

Watching Out for Blind Spots: Towards a Balanced Conception of Spiritual Well-Being in Management Research and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Despite and perhaps because of the accelerated shift to information technology-laden and virtual work environments brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, the human side of enterprise is being foregrounded. Employee stress, well-being, and engagement are common vocabularies in current business research and practice. Spiritual well-being represents an area of expanding interest and has been studied in a vast range of business and management disciplines, including in leadership, management, organizational transformation and change, ethics, corporate social responsibility, and positive organizational scholarship. The emphasis therein is primarily about work performance, whether at the individual or organizational level. However, spiritual well-being in management literature has been defined primarily in virtuous terms and thereby does not reflect realities in management practice. Part of this issue lies in the predominantly positivist paradigm and leadership/organization bias adopted in extant research. The darker, negative, and less favourable aspects of spiritual well-being in the workplace have largely been omitted. This development (i.e., blind spot) has led to an unnuanced understanding of and a (positive) performance-centred bias in applying spiritual well-being ideas. This paper argues for and presents a balanced definition of spiritual well-being, and highlights the exploitative, instrumentality, and hegemony inherent in current discourse and practice. Spiritual well-being is defined as the experience of five closely interrelated notions in the workplace, namely meaning, authenticity, growth, connectedness, and values. Each of these notions holds possibilities and limitations for the worker and the workplace. Each of these notions also represents a blessing and/or a curse, depending on the employee, the performance imperatives imposed on them, the accompanying work culture, and the nature of work – all of which are constantly evolving. Obvious examples include an employee with strong concerns about the climate crisis working in the oil and gas industry, nurses having to be separated from their own families to care for Covid-19 patients, and pharmaceutical sales representatives' compulsion to push sales, disregarding issues of patient well-being and safety. As such, pursuing one's spiritual inclinations can be unsettling and occasionally be accompanied by inner tension – moments, where the imperative to pursue work goals, are antithetical to the employee's inclinations for meaning, authenticity, growth, connectedness, and values. This unsettling and inner tension can in turn negatively affect work performance, turnover, and engagement levels, casting suspicion on the unidimensional and lopsided view of the experience. The foregoing is however not an excuse to cast aside spiritual well-being as a phenomenon that addresses employee engagement and work performance issues. On the contrary, a balanced conception of spiritual well-being, suitably viewed using the interpretive paradigm, assist with conceptualising spiritual well-being as multifaceted, nuanced, evolving, and context-bound. It emphasises the personalised view of the experience, leading to a greater appreciation of the spiritual well-being's idiosyncratic and dynamic qualities. Inner tension is in fact not all bad things since it also fosters spiritual resilience among employees. Thus, a balanced conception of spiritual well-being prepares the researcher and practitioner to embrace spiritual well-being's desirable alongside its less-desirable aspects and eliminates blind spots when engaging with spiritual inclinations in the workplace.

Keywords: spiritual well-being, spiritual inclinations, management, blind spots, balanced