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Religion's Influence on Leaders: Case evidence from Sri Lanka

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Abstract
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Keywords
sri, evidence, lanka, leaders, religion, case, influence

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ABSTRACT

The present paper reports the findings of a study examining the influence of religion on business leaders. In the literature, spirituality and leadership have been considered in significantly different ways. Many links between the two are proposed but are not evident in the analysis of the leadership characteristics, nor from the limited amount of research. The study involved thirteen influential Sri Lankan business leaders drawn from Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim faiths. The findings suggest that role modelling played a significant role in participants' leadership. The study provides early empirical evidence of the influence of religion on business leaders in a religiously plural and Asian research setting. The paper concludes by identifying several future research issues particularly in authentic/pseudo transformational leadership styles.

Keywords: Leadership, Religion, Spirituality, Role modelling
Leadership within the spirituality at work literature has been singled out as the most important influence on the presence of spirit in the workplace. Spiritual leaders create energy that excites workers, providing enthusiasm for work, and bringing out hidden capacities in them. According to Korac-Kakabadse et al. (2002), it leads to increased social responsibility, in particular, increased humanity, care and benefit to employees. For the leader, spiritual leadership can lead to pleasure from seeing potential realised, wisdom and insight and compassion.

Howard (2002) concludes that business leaders who are open to spirituality and think more deeply about their impact on organisations serve as role models for employees and may inspire greater individual spirituality at work, resulting in various benefits to the organisation. There are many examples of business leaders who overtly articulate the religious or spiritual traditions that have guided them in their businesses (see Braham, 1999; Delbecq, 2000; Korac-Kakabadse et al., 2002).

However, empirical attempts at testing the relationship between spirituality and leadership have found that the characteristics of leaders do not commonly include notions of spirituality. For example, Jacobsen (1994) finds that the most exhaustive collection of research on leadership by Bass does not mention spirituality as an important trait in the qualities affecting leaders’ values or performance. Similarly, Zwart’s (2000) American study of 266 leaders examining the commonalities of the transformational leadership of Bass and Avolio’s (1989) and the dimensions of spirituality identified by Beazley (1998) found no significant relationship between spirituality and transformational leadership within the workplace.

Joseph (2002) notes that the fact that spiritual leadership does not appear in any of the thirty or more years of research on leadership including numerous factor-analytic studies is worthy of note, although this may say more about those researchers’ preconceptions than about leadership. Citing Gibbons (2000a), he claims that ‘spiritualizing’ organisational concepts such as leadership may be a linguistic phenomenon, due to the ascendance of spiritual talk, rather than being representative of any objective spiritual dimension of leadership, motivation or wellbeing.
Spirituality has historically been rooted in religion. For example, Kriger and Hanson (1999) suggested that the world's major religious traditions have endured the test of time, and noted that the inherent values in such religions might be relevant to the organisations of today. Korac-Kakabadse, Kouzmin and Kakabadse (2002) stated that spirituality can be related to the 'spiritualities' of various religions: Tao, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Zen. According to this argument, religion and spirituality cannot be separated because one interprets the other, and because religious values help members to make sense of unexpected events. However religion can also be seen as dividing people through dogma. According to Mitroff (2003): ‘[Religion] is viewed as intolerant, closed-minded, and excluding all those who do not believe in a particular point of view’ (375).

Whatever the merits of these arguments, the conceptualisation of spirituality in the literature dealing with spirituality at work does not limit spirituality to a religion-based phenomenon. Nevertheless, as illustrated by Table 1, the role of religion appears to be a central and contentious theme in the current spirituality at work literature (Dent, Higgins and Wharff, 2005). Many contributors to the spirituality at work literature specifically link the definition of spirituality with religious practice (Dent, Higgins and Wharff, 2005). Table 1 shows how workplace spirituality researchers have attempted to identify spirituality in terms of various typologies. In these typologies, religion based spirituality appears to be the most common type of spirituality.

Table 1 About Here

The present paper reports the findings of a study examining the influence of religion on business leaders. The study involved thirteen influential Sri Lankan business leaders drawn from Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim faiths. The findings suggest that role modelling played a significant role in participants' leadership. The study provides empirical evidence of the influence of religion on business leaders in a religiously plural and non-Western research setting. Sri Lanka is regarded as one of the world's most highly religious and diverse cultures—with a wide variety of religious expression being apparent among the various religious groups of the island (Jones, 1997). This richness of the religious diversity and expression made Sri Lanka an ideal research setting for this multi-faith study.
Within a case-study framework, the paper first describes participants' meaning of spirituality. The paper then assesses the influence of role modelling on enacting spirituality and leadership. Finally, the paper discusses the significance of the findings for management theory and practice.

METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork for the present study was conducted in the Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. The business leaders who were selected as participants in the study were selected on the basis that they were spiritually motivated—that is, they had publicly acknowledged their spiritually motivated approach to heading business organisations, and were identified as such by others in their communities. These thirteen participants represented highly influential, recognised, and visible business people in Sri Lankan society—whose life stories in many instances have become part of the business folklore in the country.

The primary method of data collection was in-depth face-to-face interviews. The method of participant selection was purposive because the study set out to learn about spirituality at work from typical cases of leaders who were known to practise spirituality at work (Patton, 1980). In terms of data triangulation, to strengthen and verify the use of the interview data, additional information was sought through the review of relevant company and public documents. Organisational documents included annual reports, photographs, newspaper cuttings, certificates, and web sites. Public documents included media reports (since 1970) of participants and their organisations held in the archives of leading Sri Lankan media organisations. These reports played a critical role in substantiating the accuracy of data.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Meaning of Spirituality

The majority of the participants explained their spirituality on the basis of religious faith. Some examples are given below.

For me, it [spirituality] is the inner well-being. In my case, the Catholic religion, my feeling for the Buddhist philosophy and both those combined is my interpretation of spiritual well-being.
It [spirituality] is a source of guidance to my conduct. I seem to identify spirituality built by a concept of Buddhist faith.

The religious expressions of the participants at work were evident through their practice of various types of religious observance. These had one common aim—connecting with a transcendent and ultimate reality—variously named as ‘God’, the ‘Divine’, ‘Entity’, or ‘Reality’. Religious practices were the most commonly used mode of experiencing a connection with this transcendent reality.

**Enacting Spirituality**

When enacting their spirituality at work, many of the leader participants projected the attributes of a social leader. Given the high level of religiosity in Sri Lanka, meeting the religio-cultural expectations of the community was critical for maintaining the good public image of organisations. Role-modelling was a key part in this process.

Communication played a critical role in role modelling. For example, one leader claimed that he explicitly used religious content in his messages. For instance, before shifting to a new office or before starting a new year, he requested every employee to find time to visit his or her religious places of worship. He had ‘allowed them that privilege to spend some time, work with them to develop them in all that they can do but I keep on telling them the importance of divine guidance in whatever we do’. He claimed that he spoke formally to his employees six times a year and used this opportunity to ‘remind them to take time to thank for whatever guidance they have had.’ He confirmed that his employees knew his management behaviour had been influenced by his Christian upbringing. Similarly, a Buddhist leader used his status as the leader of the organisation to communicate his views on uplifting the ‘spiritual character’ of his employees via regular messages to his workers.

According to Schein (1985), role modelling can take place when a leader, through his or her own actions, communicates strong messages to employees about the leader’s values. Leaders effectively role model in several ways. One is through what the leaders pay attention to and how they communicate their priorities, values and beliefs. Schein (1985) describes ‘attention’ as to what the leader focuses employees to concentrate on, which communicates his or her values to them. If leaders
are consistent in what they pay attention to, measure and control, employees receive clear signals about what is important in the organisation. If, however, they are inconsistent, the followers need to decipher and find meaning in the inconsistent signals (Sims and Brinkmann, 2002). In the current study, several participants have shown their employees that enacting spirituality at work was important to them. For example, in one case, the employees knew that their leader was driven by the enactment of the five Buddhist precepts.

Leaders also role model in crisis situations. Schein (1985) asserts that followers then see what the leader values, because such situations bring these values to the surface. Emotions are heightened during a crisis, and learning is intense. Employees often emulate leaders' behaviour and look to the leaders for cues to appropriate behaviour and they observe the behaviour of leaders to find out what is valued in the organisation (Sims and Brinkmann, 2002). In the current study, many of the business leaders attributed critical business failures to the 'work of the divine'. For example, when a leader (Anglican), lost a major government tender to his competition, he attributed this loss to the intervention of God. He asked his managers to forget about it and move on and, in time, 'God will explain this'. The way Manium accepted the decision on the tender without any subsequent investigation would have given a message to his followers. In this case, when he enacted his spirituality at work through connecting with God, he was also influencing (and, therefore, leading) his followers.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study suggest that role modelling helps leaders to adopt a leadership style which is influenced by their spirituality. There is some support for this centrality for role modelling in the enactment of spirituality at work by leaders. Howard (2002) concludes that business leaders who are open to spirituality and think more deeply about their impact on organisations serve as role models for employees. Zwart (2000) also acknowledges, as do Bass and Avolio (1994), that transformational leaders behave as models for their followers. These observations together with the findings of this study further strengthen the case for a relationship between spirituality and
leadership. Some argue that this style of leadership – spiritual leadership – will become the next most significant theory of leadership (Fry, 2003).

According to Fairholm (1996), the characteristics of spiritual leadership include teaching one’s followers correct principles and the application of techniques that enable self-governance. Spiritual leaders are moral leaders and ‘prefer not to compromise, accommodate or collaborate in areas where their core values are at stake’ (Fairholm, 1996: 13). Many of the participants in the current study amply demonstrated these uncompromising core values.

While the spirituality at work literature singles out leadership as the most important influence on the presence of spirit in the workplace, there is also a growing recognition of an ethical leadership style in the general leadership literature. Ethical behaviour in organisations has a direct relationship to the organisation’s leadership. Researchers suggest that employees model the behaviour of the leaders in their organisations. If the leader acts ethically, then the employees are more likely to act ethical too. If the leaders act unethically, employees may assume that the leader is sanctioning unethical behaviour (Calabrese and Roberts, 2001).

To summarise, in the literature, spirituality and leadership have been considered in significantly different ways. Many links between the two are proposed but are not evident in the analysis of the leadership characteristics, nor from the limited amount of research. However, the current study findings suggest that, in the enactment of spirituality and leadership, role modelling plays a pivotal part and warrants further enquiry.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study raises important questions for future research on leadership in organisations. Within the general leadership literature, the notion of ethical leadership has been hotly debated (see Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Parry and Proctor-Thompson, 2002; Calabrese and Roberts, 2001; Collier and Esteban, 2000; Hood, 2003). For example, Parry and Proctor-Thompson point out to a debate on the distinction between ‘an authentic transformational leadership, which by definition is ethical, and pseudo-transformational leadership, which is unlikely to be ethical’ (para. 3 in the introduction,
In terms of an authentic/pseudo transformational leadership style, future research could examine the place of role modelling in spiritual leadership.

Future research could also examine religion’s role on leadership from the perspectives of various stakeholders—such as non-executive employees, shareholders, customers, and suppliers. Researchers could perform a similar study to assess the findings of the present study in diverse cultures. Moreover, researchers could focus on comparative studies of spiritually motivated and spiritually indifferent leaders.

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### TABLE 1

Some Typologies of Workplace Spirituality and the Role of Religion

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<th>Author/s</th>
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