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Faculty perspectives on the inclusion of spirituality topics in nonsectarian leadership and management education programs

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore faculty views on the inclusion of spiritual topics in graduate leadership and management programs, focusing on faculty experiences, perceived benefits and challenges, and teaching methods and principles in use. We interviewed twelve faculty members in leadership or management programs from eleven nonsectarian universities. Participants discussed eight benefits including the opportunity for whole person growth and skill development that would benefit leaders in a global workplace. Eight barriers to such inclusion were identified such as proselytizing and the misuse of power. The sampled instructors also made some suggestions for how to include spirituality topics, such as using respected resources and linking classroom discussions to practice. Overall, instructors' preference for including spiritual topics also varied in terms of explicit versus implicit and organic-emergent versus preplanned-structured approaches.

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1. Introduction

The literature about spirituality in the workplace has grown especially since Mitroff and Denton's *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America* (1999) and the special issues of the *Journal of Management Education* (Dehler and Neal, 2000) and *The Leadership Quarterly* (Fry, 2005). Correspondingly, there has been an upsurge of discussion about the role of spirituality in leadership and management education with Bento (2000), Delbecq (2010), Harlos (2000), McCormick (2006), Pielstick (2005), Nash and Scott (2008), Trott (2012), and others discussing ways in which they have incorporated spiritual topics into graduate management and leadership courses. In spite of the growth of the spirituality in the workplace literature and many anecdotal accounts of including spirituality in leadership and management courses, we noticed a lack of research in leadership and management education literature; more specifically, we found no empirical research focusing on faculty perspectives on including spiritual topics in expressly non-aligned (secular, multi-faith, nonsectarian) graduate leadership and management education programs. Lindholm and Astin (2011) note that "with few exceptions the research on spirituality that has been conducted within higher education institutions has focused primarily on students, ignoring completely the experiences, attitudes, expectations, and behaviors of faculty" (p. 51).

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As leadership educators, we have observed that many students desire opportunities to explore the role of their spirituality in their own leadership education and development. These students may identify with organized religious or non-religious spiritualities. Several authors (e.g. Delbecq, 2010) have made similar assertions regarding professional students' interest in the topic. Consistent with this interest and in line with other arguments related to the positive benefits of including spirituality such as improving leaders' balance (Delbecq, 2010), whole-person education, and religious-cultural literacy (Nash and Scott, 2008), some instructors have included spiritual topics in their management and leadership classes. Strange and Rogers (2011) also point to the institutional desire to do the same: "Many institutions are beginning to reconsider the divide between religion and education, and to search for new ways of connecting once again to a more complete vision of students' lives" (p. 30). From a pedagogical perspective, the inclusion of spiritual topics in leadership and management classes must be done recognizing the tensions inherent in a curriculum that prepares students for a diverse context in which they will probably work (Lewis and Geroy, 2000) while also acknowledging the students' desire to express themselves authentically through their leadership (Nash & Scott, 2008).

We teach in graduate programs and chose to focus our inquiry on the graduate, adult, professional learners. In a previous study (Allen and Williams, in press), we surveyed graduate leadership and management students, exploring student views on the inclusion of spiritual topics in their graduate programs. That study suggested a generally positive outlook on inclusion, but also found a small percentage (approximately 20%) of students who were uncomfortable with including such topics. The participants identified clear connections between leaders' spiritual (or religious) beliefs and their leadership, echoing the sentiment of authors like Cashman (2008) and Judge (1999) who suggest leaders' spiritual lives impact and support their leadership. That initial study on student views, along with our teaching practice, sparked our interest in faculty views and experiences related to the benefits, barriers, and methods of including spiritual topics.

To explore faculty views, we searched the literature for guidance on if and how instructors should include spiritual topics in an already packed curriculum. While existing reports provide positive examples of including spirituality in leadership and management courses (e.g., Delbecq, 2010; Pielstick, 2005; Trott, 2012), these articles are case reports rather than systematic research attempts, suggesting the authors had already decided to include spiritual topics. They provided some valuable insight for us, but they did not answer the compelling questions that arose from our teaching practice: Should we include spiritual topics in an already packed curriculum? In our decision, what barriers and benefits should we consider? If we decide to include spiritual topics, how should we do so? Given our practice oriented questions and the lack of research on the topic, we saw a need for a systematic investigation into the views and approaches of a broader array of instructors. The purpose of this study was to explore faculty views on the inclusion of spiritual topics in graduate leadership and management courses, including a focus on faculty experiences, perceived benefits and challenges, and teaching methods and principles in use.

2. Spirituality defined

The challenge with defining spirituality is well acknowledged in the leadership and management literature with definitions varying widely (see Dent et al., 2005). In their narrative analysis of leadership and spirituality literature focusing on workplace spirituality, Dent et al. (2005) found that the majority of authors included in their definition of spirituality "a search for meaning, reflection, inner connectedness, creativity, transformation, sacredness, and energy" (p. 633). We do not attempt to resolve the issue of defining spirituality in this study. However, Puchalski et al. (2009) provide a definition which may be useful to readers: "The aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose, and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred" (p. 887). Many authors also point to the need to clarify and discuss the relationship between spirituality and religion (e.g. Marx et al., 2008). Fry et al. (2011) acknowledge this association suggesting, "spirituality is necessary for religion, but religion is not necessary for spirituality" (p. 260).

3. Background literature

Grzeda and Assogbavi (2011) recognize that the literature includes numerous examples of instructors sharing how they have included spiritual topics in their leadership or management classes. Delbecq (2000, 2005; 2010) stands out because of his explicit focus on spiritual topics in an entire graduate elective presented at a Silicon Valley business school. Authors such as Pielstick (2005) and Marx et al. (2008) provide detailed suggestions on how educators can include spiritual topics in graduate classroom activities. Nash and Scott (2008) make a case for the inclusion of spiritual topics in higher education in general. Despite the several articles on the topic, it is still problematic and possibly contentious for instructors who wish to include spiritual topics in leadership and management education classes (e.g. Strange and Rogers, 2011; Waggoner, 2011).

Amongst the articles published on the role of spirituality in leadership or the inclusion of spiritual topics, we found none that explicitly argue against the inclusion of spiritual topics. However, authors such as Marcic (2000), McCormick (2006), and Tourish and Tourish (2010) have questioned the inclusion of spiritual topics mentioning the risks of indoctrination and domination in discussions of spirituality in leadership and management education. Most authors, however, describe their own experience, discussing the *why*, *what*, and *how* of this integration through reflection on their teaching in general (see McCormick, 2006) or provide a sort of case description reporting on their experiences in a particular graduate program (see Bento, 2000; Dhiman and Marques, 2011; Katz, 2012; Marcic, 2000; Nash and Scott, 2008; Pielstick, 2005; Trott, 2012). While many of these reflective essays are valuable anecdotal cases of such inclusion, we did not find any empirical research

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