
Peer-Reviewed Article

Workplace spirituality for online educators: Inherent or cultivated?

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Abstract: Workplace spirituality is an organizational culture construct defined as the intersection of calling, commitment, and connection. For many online educators the desire to teach stems from a personal calling, which is then projected forward in the hopes of inspiring others to find their own purpose, fostering positive feelings both individually and collectively. However, online educators may not inherently experience workplace spirituality due to their calling; they must cultivate both commitment and connection to fully benefit from the organizational culture construct.

Keywords: workplace spirituality, educators, online education, organizational culture



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Workplace spirituality is an organizational culture perspective that encourages individual transcendence through and in their work roles and their sense of connection to both colleagues and the organization that instills positive feelings (Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004; Pawar, 2008). Individuals whose communication and habits demonstrate their commitment to their role because of its personal importance for self and others, including the opportunity to transcend self-interest, as well as a connectedness to employees, the organization, and the organization's mission are modeling workplace spirituality (Kolodinsky et al., 2004; Pawar, 2008). For many online educators, the desire to teach stems from a personal calling, which is then projected forward in the hopes of inspiring others to find their own purpose, fostering positive feelings both individually and collectively. However, online educators do not inherently experience workplace spirituality due to only their calling.

Workplace Spirituality

Workplace spirituality is defined as the intersection of calling, commitment, and connection (Hassan et al., 2016; Pawar, 2014). A calling provides context, a definition for who one is that guides both short-term activities and long-term goals. Many people seek meaning in their work, and they experience meaning when they feel the work is important. Educators are no exception, with a desire to positively contribute to others which undergirds a sense of purpose as the primary factor that motivates people to become teachers (Alexander et al., 1994). Online educators in particular are also no exception, although the calling to teach is often coupled with a preference for flexibility (Edwards et al., 2011; McAllister, 2009). Employees affirm a desire for meaning and purpose in their lives (Long & Driscoll, 2015), and find that meaning through work (Fry, 2003). Meaning and purpose in work life facilitate a sense of calling, an opportunity to make a difference (Long & Driscoll, 2015; Roof, 2015).

Commitment relates to the organization and congruence between individual values and organizational values. A sense of value alignment creates organizational commitment (Pawar, 2014). When accompanied with calling, commitment includes the ability to learn and grow within an organization in order to develop competency that fosters a sense of purpose (Rego & Pina e Cunha, 2008). Educators acknowledge a belief that education empowers, and online educators, who are often required to have both academic credential and occupational expertise, hold individual value to the professional expertise they are invited to share as a content facilitator (McAllister, 2009).

Community is defined as a sense of belonging, of shared feelings of calling and commitment that create connectedness to a common goal (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Kolodinsky et al., 2008; Pawar, 2008; Roof, 2015). Within the context of work, community is created through the social interactions of co-workers who also demonstrate calling and commitment (Roof, 2015; Skaržauskienė, 2010). Online educators establish community both with colleagues and with their students through active and sustained engagement in online forums, chats, telephone, and video conferencing (Archibald & Barnes, 2017). The ability to influence others is what calls an educator to the field, and the value alignment that allows an educator to use their influence to empower others is what creates commitment. Community is the realization of the effectiveness of the calling; online educators who invest in developing interpersonal relationships through online modalities feel the connection to others with whom they interact, thus solidifying the community to which they belong (Martin & Dowson, 2009).

Workplace spirituality is the construct that organizations are comprised of people who find meaning and connectedness within their establishments, both in their selected profession and in their chosen workplace (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Pawar, 2008). Organizational benefits of a culture that incorporates workplace spirituality include increased commitment, honesty, trust, kindness, and creativity, which leads to increased profits and morale, as well as performance and productivity (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2008). Benefits to individual employees are also documented by researchers, including creativity, fulfillment, feelings of success, and job satisfaction (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2008). Educators who experience efficacy in their role naturally increase their commitment to the profession (Coladarci, 1992). Commitment to the institution stems from the other tenets of workplace spirituality—value alignment with the institution and camaraderie with colleagues.

Within the context of cultivating community, it is imperative that both organizations and employees have clearly stated and understood values. An organization must have values that are expressed in their mission and vision statements and are supported by the policies related to both internal and external customers. Individual employees must know their personal values and select an organization whose values align with their own, where personal values can be modeled through each day and each decision. The ability to work within a values structure that supports individual values creates a higher quality of life (LaPointe, 1998). This is how commitment is

demonstrated. When values align, organizational culture is positive; employees are satisfied both as individuals and as company representatives and are thus more effective and efficient.

A culture of workplace spirituality allows for people to be the best versions of themselves, connecting to intrinsic motivation components from within to drive work performance (Poole, 2009). Workplace spirituality is a demonstration of self-actualization, and positively affects organizational performance (Neck & Milliman, 1994; Poole, 2009). Employees who believe their work is meaningful, in addition to believing that they complete their work for an organization that chooses to make a positive difference, are more committed and motivated, performing at higher levels (Poole, 2009).

Workplace Spirituality: Inherent or Cultivated for Online Educators

Workplace spirituality recognizes that people are whole beings, unable to separate various identities based on specific roles (Hicks, 2002). Individuals with a sense of calling will exhibit those skillsets in multiple arenas. Additionally, once personal values are identified, individuals will associate with other people and organizations that demonstrate similar values. The desire to contribute in positive ways, through an affiliation that models congruent values, while building beneficial relationships is inherent to all people, and cannot be set aside to perform a work role (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2008; Hicks, 2002). Workplace spirituality embraces the whole person, creating an inclusive perspective that allows for the intersection of calling, commitment, and community so individuals can thrive.

Calling

Human beings seek meaning in their life (Long & Driscoll, 2015; Sheep & Foreman, 2012). People have a desire to be rewarded because of their work, but even more so, to establish a clear sense of purpose in relation to the roles fulfilled each day (Sheep & Foreman, 2012). A sense of purpose can be a calling, the activities that create a better place for others. For educators, “career fit” ranks amongst the top factors related to vocation selection (Richardson & Watt, 2005). As it relates to the workplace, a calling is work that makes a difference (Hoppe, 2005; Roof, 2015), contributes to the good of all (Long & Driscoll, 2015), and evidences a commitment to societal welfare (Fachrunnisa et al., 2014).

Many educators feel a sense of calling to their role, which is the inherent component of the three prongs of workplace spirituality. A calling to online education, however, is cultivated through experience in the education sector and a willingness to embrace technology, while also

adapting to a flexible facilitation model for students (Edwards et al., 2011). Additionally, all educators who desire to experience the fullness of workplace spirituality must cultivate the remaining tenets of commitment and connection.

Commitment

Calling is the beginning of individual commitment, which strengthens to organizational commitment when the organizational identify mirrors individual goals, values, and beliefs (Sheep & Foreman, 2012). The linkage between individual values and organizational values creates connectedness to an organization (Hassan et al., 2016). In the context of workplace spirituality, the connection between individual and organizational values, or value congruence, is commitment. Employees desire the knowledge that the organization is seeking to positively impact societal welfare and thus, individual contribution will make a difference (Hassan et al., 2016). Educators believe in the power of education to change lives, to positively impact social welfare, and they acknowledge the individual contributions required in order to affect change in and for others.

Organizations that support one another, celebrating positive contributions and ensuring fairness in decision making, will see employees rise above self-interest in order to provide maximum benefit to the organization (Pawar, 2008). Educators embrace the concept of greater good, it is part of their calling to teach (Whitbeck, 2000). In this vein, educators will often rise above self-interest in order to serve students and to advance the mission of their institution. However, educators must determine the type of institution their values best align with in order to foster commitment, whether public or private, for-profit or non-profit, traditional or non-traditional, community-focused or career-focused. There is a plethora of institutional options to select from, allowing an educator to teach for the type of organization that cultivates commitment through value congruence.

Educators must recognize their personal values and select an institution that aligns whether due to cost of education, teaching modality, or student support programs. Further considerations include funding sources, research focus, career stability, social status, and financial benefit (Richardson & Watt, 2005). Educators who fundamentally believe in low-cost, open-access education may struggle to find value alignment in a private, selective institution; conversely, educators who believe in career-based education tied directly to industry-required outcomes may find dissonance in a liberal-arts institution. Educators who value the sharing of

ideas, who believe in flexible and autonomous learning, and are willing to build interpersonal relationships through technology are more likely to feel commitment to an online institution. Commitment is correlated with value congruence, and educators must determine their own values in order to then select an institution where alignment is possible, thus cultivating the second tenet of workplace spirituality.

Connection

The third tenet of workplace spirituality is community. Community is created by a group of people working together to fulfill organizational goals. An employee wants to feel as though they are an important, relevant, contributing member of a team; this drives the sense of connectedness that creates community (Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Milliman et al., 2003). Workplace spirituality is inclusive, and allows people to work together to contribute positively, to find joy, to embrace justice, and to model compassion and empathy, internally and externally (Long & Driscoll, 2015). This community unites to a higher level of consciousness (Long & Driscoll, 2015) to meet the organizational mission while also fueling each member individually. Community encourages genuine and meaningful relationships with colleagues (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2008; Neal, 2000), which is often rooted in a shared sense of purpose that guides action. Online educators cultivate connection differently due to the nature of education delivery. Relationships are cultivated through active engagement in a variety of technology-based platforms, and affirmed through frequent communication with colleagues. Online educators cultivate community more intentionally through online collaboration, creating peer support and development of skills and resources (Seo & Han, 2013).

Connection, as evidenced by camaraderie with colleagues, can be present due to either of the other two tenets of workplace spirituality. Individuals who have a calling will feel a connection with others who share the calling. Similarly, individuals with strong value alignment will create connection due to the cause of their shared commitment. However, it is only when all three components are present that individuals will experience a culture of workplace spirituality. Online educators who have felt a calling to teach, who selected an institution where personal and organizational values align, and who cultivate connections with other educators based on their shared calling and commitment will reap the reward of workplace spirituality in their institutions.

Summary

Workplace spirituality is an organizational culture construct, a lens that frames organizational values in a way that encourages individual transcendence through and in their work roles and their sense of connection to both colleagues and the organization that instills positive feelings (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Hassan et al., 2016; Long & Mills, 2010; Pawar, 2014; Roof, 2015). Creating an organizational culture of workplace spirituality requires individuals to foster an environment that recognizes individual calling and requires a commitment to the shared community (Roof, 2015; Skaržauskienė, 2010). Workplace spirituality provides benefits to employee engagement and participation through the design of organizational cultures that meet the demands of stated organizational values (Fachrunnisa et al., 2014; Kolodinsky, Giacalone, & Jurkiewicz, 2008). When values align, organizational culture is positive. Employees are satisfied both as individuals and as company representatives and are thus more effective and efficient. This sense of value alignment creates organizational commitment (Pawar, 2014).

Workplace spirituality is modeled by behaviors that embrace a sense of calling, commitment, and community to create an engaging and sustainable organizational culture. Online educators do not inherently experience workplace spirituality due to their calling to education, but the calling can be affirmed as they build their motivation and expertise. Once calling is confirmed, workplace spirituality is nurtured as online educators pursue employment with institutions that exhibit value congruence, both in their stated mission and in the modeled behaviors of other employees. It is further cultivated when the shared calling and commitment lead to connection with other educators, providing support and camaraderie amidst changes and challenges that arise.

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