



TRUE SPIRIT AT WORK

BY TOM HEUERMAN

One February night in 1991, I dined with Diane Olson, my friend and consultant. In awe of my learnings from a leadership experience I was involved in, I discussed my insights with her. I was the leader of a 4,500-employee business unit at the *Star Tribune* newspaper, in Minneapolis, MN. This unit was in the midst of a transformational change process.

I glanced around secretly, leaned over the table that separated us, and whispered to Diane, “You know, this transformational change is spiritual.” I feared making this statement out loud because I was convinced that had I described the change process as a spiritual journey, the mechanistic organization would have rejected me quickly. On the other hand, when I linked the change effort to materialism (reduced costs and increased revenues), I was provided heroic status—at least for a time.

“Spirit at work” is one of the recent themes of people seeking to help organizations adopt a holistic and organic worldview. And, like other well-intended and theoretically sound initiatives, it is in danger of being rejected as a fad. But spirit at work is not a quick fix to problems; it embraces the complexity of life and the human condition—and focuses on the difficult inner work followed by courageous actions needed to effect profound transformation.

The change effort I was involved in began in 1990 with the need to save the enterprise millions of dollars and respond to a union-organizing effort. In addition, demographic and market changes that demanded new ways of doing things were on the horizon. We all felt a sense of urgency and excitement.

A period of exploration and study about ideas new to organizational life

began. We read books, attended conferences, and visited other organizations. Those who had caused the crisis retreated to the safety of their offices. We began to feel the end of the old ways, the confusion of chaos (which we welcomed), and the uncertainty of new approaches.

People responded to the challenge. The worries and frustrations of day-to-day life receded from awareness. A powerful sense of purpose became real. The rule books went out the door. Finding what worked was what was important. Barriers were eliminated. Those with the needed skills or information led, regardless of rank, and all who wanted participated in the creative process. People learned and adapted as they proceeded.

Employees were involved in the redesign of their work. Consultants provided facilitation and methods. Managers made sure the employees felt valued, involved, and informed during this change effort. Trust and credibility grew, and the union-organizing effort went away. The energy level was incredible. We were alive in the moment instead of toiling for an obscure future.

Operational results were phenomenal. Now when employees went to conferences they were presenters as well as observers. People began to visit to learn from the business unit. Consultants began to write about this work.

For a moment we were more of our natural selves: braver, smarter, and more creative than during more orderly times. We worked harder, cared for one another more, and accepted our differences. We were filled with hope for the possibilities we saw for us as people and for the life we lived at work.

As the change effort continued, its meaning became clear to me. I realized

the ways in which leadership can bring forth mediocre organizations and dispirited people. I came to understand the powerful energy generated by a shared vision. I saw the courage summoned when people create together what they want most for their lives. I felt the inspiration born when people live by their deepest values.

This describes spirit at work. Spirit is not the move to teams, the quality efforts, the job redesign, and all the other tools we use to change organizations. Spirit is the profound energy, the creativity, and the commitment that emerges when free people live their highest and most authentic potential. For me today, spirit at work represents the expression of our deepest authenticity as, inspired by our sense of purpose and guided by our values, we step into the unknown and move courageously together toward a bold vision, feeling the aliveness of life experienced completely and humanity realized more fully.

Historically, spirit at work was effectively destroyed by industrialization when work was redesigned to make money for others. Our spirit at work at the newspaper was eventually destroyed by people who, afraid to look within, projected their fear, pain, and limitations outward and destroyed our creation.

Why is spirit important? Because, simply, our spirituality makes us human, connects us to all of life, and elevates us to our potential as caring people. The uncertainty of the times, the suffering all around us, our need to help others, and the grandeur of life focus our attention on spirit at this difficult time in our history. ■

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