

# LEADING WITH THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

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by Michael Hartsfield

The workplace, where people once found their sense of purpose and personal fulfillment, has become a place of uncertainty. As a result, interest in workplace spirituality has increased dramatically over the past decade as people are looking for ways to cope with the growing sense of insecurity that pervades much of corporate America. The threat of layoffs, restructurings and the disillusionment of many aging Baby Boomers, who now see their hard earned success as an insufficient reward for the sacrifice of family, health and even personal identity paid to earn it, have people looking for more in the workplace than what it now provides. Workers are longing for a more humanistic environment with increased simplicity, more meaning and a connection to something higher (Marques, Dhiman & King, 2005). Workers are looking for a sense of significance in the workplace.

Spirituality in the workplace is often expressed through a sense of community. Duchon and Plowman (2005) define workplace spirituality as “a workplace that recognizes employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community” (p. 807). A sense of community, then, is central to the nurturing process that gives significance to work and builds up the inner life of those who carry it out. This is increasingly important today when, for so many, the workplace is the only source of community. The community with which they most closely identify is no longer the church, the neighborhood, nor even their extended family. They are increasingly finding their identity in the workplace community, which takes the responsibility of leadership beyond the realm of simply engaging the hands. Leaders must also focus on creating a sense of community that nurtures the heart.

## The Power of Community

Scott Peck begins his book, *The Different Drum*, by saying, “In and through community lies the salvation of the world.” This is a bold statement, but Peck, in his next book, *A World Waiting to be Born*, says that six years and hundreds of community building experiences later, he remains convinced this statement is true. Peck speaks of the wisdom of community that can seem somewhat miraculous. It is a wisdom born in the freedom of expression, the melding of varied talents and the power of consensual decision making that takes place in the context of community. When people experience community, they experience each other at a deeper level and they approach their tasks with a deeper sense of security and inspiration, resulting in something much greater than merely the sum of the parts.

Community is about people coming together for a shared purpose, and this process of coming together can have a profound personal impact on each member. Isaacs (1999) points out that

communities of wealth, built upon the value systems and priorities of the postwar generation, focused on the growth of the consumer society and a more traditional hierarchical control structure. The shift, today, is to communities of meaning that are characterized by a move toward the personal, toward independence and toward self-development in the workplace. Those who once had their personal growth needs met outside the workplace are now looking to their work for a new sense of meaning. In the context of community at work, they are connected to others and to a common purpose.

This unitive experience creates positive energy and vitality that can result in “a sense of perfection, transcendence, and experiences of joy and bliss” (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006, p. 283). Perhaps the greatest power of community is the freedom it gives individuals to become whole people. Peck (1987) says the most common statement members make once community has been achieved is, “I feel safe here” (p. 67). It’s in the safety of community that people have the freedom to function as people and not as mere mindless and emotionless parts of a machine.

### **Leadership & Community**

Fry (2003), in his spiritual leadership theory, speaks of our quest for spiritual survival that is manifest in a sense of calling, or deep meaning and purpose, and a longing for membership in a community where we are understood and appreciated. Fry says people need someone and something to believe in. They need a spiritual leader who walks in front of them when they need someone to follow, someone who walks behind them when they need encouragement and someone to walk beside them when they need a friend. This is the kind of leader who understands that personal agendas must be put aside to foster the kind of spirit at work that creates a genuine sense of community. While no leader can be all things to all people, the leader described by Fry is one who can empower people to be what they feel called to be through the empowerment of membership in a secure community.

This is the kind of leader Kinjerski and Skrypnek (2006) call an inspiring leader. In their research, inspiring leadership emerged as instrumental in all the factors that fostered spirit at work, including building a sense of community among members of the organization. So, what is inspiring leadership? According to Kinjerski and Skrypnek, inspiring leaders create a culture of caring. They focus on relationships and are concerned about the welfare of the follower. In a culture of caring, everyone shares and feels they are making a genuine contribution. Inspiring leaders practice enabling leadership that results in regular communication with members so they are informed and equipped to be competent in their own work and to be involved in the organization’s decision-making processes. In this regard, inspiring leaders plant the seeds but let the members bring those seeds to fruition. Finally, inspiring leaders model and cultivate behaviors consistent with the vision and philosophy of the organization. They actually go beyond vision casting to communicate clarity of intention about the higher intent and purpose of the organization.

Do inspiring leaders really exist or is this nothing more than an ideal to which all leaders should aspire? Is it really possible to empower members of an organization to function in a genuine sense of committed and productive community? It is possible, but it will never take place outside the bonds of relationship. Leadership is based on relationship. Those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow must take into account that they are involved in relationship. A leader who aspires to build community without investing in the relationships inherent in the community is aspiring to an act of futility. At the core of community is trust and respect, which are products of relationship. Kouzes and Posner (2004) say credible leaders build a strong sense of community. These leaders can take people to where they have never been before, but this requires the leader and constituents to be on

the same path. Leaders and followers walking the same path, in the same direction, form relationships.

Credible leaders bring people together and unite them around a common cause. Nothing will compromise leader credibility and dissolve the trust necessary for community faster than leader incongruence. Kouzes and Posner point out that people listen to what is said and look at what is done. When these two are incongruent in the leader, the genuineness necessary to lead people into community is missing. Members will only go where the leader is willing to go. A leader who talks community but is unwilling to walk in the vulnerability of relationship is sending conflicting signals that will prove devastating to community building efforts. The leader who is intentional about creating community walks the talk and in so doing, creates a common language that allows the power of diversity and multiple constituencies to function in the strength and power of community (Kouzes & Posner, 2004).

### **Paying the Price for Community**

In describing the often painful process of community building in his workshops, Peck (1993) tells how groups struggle to accept the authenticity required to move from chaos to community. One member may share something especially poignant and transparent, but others, unable to deal with the pain of the moment, switch the subject to something shallow and inane. The move toward community is suddenly derailed and the group moves back to chaos. Peck says this bouncing back to chaos occurs until the group has become sufficiently empty (open to others) for the miracle of community to occur. When the group is sufficiently empty, members truly listen and connect. They no longer need to hide in the noise of chaos and confusion.

Peck says, “The shift into community is often quite sudden and dramatic. The change is palpable. A spirit of peace pervades the room. There is more silence, yet more of worth gets said. It is like music. The people work together with an exquisite sense of timing, as if they were a finely tuned orchestra under the direction of an invisible celestial conductor” (p. 275). If the creation of community is so transforming, why is this not the goal of every leader? Perhaps the perceived price is simply too high. The sufficient emptying required to form community is not limited only to the members. It is also required of leaders, and emptying one’s self is a price many leaders are unwilling to pay.

The emptying that brings community so often requires leaders to acknowledge the hidden self and those aspects of personality that may be unattractive. Fairholm (1997) says, “We need to bring this less-attractive self to the fore of the mind for occasional scrutiny or it will turn toxic” (p. 37). This takes incredible courage since this kind of transparency is discouraged by society. The individual who would lead a diverse group of people must necessarily spend considerable time with followers. However, this does not negate the need for leaders to give time and space in life for reflection (Gardner, 1995). It is in the self-scrutiny of this reflection that leaders can honestly and clearly establish personal strategies for countering the negative inclinations that destroy personal credibility, follower trust and ultimately, the very spirit of community.

Today, leaders are held to a higher level of public scrutiny. Global communication and the instant conveyance of so much information directly to the public through the Internet and satellite news services means the personal and professional lives of leaders are under constant scrutiny. As Gardner points out, the leadership mystique enjoyed by leaders of World War II does not exist today. No longer can a leader claim positional immunity from ethical, moral and even spiritual responsibilities. While this will cause many to shrink away from leadership service, it is a validation for those who believe leadership is most effective in the context of community where leadership is the lived responsibility to grow and empower people rather than the right to serve self.

## Community is Worth the Price

“While rugged individualism predisposes one to arrogance, the ‘soft’ individualism of community leads to humility” (Peck, 1987, p. 65). Those who choose to lead with the power of community must humbly embrace the spirit of community that recognizes the unique strengths and weaknesses of each member. The appreciation of each other’s gifts allows the appreciation of one’s own limitations. How humbling. “Witness others share their brokenness, and you will become able to accept your own inadequacy and imperfection. Be fully aware of human variety, and you will recognize the interdependence of humanity” (p.65). This recognition opens the door for true community where humility fosters greater humility, both in individual members and in the corporate body.

Today, leaders are fighting for their lives in a corporate environment that moves at blinding speed. They are overwhelmed by more information than could ever be processed and they are consumed with the ever present pressure to improve the bottom line. This is fertile ground for inspiring leaders to plant seeds of community where the creativity and innovation that mark effective organizations can grow. This is innovative leadership that gives organizations the competitive edge in today’s volatile corporate environment.

Leaders who understand the power of community understand the power of humility. The power of humility is realism. Leaders who embrace community can create empowered people who distinguish wisely between what is real and what is hype. They know what has substance and what is merely smoke and mirrors. In this day, when distinguishing between reality and illusion is so difficult, the wisdom and power of community can endow organizations with the desire and passion not only to compete, but to actually flourish in today’s competitive corporate arena. Those leaders courageous enough to inspire with humility, rather than control with power, may find community building is well worth the price.

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