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## The Spiritual Dimension of Organizational Change

By Charlie Grantham

*"You've got to be careful if you don't know where you are going, because you might not get there" - Yogi Berra*

### The Backstory

Four business people were sitting around a gracious dinner table discussing how to design work environments of the future that will offer people an opportunity to better balance work activity and the rest of their lives. All of a sudden, and unexpectedly, the conversation turned to spirituality in the workplace. Serendipity (i.e., "to make discoveries, by accident and sagacity, of things not in quest of") had struck again. So here we have a Roman Catholic, an evangelic cal, an agnostic, and a Buddhist all talking about the same thing. This deserves attention.

### The Plot

It goes without saying that the world of work is changing very quickly these days. The on-rush of technology, globalization of markets, emerging new models of business, and some of the most dramatic changes in demographics in decades have all combined to form the perfect storm for organizational change. Loss of connection, meaning, place, and identity are the headlines in our lives. The pace of change right now is perhaps more dramatic than humans have seen in 500 years or more.

Those of you who have followed our work over the past few years have heard this chant before. We've frequently cited Peter Drucker's predictions of the demise of large formal corporations ([Will the Corporation Survive?](#)) (*The Economist*, November 1, 2001), Strauss and Howe's prognostications of the "Fourth Turning" (<http://www.fourthturning.com/>), and countless others who see radical, significant changes in both the processes and structures of how we organize our lives to work, play, learn, and commune.

An awakening seems to be occurring.

### The Antagonists

At the same time, the professions we would think would be gearing up to help with the birth of these new social forms seem to be strangely quiet. For example, we noticed recently that one preeminent human resources management professional association hasn't had a seminar or discussion session on the "future of work" for at least three years.

Others who are focused almost exclusively on change management appear to be stuck somewhere in the psychology of 1968 T-groups (call me if you are too young to remember T-groups).

But these observations are not meant to malign those groups of professionals, but to point to the fact that something is missing. And we obviously have an idea about what that missing ingredient is. But first let's step back and look at what organizational change is all about and why it's so important.

### The Protagonist

Change upsets people. It upsets them for a number of reasons. But at the heart of it change does three psychological things:

- It causes a temporary loss of identity;
- It changes our social status within our peer group and community; and
- It creates a shift in power relationships among members of our social network.

Industrial society has focused us on answering a fundamental metaphysical question (Who am I?) in terms of our relationship to our livelihood. The classical social theorists like Weber, Marx, and Durkhiem have explained these dynamics quite adequately. But the point is that individuals have linked their identity to their job title, the company they work for, and – perhaps in the past 20 years – to their profession. *Who they are* is what they do! And this identity issue runs counter to human nature; more about that in a minute.

Again, our status today is largely determined by the work we do and, more to the point, by the money we make doing that work. The symbols of status are everywhere. Some lust after the salary so they can possess the symbols. In today's world that means SUV's, McMansions, gated communities, boats, and now even "toy haulers" to carry everything around in. Our **perception of self worth** is tied inexplicitly to our possessions, which generally emanate from our employment. People know us by our trappings.

**Power** is one's ability to influence or control the behavior of others. Whereas power is somewhat correlated with status is a distinct psychological dimension. An excess or deficit of power has been shown to have very visible effects on our mental states, attitudes, and behaviors. **Our purpose comes into question** – usually in a time of organizational change people perceive their power to be diminished, and that sense of loss is seen as caused by some external force that results in outward expressions of hostility and diffuse anxiety (see [http://www.thefutureofwork.net/what\\_book.html](http://www.thefutureofwork.net/what_book.html) for more a more detailed source of this idea).

We believe one of the major reasons that orchestrating successful organizational change is so difficult is that most practitioners approach the problem from a perspective of psychological acceptance, or, worst yet, rational economic behavior. What's missing is attention to the spiritual dimension of our lives. Homo Sapiens are the descendants of tribal animals who evolved in a rich symbolic environment. We are after all, human **Beings**, not human **Doings**. And *being* is the providence of spirituality. We are convinced that change will only be successful when the human spiritual dimension is acknowledged and dealt with (see Matthew Fox, *The Reinvention of Work*, <http://www.matthewfox.org/sys-tmpl/door/>, for more on this important perspective).

*We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.* - Teilhard de Chardin

## The Reconciliation

That being the case, then, what can be done to interject a spiritual dimension, say even a *practice*, into organizational change activities? We suggest taking a good look at *The Diamond Cutter : The Buddha on Managing Your Business and Your Life*, by Geshe Michael Roach, (<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0385497911/103-6053708-7783037?v=glance&n=283155>).

The spiritual dimension is especially important when it is occurring in the context of other failing social institutions from which we have traditionally brought meaning to our lives, such as political, educational, and religious structures.

We're talking here of the spiritual, *not* the religious dimension of our lives, although the two are often confused. Spirituality (in our sense) is more about the personal search for answers and understanding; religion is more of a socially organized effort, or praxis, towards the same end. We believe that within the context of organizational change and its impact on the individual there should be a more personal approach: a spiritual one.

Let's start with the basics. *Identity*. Herein lies a glimmer of hope. Younger generations of workers, and those who have been displaced from the industrial workforce, don't depend on work relationships for identity as much as many other more traditional groups. But nonetheless, it's an issue that must be dealt with in the process of change. We'll save the choice of method for another time, be it training, counseling, mentoring, or whatever.

The point here is the outcome of people finding the answer to "Who am I?" coming from somewhere other than their employment. It's a choice we get to make individually, not something thrust upon us from the outside. We get to create our own reality (see Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality : A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, 1966).

We believe the answer lies in a process of self-discovery, guided by a new social network made up of persons from other (non-employment) aspects of our lives such as the community, church, family, and professional associates. My recommendation is to consciously re-construct your network with the purpose being to discover your true essence, your spirit.

*Status*. Giving up the big house, car(s) and boat can be tough. The essence again lies in a change in perspective. If you are outwardly focused (status determined by others) your perception of self-worth comes from others and you internalize their perspectives. But if your focus on self worth comes from introspection, something changes. You become who you define yourself as.

Eastern spiritual traditions place an emphasis on work as service. No matter how menial or lofty, work can (should) become "right livelihood" in Buddhist terms. If you do what gives you, and consequentially others, joy, clinging to status will disappear as the apparition it truly is.

*Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen.*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

*Power* is about purpose. People seek power who are confused about their purpose in the world. People cling to power who are afraid they have no purpose.

It may be that this is the core issue facing the increasing irrelevance of modern corporations. Obscene profits, reckless lack of regard to the environment, and abuse of power are hallmarks of toxic work environments.

So, how do you help people discover their true purpose in the midst of turbulent times?

The first step in the process is recognize that all organizational change is really about personal change and growth. When a large number of people engage in this process at the same time, organizations change. There are, however, significant personal and individual barriers that have to be overcome. There is fear of change, uncertainty about the outcome, and self-doubt about being able to “do it.” We have to realize that this fear, uncertainty, and doubt exist and confront it explicitly, not ignore it or dismiss its importance to people.

I think it takes extreme personal courage to confront a lifetime of purposelessness. An awakening is required. Each religious tradition has its own answer to this question. But they all come back to a point that the highest purpose for humans is to serve a goal larger than oneself. If this higher purpose is lacking in your “work,” your soul is lost. Getting clear on purpose and how to serve that purpose is required to navigate these roiling rapids in the river of change. But take heart, there are many paths to enlightenment.

There is an ancient Buddhist koan that goes something like this:

**Student:** Master, what should one do before enlightenment?

**Master:** Chop wood, carry water.

**Student:** Master, what should one do after enlightenment?

**Master:** Chop wood, carry water.

### **Fade to Black**

In conclusion then, I believe there is something lacking in most efforts towards facilitating organizational change. And we observe that organizational change is occurring with increased rapidity and impact. The missing, critical, ingredient is the spiritual dimension of human change, or evolution. There are many pathways toward enlightenment, each guided by a different tradition—and they are all correct.

We see a loss of identity that can be dealt with by consciously focusing on defining who we are with the help of a re-constructed social network outside of our work.

We see a change in status that can be dealt with by an introspective approach to assessing self-worth.

We see a letting-loose of power that can be dealt with by seeking a purpose greater than oneself.

We won't be so bold as to suggest specific ways for specific people to attain these lofty goals. There is a myriad of traditions, creeds, and beliefs. *We simply encourage you to build your own theology in times of change.* In the coming months we will address the additional idea of how community, in its truest sense, can help in this transition.

*Author's Note: Kind thanks to my spiritual guides for their observations and comments: Rex Miller; Terry Musch; and Barry Tuchfeld.*

Please direct your comments and questions to [comments@thefutureofwork.net](mailto:comments@thefutureofwork.net). We'd love to publish your reactions and suggestions.

### **About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda***

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