



Managing organizational teams through spirituality- a qualitative approach

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ABSTRACT: *Organizations worldwide are facing several challenges in people management. This research paper explores the linkage between the spiritual practice of an organization and its effect on the team relationship of the members of the organization. By adopting a qualitative phenomenological case study approach, the data was collected by full participant observation and by semi structured interviews and the result was thematically analyzed after coding. The results reveal significant benefits of the spiritual practice of the organization on the team relationship.*

Keywords: *Spirituality, team spirit, wellbeing, trust, leadership*

INTRODUCTION: A sports coach recently was discussing with me the poor performance of his team due to lack of team spirit. He said each one is playing only for their personal goals and do not understand that such an attitude will not help them succeed. He was lamenting how the team had already lost 3 out of the 7 matches they are scheduled to play. So, in this paper I attempt to discuss about spirituality which is practiced by employees of one organization and which they believe is the main reason for a strong productive team.

In today's competitive age where attrition is a matter of concern for HR professionals across the world retaining talent is a challenge and this can be done by enhanced employee engagement. A core element of effective Employer branding is when an organization's value proposition is not just functional and emotional but also includes spiritual aspects. One effective way for increasing employee engagement and effective talent management is by introducing a spiritual culture in the organization. In organizations across the world various techniques and strategies have been tried since decades to foster a culture of trust and belongingness among the employees of the organization. Increased trust and belongingness and better communication stimulates team spirit in the organization which leads to increased employee well-being and productivity. Several discussions have also been done on workplace spirituality and the benefits of the same on overall wellbeing of the employees.

There are several definitions and explanations of teams. But the explanation given by Naresh Jain (2009) is most relevant with reference to my paper. "Team members need to learn how to help one another, help other team members realize their true potential, and create an environment that allows everyone to go beyond his or her limitations. Teams can be broken down into from a huge team or one big group of people, even if these smaller secondary teams are temporary. In all organizations groups are inevitable. It is the onus of the organizational leadership and members to channelize the energy of the group into teams which work synergistically. Volumes have been written about the

importance of teams and the need to build teams. However, team building is subjective and situational. Great teams can be built only if the leadership in the team is truly motivational and inspirational. There are several strategies to build teams. Team building exercises are very common in most managerial and employee development programmes. But, the effectiveness of such exercises is short lived. So, team building exercise must be on going, preferably on a daily basis, for the team to experience oneness and realize that they are working towards a common goal. Such team building exercises help individual identify their personal goals and integrate it with the organizational goal and vice versa.

There is no particular definition of the term spirituality. But this term has been discussed by many in several ways. Often religion and spirituality are considered to be the same. But I wish to explain spirituality as given by international center for Spirit at Work (2011) - "Spirituality refers to a state or experience that can provide individuals with direction or meaning, or can provide feelings of understanding, support, inner wholeness or connectedness. Connectedness can be to themselves, other people, nature, the universe, a god or some other super natural power." Spirituality is important in our life as it helps to experience compassion, increase empathy, improve social connections, feel a sense of gratitude, enjoy life satisfaction, and reduce stress in all areas of life.

RATIONALE: The discussion with my sports coach friend set me thinking on teams in organization. So, informally I began talking to other friends working in different organizations like Banks and IT companies and realized most team leaders find it very challenging to manage their teams. In fact, one person said, "Achieving competitive advantage through technological competence is nearing an end. Now organizations will only demand competence to handle human relations and teams. Leaders with good man management skills, compassion and empathy will be in demand irrespective of their level of technical skills." In an era, where Job Satisfaction is a Myth and high stress levels are common, Leaders are required who will groom the future leaders; who will not only help their teams connect with each other but also help them connect with the ideology of the organization; where every member of the team integrates his personal goal with the organizational goals.

LITERATURE REVIEW: Studies have shown a positive relationship between workplace spirituality and the functioning of teams on various parameters. Johnson (2019) concludes that a spiritual workplace helps to create harmony in the organization to achieve the vision of the organization. Further, he emphasizes that a leader who supports spiritual intelligence in an organization facilitates others in the organization to identify their purpose in life. Daniel (2010) has proposed a theoretical model to understand the effect of workplace spirituality on team effectiveness. Trust, creativity and respect are highlighted as important attributes in an organization where workplace spirituality is encouraged. Marques (2005) has also supported the enhancement of trust among organizational members due to workplace spirituality which he concludes eventually leads to organizational excellence.

RESEARCH DESIGN: Exploratory research is the primary purpose of my study. Exploratory research generally relates to understanding human and societal problems that are not well defined, explores different aspects of human life. Exploratory research identifies varies situations faced by people and intervenes and helps people effectively control the environment and reduce the impact of the problems if necessary. Exploratory research gives lot of flexibility to the researcher in carrying out the research though it can be time consuming. Generally, exploratory research is qualitative in approach. This exploratory research study set its objective to be a *descriptive correlational* study to understand the impact of a spiritual culture in the organization on the team's effectiveness. Information has been gathered *qualitatively* by adopting the *phenomenological case study approach*. Participant observation as the method of collecting data.

Research question: What is the impact of a spiritual culture of an organization on the effectiveness of the teams in the organization?

Research gap: There are several studies conducted to study the impact of workplace spirituality on the effectiveness of team's functioning. But, no specific study on a school was available for reference. Schools being the place where the future of the society is groomed must have a positive environment for the healthy growth of young minds.

Research site: The school premises was the site of the research for the two-year period.

Participants & ethical consent: The entire staff of the school were participants in the research and consent from the head of the institution on behalf of all the participants was taken in writing. The school staff included the Principal, Vice Principal, Teachers teaching both academic subjects and co-curricular activities, the administrative staff like the accountants and librarian, all the support staff engaged in cleaning and housekeeping activities in the school.

Method of data collection: 1) Participant observation 2) Field notes and memos based on Observation schedule 3) Informal conversation with school staff and 4) Semi structured interviews to clarify findings from observation.

Data Analysis: Coding of observation notes. Thematic Analysis

EVENT OBSERVED: Every morning at 8.30 a.m. all staff members assemble in a common prayer room. The prayer room has just a lamp which is lit by the person who enters the room first. Chairs are arranged in a circular arrangement around the lamp. Members generally do not talk once in the prayer room. Soft music is played in the background. As soon as all the members arrive, (members are very punctual) the person who has the responsibility to pray begins the service. All members take turns to pray based on the order of the names in the muster. Members can be as creative in their prayer. Assigned person reads out a prayer which is generally written by him/ her. After the reading of the prayer all sing a hymn or chant a mantra lead by the same person. Special prayers are offered on days when it is a special occasion like a staff member's birthday, examination of students, an event being organised etc. Prayers are also offered when any family is facing a crisis situation. Prayers are secular and people read verses from the Bible, Gita, Quran, Guru Granth Sahib or from any sacred text. Hymns which are sung are in any language like English, Kannada, Hindi, Malayalam etc.

Prayers are sometimes offered by holding hands and passing positive energies to each other. Such a practice has to be actually experienced to feel its strength. Prayers are offered by concentrating on breathing and being conscious of the beautiful life we all are blessed with. Prayers are also offered by each member sharing his thought or reflection at that moment. All this greatly energizes and relaxes the members towards a synergetic team. After the prayer service ends the team discusses important issues, announcements are made and tasks for the day are delegated. Important decisions are also taken. This whole process takes between 20-25 minutes. Being positively charged staff members begin the day.

SIGNIFICANT RESULT: Seven themes emerged on analyzing the collected observation notes. Themes were arrived at after coding the narrations of the participants in the study. Purpose & goals, role clarity, team processes, team relationships, passion and commitment, compassion, skills and learning were the themes that were identified.

DISCUSSION: The organization where this research was conducted is a school and PU college imparting education to students belonging to the lower middle class and the poorest households in the nearby localities. The teachers in the school face several challenges in handling the students. Orientation towards academics is less among the students and many of the students belong to families which are facing several social problems like marital discord, property disputes, suicidal deaths etc. These family problems affect the young students in different ways which as a teacher one has to handle very sensitively and calmly. In such circumstances providing a positive and healthy climate in the organization was imperative for both the staff and the students for overall development of the students and their future. The leader ensured that all the team members worked in healthy cooperation and coordination with each other and kept the organizational goals in

mind always. This was not achieved overnight but was the result of total dedication and hard work for nearly a decade. The leader shared regarding frequent conflicts and several negative vibes between staff members in the initial years and how slowly it transformed into a healthy environment due to the introduction of a spiritual culture.

“Spirituality finds a common emphasis on the value of thoughtfulness, tolerance for breadth and practices and beliefs, and appreciation for the insights of other religious communities, as well as other sources of authority within the social sciences.” The above practice of the organisation reflects this thought of Seybold, Kevin and Hill (2001).

- Contemporary spirituality theorists assert that spirituality develops inner peace and forms a foundation for happiness. In alignment with this thought one of the members said, “The morning rush of getting kids ready for school, packing lunch boxes, completing household chores, getting dressed and reaching the workplace on time by braving the traffic is very stressful. But, when we all get together first thing in the morning and calmly spend a few moments praying, it really calms me down. All the stress vanishes and I am energized to begin the day afresh. I get a chance to feel god’s presence within and around me.” (Coded as Relaxing) Another member expressed, “sitting in a circle and singing a hymn together bonds one strongly to another. This helps a great deal in accomplishing all tasks collaboratively.” (Coded as collaboration and cooperativeness) Beautiful expression of yet another member was “One realizes the nothingness in front of the almighty. One realizes that in front of God all are equal and this helps each one to melt individual differences to work together. There is a lot of positive energy which radiates from each person in the room. This brings about freshness, calmness, cooperation and a belief in the wonder of creation. Prayers offered as a team in the morning instills a faith in all that everyone is here for a noble purpose which can be achieved only synergistically.” (Coded as Cooperation and oneness) One of the teachers reflects thus, “Praying together in the morning is part of many cultures and that simply signifies that whatever is learnt in the early morning hours stays fresh throughout the day. Togetherness implicates oneness which prevails through and through each. The presence of the flame takes over any negative vibes by anyone. Moreover, people are conscious of the burning flame in that room, and hence each one participates with a clean mind and soul.” (Coded as negativity reduction) “I am an integral part of this school since its inception. Earlier we used to have many quarrels and misunderstandings. Now, I am able to see a transformation in me since we started this prayer time daily as we all get a few minutes to introspect together and it has helped us understand each other better.” (Understanding, conflict management) The experience of one of the teachers is expressed as, “Praying together is like a mirror that reflects our imaginations and leads to actions. The creator is merciful to reveal his light and knowledge to us when we offer faith and devotion to him. He assists us to fan the flame of true self-consciousness and thereby illuminates both inner and outer world. We request God to bless us with common sense, experience, learning and maturity. This makes each of us see each other positively and accept each other’s weaknesses and mistakes. Once we set our path of surrender everything is automatic, pleasant and successful.” (Coded as shared learnings)

The themes identified in this study are also the benefits of this practice that was observed and was concluded from the informal conversations and the semi structured interviews with the staff members are:

- 1) Prayers when written and read out aloud gives a sense of security to all. A security because one realizes that the challenges of life are not theirs alone but that of everyone. This shared feeling gives the strength to face the challenges with a smile. (Purpose & goal)
- 2) Writing down of prayers is like writing a plan or a goal. It brings in a lot of clarity about the issue to be tackled. Moreover, such prayers, inculcates the value of empathy since the prayers are written on behalf of everyone. (Purpose & goal) (Compassion)
- 3) It brings about a sense of responsibility as the person assigned to pray for the day must be prepared for the same and must carry it out independently and creatively. (Passion & commitment)
- 4) Post prayer discussion saves a lot of time in unnecessary meetings. In the morning after the prayer all are relaxed so decisions are taken quickly with a lot of clarity. (Role clarity)

5) Since the prayers are secular it promotes respect for all faiths, languages and culture. (Compassion)

6) Team members experience the spirit of oneness and of being like a family. Birthday prayers specially make the person feel blessed and special. (Team relationships)

7) Since all matters are openly discussed and collectively decided, it fosters a spirit of openness and trust among the members. It also brings in participative decision-making style which benefits all and each one learns from the other. Such transparent communication ensures there are no information gaps and work move smoothly. (Team processes) (Skills & learning)

8) Being appreciated by the leader for good work done immensely motivates the members for the rest of the day. (Team relationships)

Members of the organization work with an altruistic intention as mentioned by many during the informal discussions so, they are able to absorb the benefits of such spirituality more. Those members who did not join the organization with an altruistic motive gradually developed it mainly due to such prayer session which, helped them find inner peace and understand the purpose of life. Moreover, all the members opined that they found strength in each other and also melted their individual differences due to their leader. The qualities of the leader expressed by the team members can be summarized with the 8 principles for spiritual leaders suggested by Houston & Sokolow (2006)

These are:

- 1) Attention to all
- 2) Unique gifts and talents
- 3) Gratitude for big and small
- 4) Uniqueness of life lessons
- 5) Holistic perspective
- 6) Atmosphere of openness
- 7) Trust
- 8) Intention

All members strongly agreed that their leader was not only competent but possessed all the above qualities which made it very comfortable for them to approach her and express their view points and problems. Salient observations about Team Spirit in the organization are:

- Every event in the school would be carried out smoothly in a well planned manner.
- Teachers were always willing to support each other in their work like substituting for a class or switching exam supervision duties or completing tasks together with joy and laughter.
- Staff members trusted each other and communicated openly with each other.
- Each one identified with the organization and its vision. The number of staff members in the school has only increased and none have left the school unless due to unavoidable circumstances.

IMPLICATIONS: The lessons learnt at this institution can easily be implemented in any small organization or the departments of large organizations. The introduction of a spiritual culture in an organization cannot be done unless the top management does not believe strongly in the need and necessity of the same. Such a culture can reap its benefits over a period of time but once the culture is set then it will be rooted strongly and the organization can garner sustained rewards.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE SCOPE: Since the observation was done only in one organization no generalization is possible. The experience of the observer is limited by subjective analysis. Moreover, the lack of available literature reduces the richness of this study.

The practice of this organization can be easily implemented in other organizations and teams and the benefits of the same can be observed. Adopting such a practice will do no harm so, other organizations can at least try this practice for a few years and observe the benefits of the same. The role of leadership in this organization can be studied more in detail.

CONCLUSION: We Indians are considered to be deeply spiritual people in some way or the other. Since the pandemic brought several changes in each of our lives the spirituality quotient of each of us has only increased. Yet, most Indian organizations do not practice this spirituality to derive its benefits. Daily interaction between team members and their leaders helps to break barriers between team leaders and team members facilitating better communication, openness and trust. In today's world where tolerance for everything is diminishing among people such spiritual connect will immensely benefit organizations and employees in goal attainment. Such integration of spirituality in the organization culture will bring about organizational development and also reduce the rate of attrition. Spirituality brings human beings much closer to each other than technology does. So, let us all create spiritual organization and experience inner peace and tranquility.

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