore a question in depth on an individual or smaller group of individuals who represent a larger population. Results from such exploratory studies are not always definitive, but they can yield powerful insights and pave the way for more systematic research on larger populations.

We were particularly interested in small business owners and operators for several reasons. First, as noted above, little is known about spirituality in small workplaces. Second, the vast majority of working adults are employed by smaller businesses. Third, for ten years, we had been studying ways to prevent employee substance abuse through workplace health promotion programs that go beyond drug-testing.³ National studies show that rates of problem drinking and illicit drug use—as well as other health problems—are higher as businesses are smaller. In other words, the small business represents a special “at-risk” population. Fourth, and most important, we felt that the individual in a leadership position may have the most influence, and perhaps the greatest insight, regarding workplace spirituality.

Hypothesis: Business Owners and Operators with Greater Spiritual Orientation Should Have Healthier Workers

We put these reasons together with what we know so far from the two fields described above—workplace spirituality and health and spirituality—to derive some hypotheses. Because of the importance of leadership, we reasoned that the spiritual orientation of the business owner or key operator would be associated with employee health and well-being. We defined *spiritual orientation* by adapting a questionnaire that was developed by Ian Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton for their study of spirituality in corporate

³ Our work on workplace substance abuse prevention is highlighted in a recent book. See Joel Bennett and Wayne E. K. Lehman (2003). *Preventing Workplace Substance Abuse; Beyond Drug Testing to Wellness*. Published by the American Psychological Association, Washington, DC ([link to](#)

America.⁴ The items chosen asked whether work was meaningful, frequency of prayer or meditation, openness to spirituality at work, and whether the respondent followed, or compromised, important life-values when making decisions at work (see Table 1).

Our definition of worker health was two-fold. Ultimately, we would like to know if having a spiritually-oriented boss reduces health risks in areas that extend beyond the work setting, such as tobacco or alcohol use, proper diet, and depression or anxiety. However, the spiritual health of leaders may be more related to life-to-work spillover and health incidents that interface directly with the work setting. Life-to-work spillover refers to workers who bring personal problems to work, workaholism, excessive medical leave, and safety/productivity risks because workers fail to get help for problems. We reasoned that businesses would see less spillover incidents when those businesses projected a healthy climate through spiritually-oriented leadership.

The Small Business Wellness Initiative: A Sample of Small Business Owners and Operators

The “Small Business Wellness Initiative” is a federally funded research project that explores health concerns, work-life issues, and workplace spirituality by conducting intensive interviews with principles and owners in small businesses in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. To date we have interviewed in over thirty, ethnically-diverse, businesses from a variety of occupations including bus driving, home building, street construction, home health care, restaurants, hotels, a car wash, a moving company, and a beauty salon. Businesses ranged in size from 5 to 115 workers, with a median of 20 workers. Many businesses (40%) had been in operation for 20 years or more, but there were a number (20%) of young businesses operating for less than five years. Interviews lasted between one and two hours

⁴ Ian Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton (1999). *A Spiritual Audit Of Corporate America: A Hard Look At Spirituality, Religion, And Values In The Workplace*. Jossey-Bass Publishing.

and when the small business owner was not available, a key contact who works most closely with staff (usually human resources or head manager) answered questions.

Descriptive Quantitative Results

We combined items to form three measures and first report on the five health-related risks. Smoking was the most prevalent, with 87% percent of small businesses having at least one or two workers who smoked, and 59% indicating that several or more smoked.

Depression was seen in at least one or two workers in 45%, and in several or more workers in 28% of interviewed businesses. Figure 1 also shows that the majority of businesses included at least one employee with chronic health (57%) or alcohol (54%) problems, or who were overweight (64%).

Figure 2 shows work-life spillover incidents in seven areas. The most prevalent problems reported were “employees personal stress effects work” (90%), “I have done extra work because one or more employees called in sick” (74%), and “employees bring personal problems to work” (71%). Fifty-seven percent of those interviewed indicated that their business was currently at risk of lost productivity and/or safety problems because employees fail to get help for personal problems.

Figure 3 shows results for five spiritual orientation items and suggests a relatively strong orientation amongst small business operators. For example, 83% felt strongly that worked contributed to the general meaning in their life, 74% prayed or meditated at least daily, and as many felt that it was important for employees to be spiritual. When asked how often they compromised their values when making important decision, 55% indicated “none” and 26% indicated “a little.”

The strong spiritual orientation was also heard in stories the interviewees told about themselves and their workers. Several owners prayed for their workers every day. In one

instance, a serious workplace accident caused a significant increase in gratitude and care amongst many workers. In another, different workers would take turns saying a short prayer over the speaker-system just before the start of the work day. One Vice President shared that she had never gone to church until meeting the business owner and hearing about the importance of family values. Many interviewees talked about the importance of honesty, integrity, respect, and having a relationship with God or a Higher Power.

Is There a Relationship between Business Operator Spiritual Orientation and Employee Well-Being?

To test our hypotheses, we examined the relationship between spiritual orientation and two measures of well-being. While we found no significant relationship between spirituality and health risks, there was a significant association between spirituality and spillover. Figure 4 displays a scatter plot that describes this relationship. Each circle represents an independent business. Numbers along the x-axis represent spiritual orientation and numbers along the y-axis represent spillover incidents. The plot shows that as business operators' spiritual orientation increases, there is less probability of a spillover-incident. The relationship is consistent whether we control for business size, age of business, or health-risk scores.

So What?

These exploratory results hopefully will promote discussion and further research in the area of workplace spirituality. Results point to significant risks in small businesses and to the possibility that the spiritual orientation of small business operators actively buffers against and may reduce those risks. Often small business lack the financial resources for health promotion programs. However, the spiritual health of the business operator may potentially be a key resource that can improve employee health. Business operators should be supported in their efforts to use this aspect of their personal health as a way to improve the

well-being of their employees. Many small businesses start out, and survive, because of a sustained passion and vision to run a business “a better way.” The current results suggest that when this is a spirited passion and vision, the better way is also a healthier way.

Table 1.

Spiritual Orientation Measure

How much does your work contribute to the general meaning in your life?	<u>None</u> 1	<u>A little</u> 2	<u>Some</u> 3	<u>A lot</u> 4	<u>Very much</u> 5
How often do you pray or meditate?	<u>Never</u> 1	<u>Monthly or less</u> 2	<u>Weekly</u> 3	<u>Daily</u> 4	<u>More than Once a day</u> 5
It is appropriate to talk about spirituality at work.	<u>Strongly Disagree</u> 1	<u>Disagree</u> 2	<u>Undecided</u> 3	<u>Agree</u> 4	<u>Strongly Agree</u> 5
It is important for employees to be spiritual.	<u>Strongly Disagree</u> 1	<u>Disagree</u> 2	<u>Undecided</u> 3	<u>Agree</u> 4	<u>Strongly Agree</u> 5
How often do you feel you are forced to compromise your basic values—those which guide your life—in making important decisions at work?	<u>None</u> 5	<u>A little</u> 4	<u>Some</u> 3	<u>A lot</u> 2	<u>Very much</u> 1

This exploratory measure was adapted by permission from Ian Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton (1999). A Spiritual Audit Of Corporate America: A Hard Look At Spirituality, Religion, And Values In The Workplace. Jossey-Bass Publishing.

Fig. 1. Health-Related Problems Reported By Small Business Operators

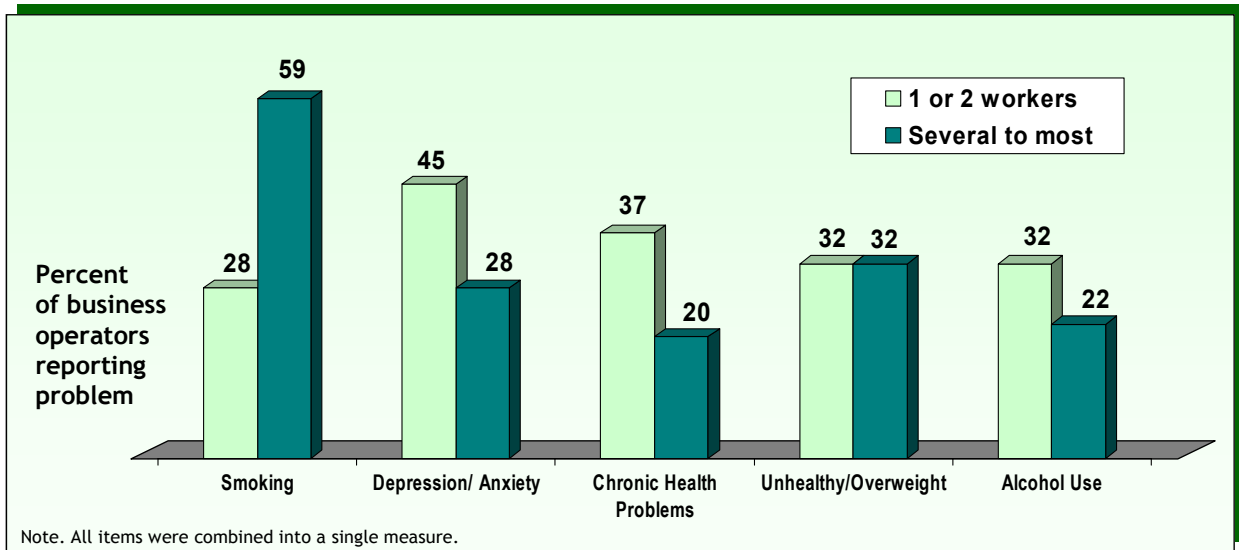


Fig. 2. Work-life spillover/health incidents (past 6 months)

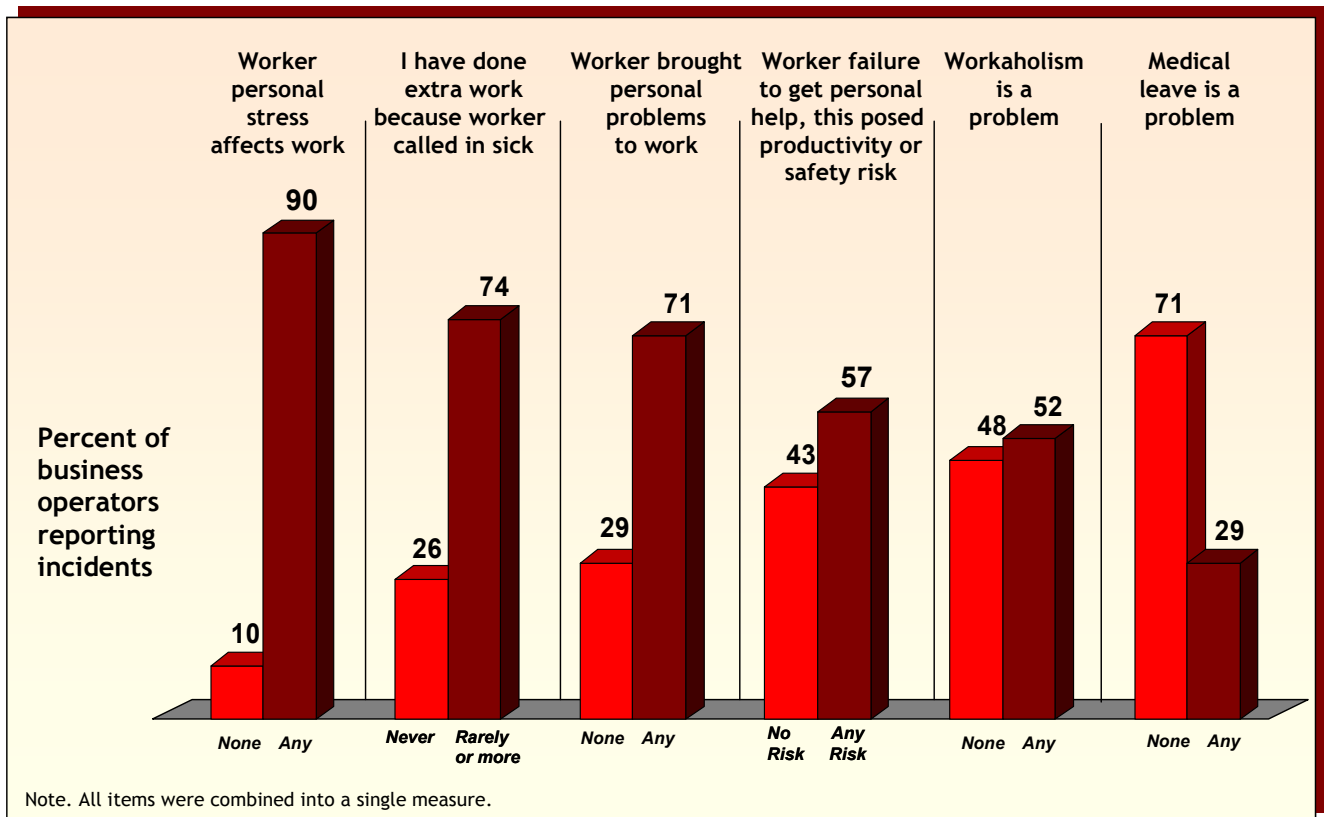


Fig. 3. Spiritual orientation in the workplace

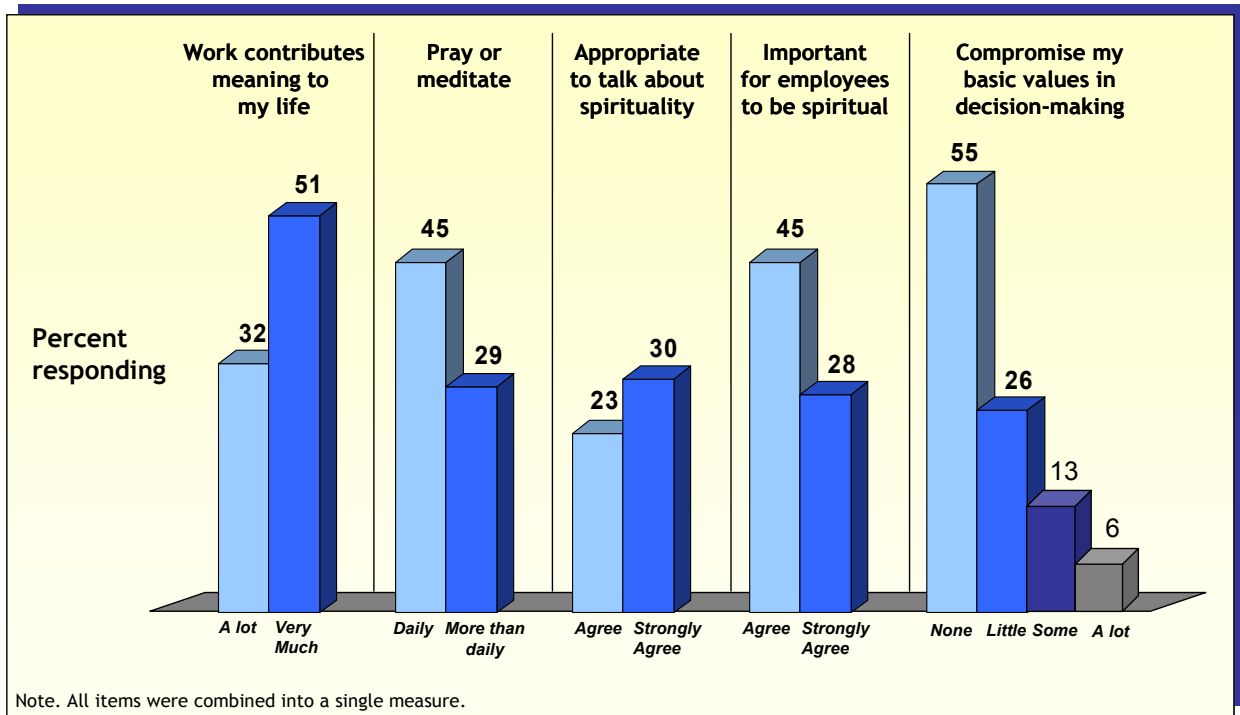


Fig. 4. Spiritual orientation and spillover incidents

