



# Leadership and Workplace spirituality: A self-determination theory perspective

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## Abstract

Workplace spirituality (WPS) influences several desired business outcomes at the individual, team, and organization levels. This has led to the increased acceptance of WPS among researchers and practitioners. But the biggest question among the researchers and practitioners is how to increase the WPS experience among employees. This paper aims to investigate the potential influence of leadership on the WPS levels of employees. The authors of the current paper review the organizational and human resource management literature and identify the self-determination theory to explain the influence of leadership on WPS. The paper suggests that leadership style may potentially influence WPS experience among employees. This paper provides valuable direction to future researchers who plan to test the antecedents of WPS empirically. The potential precursors may be improved with organization-level interventions. The current paper helps the industry practitioners design interventions that may influence WPS among employees.

## Keywords

Workplace spirituality (WPS), self-determination theory, transformational leadership, leader-member exchange.

## Introduction

The past two decades have recorded an increase in the debt crisis, recessions, scandals, unethical practices, and failures in the organizations that have caused the collapse of strong economies (Akhtar et al., 2018; Putri et al., 2017). In the emerging economies despite an increase in the importance of human resource management practices, we have witnessed an increase in employee turnover (Wang et al., 2020; Costa et al., 2014), stress and burnout (Li et al., 2019; Chang et al., 2012), and lower levels of job satisfaction (Jeanson et al., 2018; Rutner et al., 2008). Recent studies on organizational behavior revealed that the employee satisfaction is not merely focused on the compensation and benefits but also focus on seeking work that is purposeful and fitting with their values and beliefs (Berger, 2017; Rigby and Ryan, 2018). This encouraged organizations to look beyond monetary incentives for employee motivation and focus on the concepts of quality of life, well-being, social responsibility and spirituality for desired outcomes (Adnan et al., 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2003). Spirituality at the workplace is being recognized as a credible solution to the challenges in human resource management (Garg, 2018; Milliman et al., 2018). The commonly used term for spirituality in organizations is workplace spirituality (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Sheep, 2006). Workplace spirituality is considered to be an essential research area that can bring new insights for the development of organizational science, as it has potentially shown significant relevance to the well-being of individuals, societies, and organizations (Biswakarma, 2018; Afsar and Badir, 2017). This study focuses on identifying the predictors of workplace spirituality and conceptualizing a model that enables the swift implementation of the concept by the organizations through management practices.

Employee attitudes are influenced by their workplace experiences which in turn influence their behavior (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). Workplace spirituality focuses on nurturing employee experience at workplace (Milliman et al., 2018; Sheep, 2006). This increased the significance of research studies on the utility and concept of workplace spirituality (Houghton, Neck, and Krishnakumar, 2016). Pawar (2016) mentioned in their study that workplace spirituality was also found to influence the well-being of employees at both psychological and physical levels. Further, at individual level, workplace spirituality is found to influence self-

efficacy (Mahipalan et al., 2019), subjective happiness (Mahipalan and Sheena, 2018), Mindfulness (Petchsawang and McLean, 2017). At team level, workplace spirituality is found to influence team viability (Prabhu et al., 2019) and mutual trust among employees, teams and organization (Rahman et al., 2015; Miller, 2001). At organizational level, to mention a few, workplace spirituality is found to influence organizational commitment (Pradhan et al., 2016; Fanggida et al., 2016), Job satisfaction (Zhang, 2018), organizational citizenship behavior (Belwalkar and Vohra, 2016), Organizational performance (Albuquerque et al., 2014) and employee engagement (Sharma and Kumar, 2020) etc. At societal level, Workplace spirituality drives organizations to take up philanthropic activities and social services to contribute back to the society (Garg, 2017), Due to the lucrative individual, organizational, and societal benefits and utilities associated with workplace spirituality there is increase in research interest on this concept (Moore and Casper, 2006).

In spite of its global acceptance, there are limited studies on how to nurture the employee experience of WPS (Haldorai, 2020; Iqbal et al., 2019; Zhang, 2018). The current study focuses on explaining how leadership plays a role in nurturing the employee experience of WPS. This paper emphasizes the connection between these elements of leadership and WPS, based on the concept of employee need satisfaction mentioned in the self-determination theory's postulations. A justification for choosing the proposed predictors and the common aspect of need satisfaction is elaborated in the subsequent parts of the paper.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The following section discusses the concepts of religion and spirituality, and the difference between the two and introduces the concept of WPS. The following section aligns the concept of WPS with the postulates of self-determination theory. The "leadership and WPS " section includes an in-depth discussion of the leadership and quality of leadership and their potential influence on WPS and the possibility of quality of leader-member relationships mediating the leadership influence on WPS. The final section discusses the implications of the results for both theory and practice and the directions for future research.

## Workplace spirituality (WPS)

Spirituality originated from the Latin word 'Spiritus' which means breath of life, in Latin 'Spiritalis' is designated for a person of the spirit. Hebraic Old Testament (Ruach) and Greek New Testament (pneuma) have the word spirituality first mentioned. Spirituality is often confused with religion as it was historically been referenced in the context of religion more frequently and is still both experienced and expressed by many by the conformist religious understanding (Zinnbauer et al., 1997).

The word religion comes from the Latin word 'religio' which depicts the bond between humanity and some-greater than human power. In the contemporary world, religion is been transformed completely from an abstract process to a fixed object entity that is expressed through a definable system based on the theological traditions, major denominations, and major world religions (Wulff, 1997). Religion for classification has undergone a transformation which led to its depreciation and distortion as the dynamic personal quality of the religious experience was neglected in this process. The ideal version of religion should be responsive and sensitive to the ultimate questions that urge the individual to pursue their answers to those questions (Tillich, 1952). Religious thinking is often explained as the intellectual effort to understand the depths of reason and is a source of cognitive insight towards the wholeness of human existence (Heschel, 1958).

Religion is often portrayed as the stabilizing, positive influence on the lives of the individuals. Heschel's definition of religion gives an insight into the spiritual component but Spilka's (1993) review of the literature led him to conclude that most contemporary understandings of spirituality are different from religion (Hill et al., 2000). There are different categories of spirituality that talk about God-oriented spirituality where practice and thought are premised in the theologies either narrowly or broadly conceived. The second category is spirituality that is world-oriented that highlights the relationship of humans with nature or ecology. The third category is the spirituality that is humanistic or people-oriented that focus on the potential or achievement, so spirituality is as a construct is multidimensional and is perceived differently based on these mentioned contexts.

Religion is all about the practicing of rites and rituals whereas spirituality is about the inner life that looks inwards to the kingdom within (Marques et al., 2005). Religion is external and is based on the perceptions, values morals, and beliefs of a group, whereas spirituality is internal and inclusive of a person so it is unique and the perception of spirituality differs from person to person.

Ashmos and Duchon (2000) defined the phenomenon of workplace spirituality as the experience of an inner life that nourishes, and is nourished by meaningful experiences that take place in the context of the workplace. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) has defined spirituality at the workplace as the "organizational values framework that is reflected in the culture, that promotes the experience of employees through work processes by facilitating the sense of being connected to others in a way that provides the feelings of joy and completeness". The organizational values that were referred to in the above definition include benevolence, humanism, integrity, mutuality, justice, receptivity, responsibility, respect, and trust. Mitroff and Denton (1999, p.83) refer to workplace spirituality as a basic feeling of connection with ones' self, others, and the society that reflects on the notion of the inner life. Marques et al. (2005) refers to workplace spirituality as the employee experience of interconnectedness, shared by all those involved in a work process.

The construct of workplace spirituality that we intend to pursue in this study has three dimensions: meaningful work, sense of community, and alignment of values and is based on the definition given by Milliman et al. (2003, p. 429) which is expressed as an "individual experience of meaning and purpose in their work, strong connection with co-workers, and better alignment between one's core beliefs and organizational values".

## WPS and leadership

### *Transformational Leadership and WPS*

Leadership plays a very important role in shaping up the organization, transformational leaders are those who work and involve their employees together for creating a vision by identifying the needs and change. Bass (1985) refers to a transformational leader as someone who strives to raise awareness about the issues of consequence and shift them to higher-level needs to influence them to transcend their self-interests for the betterment of the group or organization which motivates them to work harder than they originally had expected they would.

An important process in transformational leadership is the support of value internalization in the workplace (Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders articulate an ideological vision and framework that encourages inspirational motivation where the subordinates are empowered to take part in developing commonly endorsed values and vision and find creative solutions (Gagne and Deci, 2005). This helps subordinates to identify with the vision of their supervisor and perceive their work to be aligned with their values (Bono and Judge, 2003). This encourages volition, and autonomous motivation, and fosters internalization (Deci et al., 1994; Kanat-Maymon and Reizer, 2017). The concept of internalization is strongly associated with the intrinsic motivation aspect of self-determination theory. Eyal and Roth (2011) have also mentioned in their study that transformational leadership was associated with the intrinsic motivation of the subordinates. Wnag and Gagne (2013) have found in their study that supervisor transformational leadership influences the subordinates' need-satisfaction in both collectivistic and individualistic samples in the work context.

Bass (1985), Carey (1992), and Khattak et al. (2020) in their study have mentioned that transformational leadership aids in accommodating followers' self-interest transcendence. The previous literature also suggests that transformational leadership behaviors result in the follower outcomes like improved effort, satisfaction, and better self-interest transcendence (Effelsberg et al., 2013; Sparks and Schenk, 2001). As WPS focuses on the employee experience of spirituality at work in terms of transcending self-interests, and finding meaning

and purpose, which are all in congruence with the transformational leadership process of creating a mechanism for employees' self-interest transcending at work (Pawar, 2009a). Therefore, we propose transformational leadership might have an influence on the employee experience of WPS.

H1: Transformational leadership has a positive influence on WPS.

### ***Leader-Member Exchange and Workplace spirituality***

Previous literature suggests that leadership is an important aspect of improving organization performance (Bodolica & Spraggon, 2020). Leadership is referred to as the ability of an individual to motivate, influence, and enable others to contribute to the success and effectiveness of the organization (House & Javidan., 2004). One of the modern approaches concerning leadership is the leader-member exchange. The definition of leadership flourished through the viewpoint of the leader-member exchange theory (Kang & Stewart, 2007).

The concept of leader-member exchanges is based on the relationship between the leader and follower, unlike traditional leadership theories (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). Leader-member exchange theory focuses on leadership as not one individual's prosperity, but guides and others accept (Hogg, 2004). Leader-member exchange is associated with interpersonal exchanges, meaningful roles, and their respective functions in the work setting. Leader-member exchange theory mentions that leaders develop and maintain leader-member relationships through social exchanges and norms of reciprocity and, therefore, engage the followers (Oliveira et al., 2015).

Tse et al. (2008) have highlighted that the interpersonal relationships between the leader, subordinates, and co-workers contribute to a social system. Furthermore, Lee (2020) and Tanskanen et al.(2018) have mentioned that the quality of the relationship between the leader and the member significantly influences organizational performance and plays a vital role in organizational success. Furthermore, the previous research suggests that the quality of a leader and member relationship positively influences the follower's states of performance and behaviors (Regt et al., 2018).

Recent literature has highlighted that an important currency in social exchanges is the perceived fairness of leaders (Wayne et al., 2002). When employees perceive that their leader is fair, and when leader behaviors are attributed to the leader's benevolent intentions, employees infer that they are committed to them, and high-quality exchanges result. There is a positive relationship between the quality of the leader-member exchange and employees' attitudes and behavior (Kim & Yi, 2019). Tanskanen et al. (2018) mention that employees show high performance when the quality of the relationship between the leader and followers is high. The subordinates, who have close relations with their seniors, develop their job attitudes positively and perceive a better workplace experience (Katrinli et al., 2008).

The quality of leader-member exchange that involves acknowledging the employees' perspectives in their discussions, offering choices about how to enact the ideas, and refraining from pressing behaviors and language is viewed to support the autonomy and relatedness needs of self-determination theory (Deci et al., 2017; Graves & Luciano, 2013). "Need satisfaction" aids in providing a better employee experience (Gatling et al., 2016). Since WPS is a concept that focuses on employee experience, the leader-member exchange might influence WPS. Further, the previous studies have highlighted the positive association needs leader-member exchange and employee experience-related outcomes (Prabhu et al., 2019). Therefore, the quality of leader-member exchange might positively influence the employee experience of WPS.

H2: Leader-Member exchange has a positive influence on employee experience of WPS.

### ***Leader-Member exchange as a mediator***

A transformative leader is one who values the needs and contributions of their employees and provides support and purpose for their presence in the organization (Astrauskaite et al., 2014). When a leader is transformative enough to trust their employees to be more autonomous in their jobs, providing employees with the necessary resources to perform their job to unleash their maximum competence (Gigliotti et al., 2018; Gillet et al., 2013), employees perceive their superior to value their contribution and the extent to which they care for their well-being and welfare (Wattoo et al., 2018). Leader-Member exchange as operationalized focus on caring for



employees by making them feel related to the organization and its members. Further, the previous studies have mentioned that leader-member exchange is an important consequence of leadership styles (Akkoc et al., 2013; Pacleb et al., 2016) and a strong predictor of employee attitudes and behavior than leadership styles (Burch et al., 2014; Miner, 2015; Podsakoff et al., 2016).

The quality of leader-member relationships is often related to motivation as it aids in the basic employee psychological need satisfaction (Khattak et al., 2020; Deci et al., 2017). Studies on self-determination theory have highlighted the importance of the quality of the leader-member relationship to autonomous motivation (Kuvaas, 2009). Employee perception of the degree of autonomy and supportiveness of their leader which is highlighted by the quality of their leader-member exchange relationship is positively related to the satisfaction of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Baard et al., 2004). Further, the leader-member exchange theory highlights the link between transformative leadership and leader-member exchange and needs fulfillment (Khattak et al., 2020; Deci et al., 2017). Tremblay et al. (2009) mentioned that work climate and leader support were significantly related to self-determined work motivation. Further, in their study, Gagne et al. (2010) and Hong et al. (2019) highlighted the role of leadership in the prediction of employee motivation. The previous discussion reflects the organization's attempt to acknowledge the self-interest transcendence of an employee at work, which aligns with the concept of WPS that focuses on the employee experience of spirituality at work in terms of transcending self-interests and need fulfillment. Therefore, we propose that transformative leadership strengthens the quality of leader-member exchange which in turn influence the employee experience of WPS.

H3: Leader-Member exchange mediates the relationship between transformative leadership and employee experience of WPS.

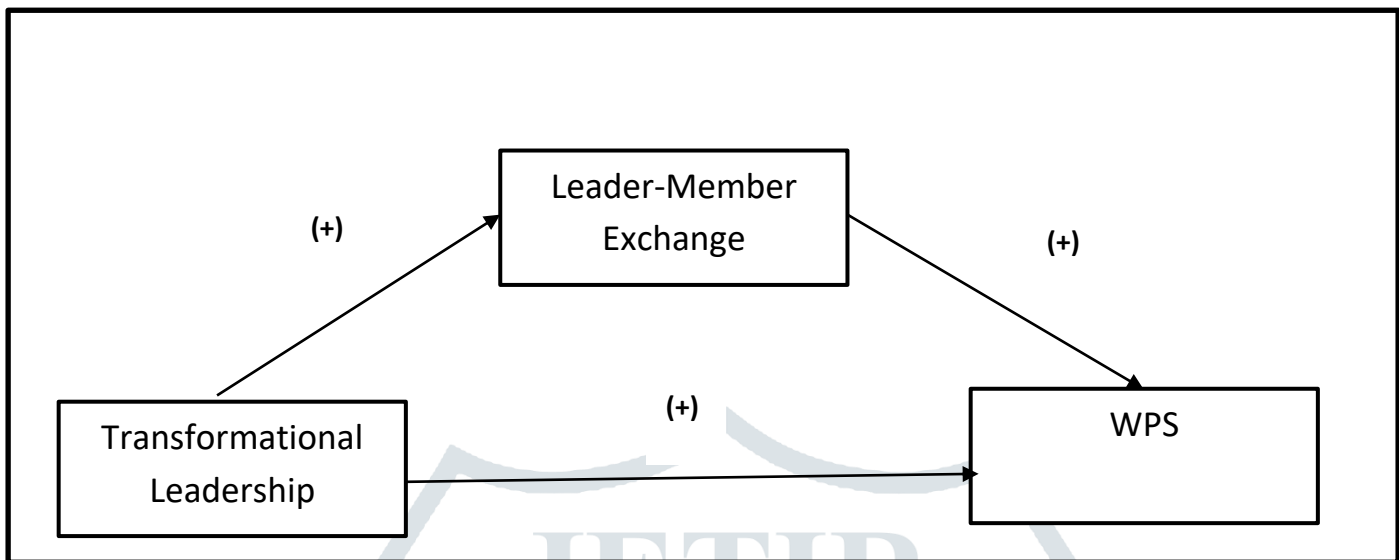


Figure 1: Conceptual Model to be tested

### Limitations and Scope for future research

It is important for practitioners and academicians to list and understand the antecedents of WPS. The current paper proposes two antecedents of WPS however, it does not empirically test the relationships. Further, the academicians are suggested empirically testing the present model for their future research. Future researchers may use the common aspects of these constructs (antecedents) to develop theories of WPS. They may build design combinations of these constructs to predict WPS. For example, a better leader-member exchange may also improve employee psychological capital, which may enhance the WPS experience of the employee. The current authors have considered a simple mediated model which proposes the antecedents of WPS. Further researchers could come up with moderated-mediated models that will better explain the antecedents of WPS. The current paper opens the avenue to theoretically and empirically examine the role of leader-member exchange and transformational leadership as antecedents of WPS. Studies in this direction will help develop comprehensive predictive models to predict several employee behavior and performance as outcomes of WPS. WPS will serve as antecedents to predict employee behavior and performance in such models.

## Implications

Our study contributes to the literature on WPS and self-determination theory, transformative leadership, and leader-member exchange. It makes a substantial contribution by conceptualizing transformative leadership and leader-member exchange as the important predictors of WPS. This paper proposes potential antecedents of WPS that might help the practitioner and researchers gain insight into the mechanism of employee experience of WPS. It presents leadership and quality of leadership as antecedents of WPS at the organizational level. Further, this paper also identifies leader-member exchange as a mediator for the influence of transformational leadership on workplace spirituality.

## Conclusions

The paper proposes two potential antecedents of WPS. Milliman et al. (2003) conceptualization of WPS was considered to discuss the role of the proposed precursors on WPS. The authors have used the self-determination theory to explain the relationships. The practitioners are recommended to develop a climate where employees experience WPS. Organizations with practices, policies, and procedures that support the development of the five antecedents are expected to develop such a climate where employees experience meaningful work, a sense of community, and an alignment with organizational values.

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