

BEING AWAKE AT WORK: AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY OF HOW MANAGERS INTEGRATE INSIGHTS FROM SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT INTO THEIR WORKING LIVES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of how managers who engage in spiritual development for private reasons (e.g. to deal with a personal crisis or to find meaning in life) integrate their insights into their working lives. While insights may happen in an instant, the integration process may take a long time - being "awake" at work can be a challenging journey. This paper is based on a longitudinal, qualitative in-depth process study of the integration processes of seven managers. A conceptual framework was developed highlighting four quadrants that were subject to mutual adaptations during the integration process: acting, experiencing, the external situation, and the inner world. Qualitative analysis of the integration process shows that the process is perceived as a roller coaster ride. In between the "ups" and "downs", the managers experienced acting with passion and compulsion, awareness and avoidance, feeling support and resistance from the external situation, as well as groundedness and rootlessness in the inner world. It is suggested that the "ups" could be understood as a spiral of integration, in which the four quadrants are perceived as coming together. Conversely, a spiral of separation is suggested to happen when the four quadrants are perceived as coming apart during the "downs". Implications for research and practice will be discussed.

Keywords: spirituality at work, spiritual development, work-life integration

1 INTRODUCTION

Working life puts high demands on managers to cope with stress, fatigue, and finding a meaning in life, and as a result many of them start looking for personal development initiatives in mid-life (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1991). Contemplative practices such as yoga and meditation – backed up by evidence of their benefits from neuroscience (e.g. Hölzel et al., 2011; Jacobs et al., 2011) - have started to flourish as an alternative or complement to these personal development initiatives.

Today, contemplative practices are being used in many different fields, for example in medicine (Kabat-Zinn, 2009), higher education (Barbezat & Bush, 2013), and in the corporate world (Hunter, 2013; Tan, 2012). Even though these methods to a large extent have become secularized and stripped from their original spiritual context (R. Purser & Loy, 2013), they nevertheless *invite* the individual to open up a deep space within that can be experienced as spirituality. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the consequences of such programs, it can be concluded from previous research that for some people these may contribute to fundamental new personal insights and qualitative shifts in the way they perceive the world and themselves (Herriott, Schmidt - Wilk, & Heaton, 2009).

Many managers turn to these spirituality-based initiatives for personal development in order to become more relaxed or to recover from fatigue. As an unexpected side effect, the individual may also become more aware of his or her inner life, and start to “awaken” to his or her true nature. The person may then open up to a broader spectrum of both “positive” and “negative” feelings, leading to greater vulnerability, increased empathy for employees and colleagues, an inclination of letting go of control, and a stronger sense of one’s own body and its limitations (Firman & Gila, 1997; Kabat-Zinn, 2009; Kornfield, 2001; Sinclair, 2007).

While in line with the path of spiritual development, these kinds of outcomes are often at odds with the ideal of mainstream western managerial culture, which is mainly based on managers not recognizing “negative” feelings or showing vulnerability, treating “human resources” rationally, striving for control, and giving priority to the determination of the mind rather than to the warning signals of body. As people who engage in spiritual development tend to be sensitive to how their inner life relates to their working life (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000) it is likely that they sooner or later will encounter job related situations for which they are not well prepared. In this sense, “being awake” at work may be a big challenge.

Previous empirical research has contributed to our current understanding of how spirituality is experienced and expressed in working life (e.g. Herriott et al., 2009; Mitroff & Denton, 1999; J. Neal, 2000) and shown some potential organizational outcomes, for instance by improving organizational commitment (Rego & Pina E Cunha, 2008), employee work attitude (Milliman, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2003), work performance (Duchon & Plowman, 2005), and leadership effectiveness (Reave, 2005).

However, we know little about how a manager who has started engaging in spiritual development handles the challenges he or she faces at work. The purpose of this paper is therefore to contribute to a deeper understanding of the process in which insights from spiritual development can be integrated

into working life. The aim is to start addressing questions such as: What is the significance of having insights from spiritual development integrated into working life? How can we characterize the integration process so that it can pave the way for further research and observe its practical implications?

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the first section, spiritual development and spirituality at work will be discussed and key concepts will be defined. Based on this, a framework will be suggested as a conceptual tool for better understanding the integration of insights from spiritual development into working life. The longitudinal research study approach will then be presented together with the foundation for analysis. Thereafter, three short case stories will be presented and analyzed before the paper ends with a discussion of the conclusions, their limitations, and suggestions for further research and implications for practice.

2 SPIRITUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY AT WORK

2.1 Spirituality at work

In a broad sense, the concept of spirituality at work refers to two different aspects of the same phenomenon: on the one hand, it's "an individual's attempt to live his or her values more fully in the workplace", and on the other hand "the ways in which organizations structure themselves to support the spiritual growth of employees" (J. A. Neal, 1997, p. 123). While the two aspects are highly interconnected, the focus of this paper is on the individual level, rather than on the organizational one.

Maslow (1972) asserted that spiritual life is a defining characteristic of human nature. Yet, researchers in the field of spirituality and management have struggled to reach a common definition of spirituality and spirituality at work. One reason for this might be that spirituality is at the core a very subjective phenomenon that eludes attempts of objectification and categorization (J. A. Neal, 1997). Another reason might be that spirituality at work in its essence is a holistic experience and the whole is greater than the sum of the many dimensions identified (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004). Therefore, the purpose of this section is not to come up with new definitions, but rather to explain how key concepts were used in this particular study.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a convergence between how authors regarding several fundamental characteristics of spirituality and spirituality at work. When the concept of spirituality in management took off in the late nineties, Mitroff and Denton (1999) identified a number of characteristics that helped understand *spirituality*. The findings were based on a large qualitative study of considerable impact, and included for instance: a sense of interconnectedness and oneness; faith in a supreme power that governs the

universe and provides meaning and purpose in life; trust that everything will work out well, even in the most difficult circumstances; and a positive attitude towards life in general.

While this provides us with a good basic understanding of what spirituality at work might mean for an individual, it serves as a poor guide for exploring the process of *becoming* spiritual at work. This paper therefore takes a processual perspective, viewing spirituality at work not as a state, but as a phenomenon in constant development (Rescher, 1996; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. c.f.). In the Western world, the process view is often associated with the Greek philosopher Heraclitus' dictum that "you cannot step into the same river twice" and with later philosophers such as William James, Alfred North Whitehead, and Henri Bergson. Heraclitus' saying illustrates that what is perceived as a more or less stable entity (the river), is more of a continuous flow of activity (the flow of water). While it is unconventional to give priority to processes rather than entities in the Western tradition of thinking, many eastern philosophies, such as Buddhism for example, have a processual worldview at its very foundation. In the following two sections, key concepts for this paper will be identified based on previously existing literature.

2.2 A process perspective on spirituality

From a process perspective, the smallest building block of spiritual development is the *spiritual experience* (c.f. Whitehead, 1929/1969), considered as "an acute experience of a spiritual nature" (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992, pp. 169-170); for instance the deep feeling of interconnectedness or awe in the presence of the transcendent (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). While it is not possible to cause these kinds of spiritual experiences directly, one can create conditions that are advantageous for them to take place (Chandler et al., 1992); for example through meditation, prayer, being in nature or practicing other contemplative practices. Spiritual experiences arise and pass away, and it can thus be concluded that spirituality is not a constant state, but rather being subject to a continuous flow of spiritual experiences (c.f. Kornfield, 2001).

Spiritual development is seen as "the process of growth strengthened by one spiritual experience after another, which ultimately leads to spiritual transformation" (Benjamin & Looby, 1998, p. 95). In line with this view, Love and Talbot (2000, p. 364) conclude that "spiritual development and spirituality are interchangeable concepts in that both represent a process (i.e., movement, interaction, transcendence) with no endpoint".

Spiritual experiences may promote insights that represent fundamental shifts in one's understanding, such as "I am not my thoughts" or the feeling that "other persons are not different from me". Paradoxically, insights have a tendency to sound like clichés when they are expressed and as profound

moments of clarity when they are experienced. In this paper, *insights from spiritual development* will be used to refer to these kinds of shifts in understanding.

Yet, having a spiritual insight does not in itself change a person's way of working or relating to work. Change comes when these insights are applied and expressed in the work setting (c.f. Schmidt-Wilk, Heaton, & Steingard, 2000). Over time, the process of spiritual development may bring about more substantial and durable changes in an individual's way of functioning in the world. The concept of *spiritual transformation* will be used in this paper to denote those more stable and embodied changes, characterized by, for instance, a broader centrality (Chandler et al., 1992) or a new frame of reference in combination with a new way of life in both thought and spirit (Benjamin & Looby, 1998).

2.3 The inner world and the outer world

A central tenet among different definitions of spirituality at work is the recognition that people have an inner life (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000), something that mostly goes unacknowledged in traditional management literature. When individuals acknowledge their own inner life, they may experience a sense of interconnectedness with other individuals (c.f. Marques, Dhiman, & King, 2005). Furthermore, people who become sensitive to their inner life are also more likely to become interested in how this inner life relates to the working life (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000, p. 137), to finding purpose and meaning, and to make a contribution at work (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Karakas, 2010; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004; J. A. Neal, 1997). When this is acknowledged, spirituality in the workplace becomes a path of learning compassion, integrity and truthfulness (J. A. Neal, 1997).

In order to be true to themselves, individuals seek to "... develop a sense of self that is unitary (as opposed to fragmented), consistent, congruent with ones actions and beliefs ..." (Love & Talbot, 2000, pp. 364-365). In this way, they seek alignment between the *inner world* of values and beliefs and the *external situations* in which we express ourselves through actions. In the case of misalignment, an individual might feel uneasiness and discontent with the current external situation (c.f. O'Connor & Wolfe, 1991). Love and Talbot (2000, pp. 364-365) argue that "[t]his unsettled feeling encourages individuals to be introspective about their lives and the conditions under which they have chosen to exist".

While it may be difficult to integrate insights from spiritual development into a new way of functioning at work, few people today want to withdraw from an active life to live a life solely based on contemplation. Nor do they want to abandon their recently acquired insights. Thus, there is a great need to integrate the active life and the contemplative life (Zajonc, 2009) by balancing

the totality of life in a way that embraces all of the experiences without separation (Kornfield, 1989).

3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the previous section, a process view of spirituality at work was outlined. From this point of view, it becomes possible to differentiate between two aspects of reality, the *process* aspect and the *entitative* aspect (Rescher, 1996). From an entitative aspect, for example, we can talk about thoughts as “things”, but from a process perspective, we are rather interested in the process of thinking and we see thoughts as temporary manifestations of that process. Also, recognizing the individual’s inner life as a hallmark of spirituality (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000) makes it possible to distinguish two other aspects of reality, the individual’s *inner world* and the *external situation* of the workplace in which his or her inner world is expressed. This also refers to what is sometimes called the subjective dimension and the objective dimension, or rather, the dimension perceived as “objective” by the subject.

Building on these two dimensions, process/entitative and internal/external, Figure 1 suggests a conceptual framework where four different aspects of reality are outlined: *acting* in the external world (external process aspect), *experiencing* the inner world (internal process aspect), the *inner world* (internal entitative aspect), and the *external situation* (external entitative aspect), in which the inner world is being expressed through actions.

Acting (A) is when the inner world is expressed in the external world. Examples include communicating and interacting, planning and accomplishing tasks, as well as carrying out activities more specifically relating to the inner world, such as contemplation and being in nature.

In the *external situation* (ES), we find the reifications of our own and other individuals’ actions, such as made decisions and agreements; established routines; customers, colleagues, and employees; strategies, information systems, and physical layouts, and so on and so forth. While these things are outcomes of acting, they also shape the conditions for further acting.

Similarly, the *inner world* (IW) is the realm of values, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, needs, physical sensations, and similar phenomena. These arise as a consequence of experiencing, and also form the basis for further experiencing. Some of these forms are rather stable, such as values and beliefs, while others can be more transient, for instance feelings or physical sensations. However, a physical sensation such as pain can be rather enduring, i.e. it is experienced over and over again in each actual moment.

Finally, *experiencing* (E) is the subtle process in which the individual comes into contact with the external aspect of reality as well as his or her own

internal world. The purpose of contemplative practices such as yoga and meditation is largely about advancing the quality of the individual's experience, for example by becoming more focused and aware of one's thoughts, feelings, and the physical sensations in the body.

Together, these four aspects represent four broad, interrelated, and ontologically diverse focus areas that can be used as a base for conceptualizing the process of integration of insights from spiritual development into working life.

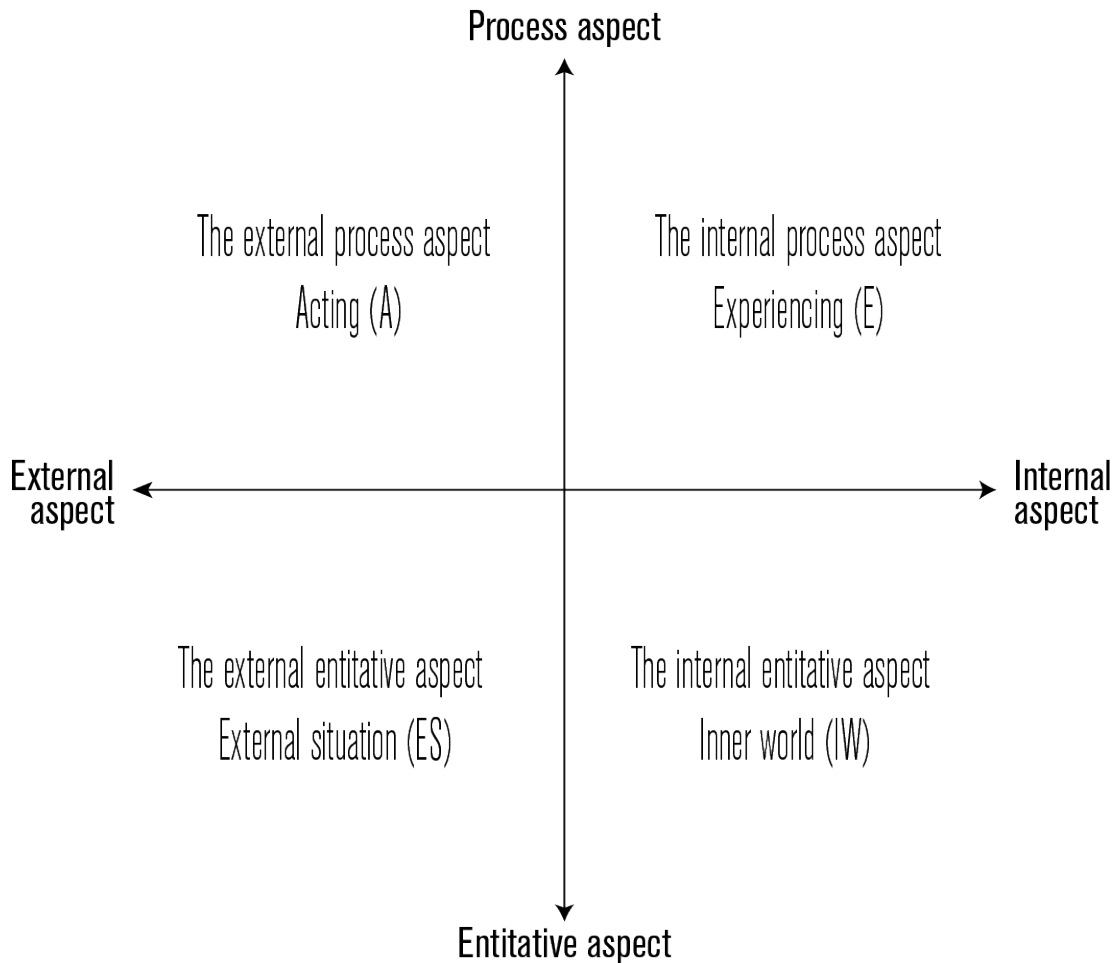


Figure 1 The conceptual framework suggests that the process of integration of insights from spiritual development into working life can be understood as a series of mutual adaptations between four different aspects of reality.

The logic of Figure 1 goes as follows. Typically, an individual is solely focused on the external world and the interplay between acting and the external results that these actions create (A-ES). However, when he or she is experiencing a feeling of misalignment between his or her inner world and the external situation at one point in time (ES-IW), the individual may be drawn to spiritual development. For some people, the feeling of misalignment apparently comes out of nowhere, while for others it's triggered by some life changing event, such as losing a job, a divorce or the death of a loved one

(Kornfield, 2001). This can be seen as an invitation to *experience* the space of *the inner world* in new ways (E-IW). In this process of spiritual development, insights can bring about substantial changes to the inner world at a later point in time (IW). Previous research has suggested that a great concern for people in transition is to find guidance from their inner world while acting (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1991). This could be described as an attempt to find a new way to connect the newly discovered qualities of the inner world with new patterns of actions (IW-A), and thus create an external situation at a future point in time (A-ES) that is more in line with the inner world (ES-IW) as experienced after the spiritual insights took place (E-IW).

In this way, the ontological map provides a ground for describing the process of integration of insights from spiritual development into working life as a series of mutual adaptations between four aspects of reality. Consider the following example. A successful businesswoman, for whom achievement is of utmost importance, starts to engage in spiritual development after her divorce. She realizes that "I am not my success" and starts to experience emptiness in her work situation. As she person seeks to be true to herself as well as to align the inner world with the external situation, a process of integration starts. During the process of integration, the individual seeks to act in accordance with the inner world in order to create an external situation that is more aligned with the inner world. By experiencing the external situation and the inner world, a more integrated sense of self might emerge over time.

4 METHOD

4.1 Background

This research is the outcome of a longitudinal research project in which seven middle aged business owners and CEOs of small to medium sized companies participated. A clinical approach was used in this project and had the dual aim of helping the participants while also gaining knowledge about the phenomena relevant to the intervention (Schein, 1987, 2001). The participants are all active in different industries, including communications, PR, consulting, and the service industry.

About two years before this research project started, the seven participants and the researcher took part in an extensive meditation-based program of personal development. When the program finished, a number of business leaders felt that the way they related to life in general and to working life in particular had changed as a result to their new insights from spiritual development. They didn't see continuing to work in the same way as before as an option, seeing the risks of another burn out or crisis. They all wanted to

continue working with their businesses, however, since it provided them and their families with financial security. Consequently, they had to find a way of running their businesses that was more in line with their spiritual insights rather than just maximizing profit and focusing on competition (c.f. R. E. Purser & Milillo, 2014).

The researcher, who has extensive experience of working with working with integrated leadership and organizational development, both in executive education and as a consultant, saw an opportunity to create a unique clinical and collaborative research setting (Adler, Shani, & Styhre, 2004) in which he could support the managers and at the same time gather data that could shed light on the process in which insights from spiritual development are integrated with working life. This, in turn, was a way for the researcher to integrate his own insights from the meditation-based course with his working life.

4.2 Research approach

During the intervention, each participant worked on a project in his or her company, aimed at establishing an external situation and patterns of action more in line with the insights from spiritual development. One manager, for example, studied the possibility of selling the company, hire a professional CEO and take on another role, or resign from an operative role but still own the business. Another one looked at changing company strategy so it would better fit with what the owner really wanted to do instead of simply trying to maximize profit. A third one wanted to change the culture of the organization so that it would be more in line with her new inner values rather than the old values that had guided the manager when she started the company.

The main bulk of data was collected during fifteen full day workshops over the course of two years. Workshops were mainly structured as focused discussions in which the participants got feedback on their projects from each other (see Torisson, Mårtensson, & Blank, 2003). This was mixed with thematic discussions about more general topics related to the current challenges in the participants' processes, such as self-compassion or using work as a meditation, contemplative practices, and theoretical input on personal and organizational development. Before every meeting each participant distributed a project report describing the current status of the project and how he or she had integrated the learning from last session. When the participants came to the meeting, they were also prepared to give each other feedback.

4.3 Data collection

During the feedback sessions and thematic discussions, the researcher took notes that included enough detail to capture longer quotes. Due to the

sensitive nature and the length of the discussions, as well as resource constrains, the meetings were not tape-recorded or video filmed. In addition to the notes, photos of whiteboards summing up main learning points, surveys, reflection papers, and status reports submitted to each meeting were gathered as data material. In total, the documentation comprises nearly 500 pages. The participants were aware of and agreed to having the data collected throughout the process be used for research purposes. The case stories and the quotes in this paper have all been read to and approved by the participants.

In the following section, three short case stories will be used to explore the process of integration in relation to the conceptual framework. Even though each of the participants' stories is unique, these three case stories have been selected because they together give a good insight into the process of integration and the different projects as a whole. The stories will provide concrete examples of the integration process by focusing on the perceived misalignment at the beginning of the integration process and the sense of alignment experienced by the participants one or two years later.

4.4 Analysis

At the end of the first year, data analysis started with open coding of events related to the integration process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Over time, an embryo of the conceptual framework started to take form as coded events merged into categories of higher levels of abstraction (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The framework was made clearer by drawing upon previous research to provide a conceptual lens and gain a deeper understanding of the process in which the insights from spiritual development are integrated into working life. In further analysis of the integration process, different qualities of acting, experiencing, the external situation and the inner world were coded. The patterns observed in these codes were then further analyzed in order to characterize the integration process. Finally, these patterns were merged into two different generalized movement patterns, one leading towards integration and one characterized by separation.

5 THREE CASE STORIES

5.1 Marie

Marie has successfully been running her own small PR agency specialized in the music industry for 12 years. At the beginning of the studied period, she experienced disharmony between her new inner world and the external aspect of the reality and strongly felt that she couldn't continue to work the in the same way as before. Financially, a big share of her revenues came from PR work but felt it took much of her energy. At the same time, her only employee

was going on maternity leave and commissions dropped. As a result she felt drained of energy and ended up on part time sick leave due to fatigue.

During her process of spiritual development, Marie realized that *“I am important and that I am worthy a pleasant life”*. She also realized that *“I have focused too much on customers and work, and less on my own needs and desires”*. These insights helped guide Marie in making changes to her business strategy. Letting go of her employee freed her of some responsibility and opened the doors to working with free lancers when needed instead. This created a space in which she could focus on acting in a way that was more in line with the new inner world, for example by being more creative and working with developing artists.

This journey was filled with struggles but towards the end of the studied period, Marie concluded that she was on the right track: *“As I have divested my larger PR commissions, which drained my energy, I have filled the time with my own projects such as writing a book and coaching artists. I am so grateful for having had the courage to do that. Sometimes I miss the revenues from the big projects and start wondering if I am doing the right thing. After a while I remember the stress it causes me and I come to the conclusion that it is worth it. Hurray! I feel so extremely alive, present and loving. It kind of continues.”*

In this illustration, Marie has started acting in new ways that are better aligned with her inner world. By letting go of the old projects, she created a space to be creative and help others develop. With time her new activities are gradually forming a new situation, which also gives her new types of incomes. Even though the current situation is not as favorable from a financial point of view, acting in a way that is in line with her inner world fills her with joy and aliveness. The meditation practice has helped her to experience acting in a new way, giving a sense of presence. *“During my coaching sessions, I feel how pleasant it is to be completely present and to listen, not only with my ears, but with my whole body. When I do this, I get so much information and new ideas that I can then choose to share to my client.”*

5.2 Sara

Sara is the owner and CEO of a middle-sized cleaning and home-care company. She has always been very emotional, making her a very enthusiastic, intuitive and inspirational CEO. However, her work as the company CEO also included tasks that she did not perceive as being in line with her needs for freedom, autonomy and joy. This sometimes made her feel like work was a struggle that drained her energy and left her out of balance.

At the beginning of the studied period, for example, she sometimes had difficulties engaging in the sales of her services to new customers and would say: *“We chose not to sell to the new municipality because we didn’t manage it.”*

When I receive all those business cards, I just feel that I have no energy. I have to force myself to sell and I don't like it."

Sara experienced a strong resistance towards many of these routine tasks because she felt that they hindered her from doing what she really wanted to do. As a consequence, she delegated much of the work to the operations manager. She was, however, not really clear about what she expected from the operations manager and with time, Sara lost the sense of ownership of the company and operations started to drift. At the beginning of the studied period, she didn't spend much time at the office and only used a small room to do administrative work. Basically, she was denying the requirements that the external situation put on her as the company CEO. Instead thinking about future projects that she wanted to carry out, such as opening a raw food café, a business much more in line with her new inner world. As a result, she did not *experience* the external situation as it was; in fact, she was avoiding it.

Two insights that Sara got from her spiritual development were: *"I am not my feelings"* and *"I have become better in living here and now instead of in my dreams"*. Over time, and with continued meditation practice, she started to embody these insights and became able to observe feelings arise and then pass away to a greater extent than before. This made it easier to more consciously choose what actions to take rather than being unconsciously run by emotions, and to be more present while carrying out tasks.

At the end of the studied period, Sara shared: *"I do tasks that I previously felt resistance to. The 'old me' wouldn't have written up time reports for the employees. The 'new me' will work through that resistance and do it. Afterwards, I feel so good, because I know more about my company. I know that six people have worked far too much and that I can coach them in order to manage the situation in a better way"*.

By being more present, she experienced the external situation with awareness, rather than avoiding it and letting her thoughts escape to future projects. This does not mean that she has given up her intention to make changes within the company or in her life, but rather that the starting point of these changes is more firmly rooted in the current situation. It is also possible to notice a shift from perceiving the routines of making time report as a barrier for doing what she really wants to do, to something that supports her in carrying out what is needed to respond to the current situation.

Sara gradually took her company back and once she was back on board in a new, bigger office, there was no room for the operations manager anymore, which subsequently left the company. This, in turn, created a new space for Sara to meet challenges that she had previously avoided, and thus opportunities to further her inner work.

5.3 Anthony

Anthony is a fifty years old creative director, video photographer, and together with his wife Elisabeth, co-owner of a small communications agency with 10 employees and a few freelancers. One of his insights from the process of spiritual development was *"I feel more empathy and understanding for other people and ways of working"*.

Anthony's dream is to build a successful company, grow it and to sell it at a profit in a few years so that he can focus on doing projects that he loves, such as making films about skiing and surfing. The process of spiritual development has given him confidence in the importance of realizing one's dreams, but in practice he is under great pressure.

Anthony is the most experienced photographer in the company and he finds it difficult to delegate work to younger colleagues without re-doing the work himself afterwards. Thus, he feels stuck in a situation in which the company can't grow, and as a consequence, he can't pursue his dream. The way Anthony is currently managing the company is not in line with his deeper inner need to pursue his dreams. Anthony is clearly under pressure and feels constrained.

Rather than perceiving reality as it is, he resorts to either-or-thinking: either to drop everything and go free lance in order to have greater freedom or to first build the company and postpone the pursuit of his dreams. This, however, is contrary to the insights that he got from spiritual development: to act with awareness and to listen to inner values and needs rather than navigating the expectations of others. Anthony's desire for control has created a block, which makes him stuck. However, six months into the studied period, he concludes, *"I am not ready to let go of the idea of building a company, but I am prepared to make a big change. I think that I am willing to let go of my need for control. To invite other people into the company. People that we don't know today, but who are attracted by the way we are working."*

One year later, the situation has changed. Revenues have increased, new people have joined the company, and Anthony has actually learned to delegate much more of his work. He has also found an outdoor company to sponsor a trip to the Japanese Alps where he and his team recorded a film for the company's website. At the moment of writing, Anthony is on his way to India to record another promotional film for a yoga and meditation studio. He has succeeded in finding synergies between his inner world and the external situation without giving up the idea of building a company, and as a consequence feels great joy and passion.

6 DISCUSSION

6.1 Conclusions

6.1.1 Towards a new equilibrium

This paper has explored the process of integrating insights from spiritual development with working life by analyzing three case stories through a conceptual framework that highlights the relationship between four different aspects of spirituality at work: acting, the external situation, experiencing, and the inner world. As participants' insights increasingly influenced their inner world, a substantial disharmony between the new inner world and their old patterns of actions and external situation arose.

The process of integration is characterized by the continuous adaptation of the four aspects in relation to each other, and towards creating a new equilibrium. This implies a spiritual transition taken to a new level of functioning, which in turn allows for the new insights from spiritual development to be expressed in the working life. Managers approached this new equilibrium after considerable struggle and courage by challenging old behavioral patterns and external situations, which had until then provided them with a sense of security.

Interestingly, the fundamental changes seemed to happen when the managers let go of control and relaxed into an acceptance of the external situation and the perceived conflicting needs of the inner world. This appeared to provide them with tranquility from where they could give expression to their new inner worlds by acting in a natural way and without effort. When the values of the inner world are expressed clearly, it is easier for other people to know with whom they are dealing. This makes it easier to attract other people who are conscious of their inner world without giving up on the outer one.

6.1.2 The spiral of integration and the spiral of separation

The case stories suggest that different managers related to the four aspects acting, experiencing, external situation, and inner world differently at different points in time. For example, the managers could experience acting as a compulsion, strenuous and energy draining at one point in time, and as passion, joy, and aliveness at other points in time. Similarly, they experienced the other aspects with awareness at certain times, while avoiding to perceive reality as it was at other times. They could also experience a sense of groundedness and stability in their inner world at one moment, and have it be replaced by a kind of rootlessness and shakiness at another. Last but not least, they felt that the external situation supported them in doing what they really wanted to do at times and was a barrier at other times.

It is interesting to note that the “positive” characteristics tended to “come together” and reinforce each other over time in a kind of flow, referred to as the *spiral of integration* in this paper. The logic derived from the case is illustrated in Figure 2: When the external situation is perceived with *awareness*, one feels more *grounded*; when one is grounded, it becomes easier to see how one’s actions are connected to the inner world, and thus to feel *passion*; and when one is acting with passion, one is more likely to create an external situation that will *support* the expression of the inner world. The description above starts with a person acting with presence, but the spiral of integration can just as well take off with a spark of passion, a feeling of being supported, or a deep sense of one’s own grounding.

In this state, the participants expressed feeling - which is similar to other findings - “in a flow state”, “in the zone”, or when things “just click” (Herriott et al., 2009; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004).

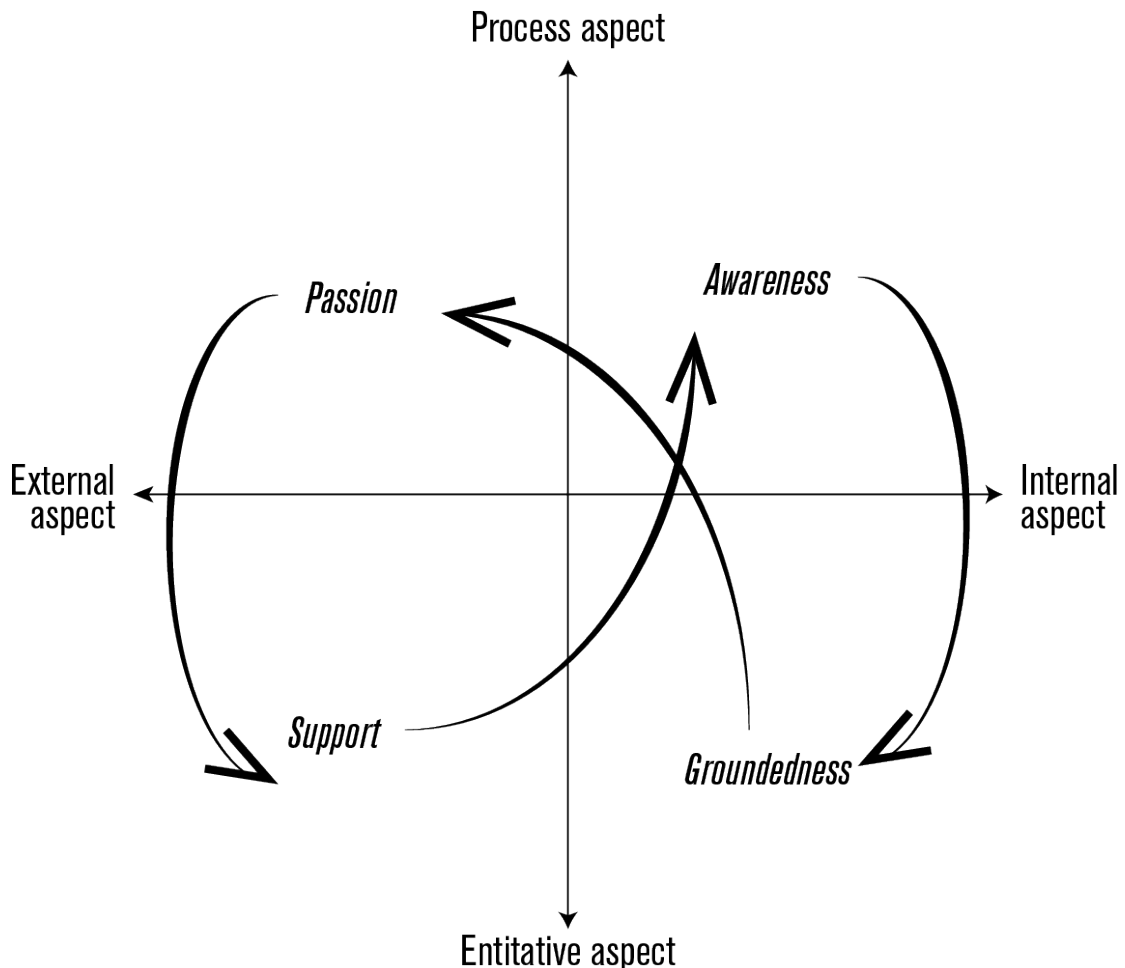


Figure 2 Suggested reinforced relationships in the spiral of integration based on the empirical material.

At other times, however, it was the opposite. When a manager wanted to *avoid* the external situation, he or she felt a greater degree of *rootlessness*,

which in turn made acting feel like a *compulsion*, creating external situations which became *barriers* to doing the things that were more in line with their inner worlds. In this movement, the four aspects were perceived as coming further apart from each other, suggesting a *spiral of separation*. The description above starts with a person avoiding the external situation, but the spiral of separation could just as well start with facing a barrier, experiencing compulsion or simply having a feeling of rootlessness. The suggested movements of the spiral of separation are illustrated in Figure 3.

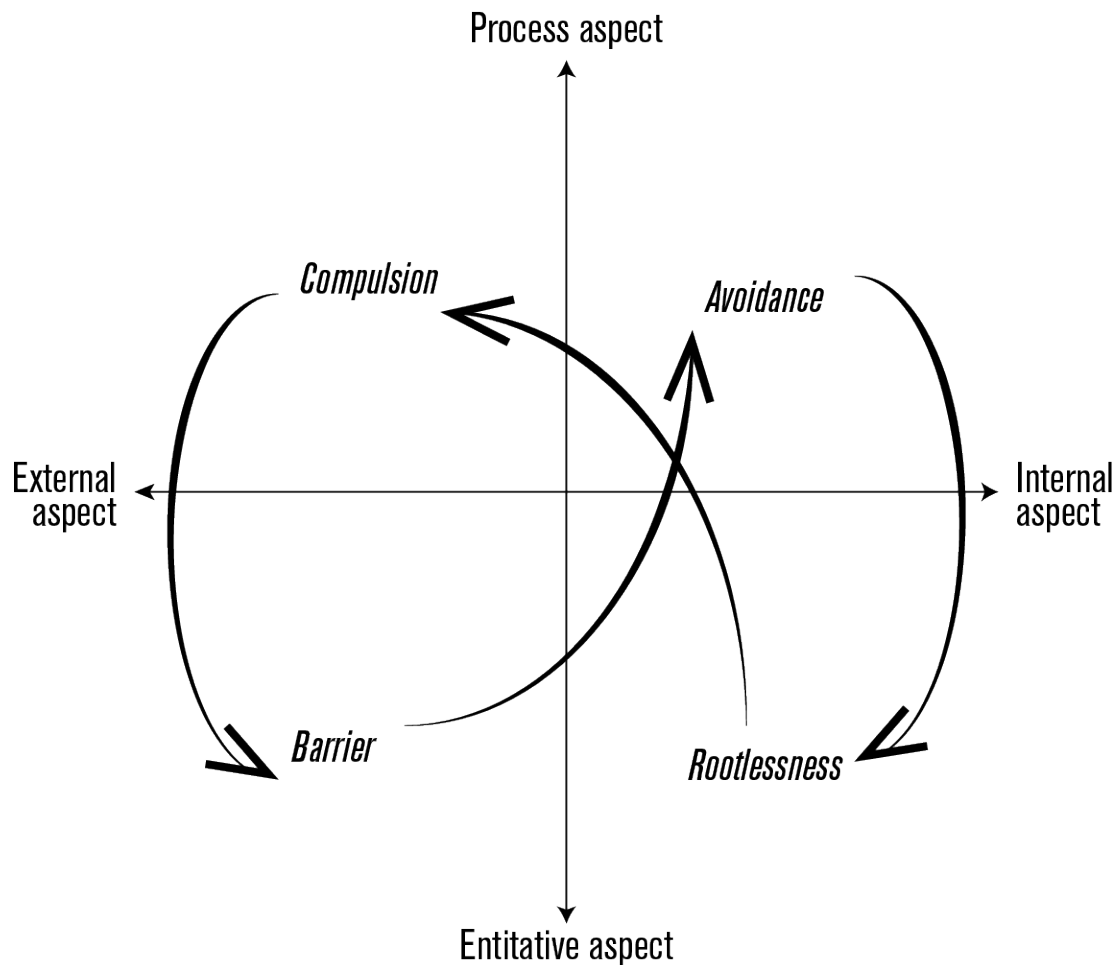


Figure 3 Suggested reinforced relationships in the spiral of separation based on the empirical material.

On the micro level, the journey of these individuals was filled with “ups” and “downs” and as if thrown between feelings of compulsion, avoidance, resistance, and rootlessness on the one hand, and feelings of passion, presence, support, and groundedness on the other. In other words, they alternated being carried away in the spiral of integration and the spiral of separation.

Over time, however, it was possible to observe three things. *First*, as research time went on, participants became increasingly able to notice when they were in the spiral of separation and then let it go, rather than panicking and

making unnecessary efforts to get back on track. Over and over again, it was observed that things ended up going well when managers didn't intervene.

Secondly, the feeling of being in the spiral of separation happened less frequently and with shorter duration as time went on. This supports the findings of Herriott et al. (2009, p. 202), which describe an unshakeable, transcendental inner spiritual core that emerges over the course of meditation practice.

Finally, it was noted that the spiral of separation helped the individuals observe the disharmony between the different aspects of reality as a whole explicit, and helped them determine where further personal growth was possible. Even though the spiral of integration may be perceived as more pleasant, it is not "better" from a spiritual growth perspective. On the contrary, both "positive" and "negative" experiences supported the process of integration (c.f. Driver, 2007; Fineman, 2006; Sugarman, 2007). In fact, a higher level of integration of spiritual insights was characterized by increased awareness of the "ups" and "downs" without being carried away in either direction.

6.1.3 The durability of insights from spiritual development

It is notable that the insights the managers got before starting the integration process were a recurring theme during the whole research project. The person who said "*I am not my feelings*" has worked on not being taken over by her feelings during the entire project; the one whose insight was "*I am important and I am worthy a pleasant life*" worked on finding a job situation that would provide her with more relaxation and joy, and the one who said "*I feel more empathy and understanding for other people and ways of working*" has continuously tried to delegate work and trust that others will deliver at a adequate level. And they are still working on it. There is a huge difference, however, since they are now much more aware on a deeper level and can see substantial shifts in their inner world, as well as in their patterns of actions and the external situation compared to at the outset of the studied period.

One possible conclusion is that profound insights from spiritual development come rather quickly, but the process of integrating them with the external aspects of reality takes a long time. Hence, insights need to be profound in order to survive the demanding "ups" and "downs" of the process, and that is perhaps what makes them "spiritual".

6.2 Implications for research and limitations

This study reports from an ongoing, longitudinal and qualitative research project that follows seven owners and CEO's of small and medium sized businesses over two years. As a result, the current paper offers insights into aspects of spirituality at work that are not covered by the vast quantitative

stream of factor research about spirituality at work, such as the process of becoming spiritual at work (c.f. Van de Ven, 2007). It is suggested that viewing spirituality at work as a process may open up to a broader and contextualized understanding of the phenomena in the future.

From a methodological point of view, this study opens up the door to clinical research in the field of spirituality where managers share things in order to receive help with urgent matters, which provides a certain type of relevance (Schein, 1993, 2001). It is not argued that clinical research is “better”, but that it adds another type of quality to the data and to the research process as a whole, which is the quality of helping.

However, the study also has some characteristics that need to be considered while interpreting the results. Just like many other small and medium sized business owners and entrepreneurs, managers found themselves in situations characterized by high responsibility and high risk, and had difficulties separating the spheres of work and private life (Zhao & Seibert, 2006). Their situation, however, also provided them with opportunities. The study’s participants are all managers that had considerable freedom to engage in the extensive research project while continuing to work on their own spiritual development. Hence, though their journey was not easy, conditions for integration were different from, for instance, those of a middle manager working 60 hour-weeks in a large company. Nevertheless, it is likely that such as manager could also have related to the spirals of integration and separation in a similar way to the participating entrepreneurs but his or her journey would have been different. As concluded by many authors before, spirituality is a highly subjective matter; and appropriately, one of the conceptual frameworks’ strengths is its general nature, which allows for many different types of journeys.

6.3 Suggestions for further research

In this explorative project, a conceptual framework based on literature reviews was used together with qualitative, longitudinal data that explored the participants’ subjective understanding of the different aspects of the framework and how they were interrelated. During this process, the researcher’s interpretative understanding of this phenomena emerged. This opens up for further research from a positivistic point of view in which propositions can be formulated and tested (Lee, 1991).

Additional longitudinal, qualitative studies may however want to focus on furthering the understanding of how the process of integration can be understood in terms of stages, or rather as a dialectic between the process of integration and separation as it moves towards a new equilibrium or synthesis (c.f. Van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

6.4 Implications for practice: six traps

While insights from spiritual development can be instant, the process of integrating them with the working life has been proven to be a long journey. The conceptual framework suggested in the paper may provide a road map and vocabulary for talking about what is going on in the “ups” and “downs” that seem to be characteristic to the integration process. When tension arises, it becomes possible to examine the relationship between the four different realms of the model in order to explore if there is a blockage that can be removed: Is there a disharmony between the external situation and my inner world? Do I experience the external situation as it is? Do I act in line with what is requested by the external situation? Am I present while acting? Am I true to myself? Do I act in accordance with my inner world? To help clarify possible challenges of these six relationships, six potential traps to be aware of are suggested below.

The trap of Who's driving the bus?: this trap occurs when one's actions are not in line with the inner world. It suggests that actions might be carried out in order to meet others' expectations at the expense of one's own needs. In the long run, the individual runs the risk of ending up in an external situation that she does not want to be in.

The blindfold trap: In this situation, the individual fails to experience and accept the current situation in the external world as it is, and keeps on going against the stream in the face of signs such as physical symptoms of illness, an increased rate of failure at work or colleagues' persistent unwillingness to support one's ideas. This person is acting as if wearing a blindfold in relation to certain features in the external situation.

Socrates' trap: According to tradition, the Greek philosopher Socrates referred to the saying “Know thyself”, emphasizing the importance of gaining knowledge about oneself before trying to understand things in the external world. This trap happens when a person shuts the window their inner world, and becomes unconscious about how his or her own thoughts, feelings, and needs are affecting the way he or she influence how he or she responds to the external world. One example is the person who always finds him or herself taking on too much work without realizing how the need for approval influences his or her choices, and in the end, the well-being of that person.

The autopilot trap: This trap suggests that a person is acting without awareness of what he or she does. It is like being on autopilot. The difference between this trap and “Who's driving the bus?” is that, in the latter, the person may be very well aware of the actions he or she is carrying out, but isn't aware of how it relates to his or her inner world. In the autopilot trap, the person is just not aware of what he or she actually said or did.

The delusion trap: This refers to the case where an individual experiences disharmony between his or her inner world and the external situation, but keeps coming up with reasons for why not to change; at least not now. By doing this, the person continuously deludes his or herself to keep up a status quo, which to a large extent is unwanted.

The *rationality trap* occurs when one focuses solely on the relationship between acting and the external situation, without considering the relationship to the inner realm. This trap is based on the belief that if you only carry out the “right” actions, the intended external situation will manifest. However, from the point of view of spirituality at work suggested in this paper, what is “right” cannot be separated from one’s unique and subjective inner world and the process of experiencing. When the inner realm is acknowledged, however, elaborating on the relationship between acting and the external world may provide a powerful tool to help to integrate the insights from spirituality into working life.

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