

Spiritual Leadership in a South Korea Cultural Context

Servant Leadership Research Roundtable – May 2008

William Hunsaker

Regent University

South Korea (hereafter Korea) has experienced breathtaking economic growth and industrialization since the 1960s, elevating its gross domestic product (GDP) from US\$2 billion in 1960 to US\$888 billion in 2006 and making it the world's twelfth largest economy (International Monetary Fund, 2007). In particular, during the past ten years, the country has become a key global player in the production of digital/electronic goods, steel, shipbuilding, and automobiles, as well as telecommunication and high-speed Internet services. In addition, representative organizations within these industrial sectors such as Samsung Electronics, LG Electronics, POSCO, Hyundai Heavy, Hyundai Motors, Korea Telecom, and SK Telecom have all become internationally recognized as global leaders within their respective fields, securing top five market positions for many of their products. Indeed, Korea is no longer the "hermit kingdom" as historically characterized. However, despite the remarkable performance of Korean firms, little research attention has been paid to characterizing Korean leadership styles and practices (Baik, 1999; Paik & Sohn, 1998), or how open market and labor policy changes that emerged as a result of the Asian financial crisis of 1997 are impacting cultural and social values (including leader-follower relationships) within Korea's organizations (Kim, 2004; Park & Kim, 2005).

In this regard, the Asian financial crisis of 1997 has emerged as a critical turning point for Korea in terms of not only the maturing of annual economic growth and the emergence of extremely profitable, globally ranked Korean enterprises, but importantly, also in terms of transformational organizational behavioral policies related to human resource management (Park & Yu, 2002) and organizational management (Chen, 2004; Tipton, 2007). In particular, as a condition for bailout funds, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) demanded that Korea (a) fully open its financial markets, provoking a reassessment of traditional human resource methodologies (Park & Yu, 2002) as well as stimulating the initiation of western management practices to sustain global organizational competitiveness (Lee, 1999); and (b) loosen its labor laws, bringing to an end an era characterized by lifetime employment, job security, and familial-based human resource policies (Kim, 2004; Park, 2004). As a result, the

competitive landscape facing workers within Korea's organizations has become increasingly harsh, and more insecure and uncertain. In particular, downsizing through early retirement and honorary retirement plans has become commonplace while employment practices have also exploited the use of temporary or contract workers to reduce payroll obligations. As a result of these practices, the sense of identity of both the employed and those seeking employment has become more individualistic and self-centered while organizational commitment has also faltered (Park & Kim, 2005). Moreover, as a result of the permeation of globalization and western culture, traditional Korean culture is gradually losing its influence on the lifestyle of people, impacting the cultural identity of Koreans (Kim, 2004; Yim, 2002), as evidenced in the gradual shifting of societal motivations from vertical collectivism to horizontal individualism (Han & Shin, 2000). In sum, the common ideas underpinning the collective consciousness of Koreans, such as "conventional ways of doing business, expectations of life-time employment, trust in business culture ... and above all, pride in being Korean" (Park, 2004, p. 154) have been upended, leaving Koreans feeling demoralized and frustrated about the future. Such changes present a difficult challenge to Korea's traditional leadership practices. The leadership challenges facing Korean organizations are more than just a local phenomenon. Writing within the context of global business, Lewin and Regine (2001) suggest "the business world is in the throes of revolutionary change" (p. 3), and with this change, "business managers are finding many of their background assumptions and time-honored business models inadequate to help them understand what is going on" (p. 4). Additionally, corporations now recognize that downsizing and re-engineering efforts of the past twenty years have not achieved expected objectives, spurring the development of organizational cultures that encourage personal growth, creativity, and innovativeness (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Leigh, 1997; Lewin & Regine, 2001). Meanwhile, workers are increasingly seeking inspiring and meaningful work, wherein a more fulfilling balance between life and work can be achieved (Dehler & Welsh, 2003; Fairholm, 1997; Mitroff & Denton, 1999), especially as "work has become the centerpiece of our lives ... and the fountainhead of values in our society" (Fairholm, 1996, p. 11). In essence, workers are signaling a desire for workplace spirituality as "one way to apply spiritual beliefs and satisfy the need to feel the spirit through work" (Fairholm, 1996, p. 11), or according to Lewin and Regine (2001), workers are seeking their "soul at work" (p. 15). A leadership theory capturing the essence of workplace spirituality is Fry's (2003) causal theory of spiritual leadership that postulates universal applicability. The theory is built within an intrinsic motivation model of three inter-related leader values, attitudes, and behaviors of vision (performance), hope/faith (effort), and altruistic love (rewards) that help satisfy follower needs for spiritual survival through calling and membership; which in turn leads to improved organizational outcomes such as organizational commitment and productivity. Since its inception, Fry's theory has undergone extensive empirical testing of validity and reliability, yielding positive results that "support a significant positive influence of spiritual leadership on employee life satisfaction, organizational commitment and productivity, and sales growth" (Fry, 2007, p. 133; see also Fry & Matherly, 2006; Fry & Slocum,

2007; Fry, Nisiewicz, & Vitucci, 2007; Fry, Vitucci, & Cedillo, 2005; Fry, Nisiewicz, Vitucci, & Cedillo, 2007; Malone & Fry, 2003).

Given the positive empirical results of spiritual leadership on employee well-being and organizational performance, the purpose of this paper is to examine spiritual leadership within a Korean cultural context, as a means of garnishing insight into the universal application of Fry's (2003) spiritual leadership model related to the challenges facing Korean leadership. The primary question driving the research is how spiritual leadership emerges within a Korean cultural context, as applies to Fry's model of spiritual leadership. In particular, what are the spiritual and religious roots that underlie motivation and leadership within Korea, and how do these cultural practices and underlying leadership principles common within Korea fit and tie-in to Fry's leadership model? Also, within the intrinsic motivation model that guides Fry's spiritual leadership framework, how do the qualities of vision, altruistic love, and hope/faith emerge in Korea? Moreover, how do the values, attitudes, and behaviors embedded and explicitly described within these three qualities emerge in Korea? Finally, how are the follower variables of calling and membership manifest within a Korean cultural context? These questions and other relevant issues will be discussed in this paper. The paper first examines the cultural context of Korea, describing the emergence of Korea's cultural identity and the spiritual and cultural impact of its primary religions. The paper next reviews the emergence of workplace spirituality and spiritual leadership theory, and the reliability of Fry's causal model of spiritual leadership. Lastly, the paper explores spiritual leadership theory within the context of Korea's culture, arguing that the cultural underpinnings of Korean culture strongly align with the motivational aspects of Fry's leadership model.

References

- Ashmos, D. & Duchon, D. (2000). Spirituality at work. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 9(2), 134-145.
- Baik, K. (1999). Thirty years of leadership research in Korea: A literature review and critique. *Korean Social Science Journal*, 26(1), 101-130.
- Chen, M. (2004). *Asian management systems* (2nd ed.). London: Thomson Learning.
- Dehler, G. E. & Welsh, M. A. (2003). The experience of work: Spirituality and the new workplace. In R. A. Giacalone and C. L. Jurkiewicz (Eds.), *Handbook of workplace spirituality and organizational performance* (pp. 108-122). New York: M. E. Sharpe.
- Fairholm, G. (1996). Spiritual leadership: Fulfilling whole-self needs at work. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 17(5), 11-17.
- Fairholm, G. (1997). *Capturing the heart of leadership: Spirituality and community in the new American workplace*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Fry, L. W. (2003). Toward a theory of spiritual leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 14(6), 693-727.
- Fry, L. W. (2007, in press). Spiritual leadership: State-of-the-art and future directions for theory, research, and practice. In J. Biberman and L. Tishman (Eds.), *Spirituality in business: Theory, practice, and future directions*. New York: Palgrave.
- Fry, L. W. & Matherly, L. L. (2006). *Spiritual leadership as an integrating paradigm for positive leadership development*. Paper presented at the Gallup International Leadership Summit, Washington, D.C. Available from <http://www.iispiritualleadership.com/index.htm>.
- Fry, L. W. & Slocum, J. W. (2007, in press). Maximizing the triple bottom line through spiritual leadership. *Organizational Dynamics*. Available from <http://www.iispiritualleadership.com/index.htm>.
- Fry, L. W., Nisiewicz, M., & Vitucci, S. (2007). *Transforming police organizations through spiritual leadership*. Paper presented at the 2007 National Academy of Management, Philadelphia, PA. Available from <http://www.iispiritualleadership.com/index.htm>.
- Fry, L. W., Nisiewicz, M., Vitucci, S., & Cedillo, M. (2007). *Transforming city government through spiritual leadership*. Paper presented at the 2007 National Academy of Management, Philadelphia, PA. Available from <http://www.iispiritualleadership.com/index.htm>.
- Fry, L.W., Vitucci, S., & Cedillo, M. (2005). Spiritual leadership and army transformation: Theory measurement and establishing a baseline, *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(5), 835-862.
- Han, G. & Shin, S. (2000). A cultural profile of Korean society: From vertical collectivism to horizontal individualism. *Korean Social Science Journal*, 27(2), 69-96.
- International Monetary Fund (2007). World economic and financial surveys. *World Economic Outlook Database* (October 2007 ed.). Retrieved on February 27, 2007, from <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2007/02/weodata/index.aspx>.
- Kim, A. E. (2004). The social perils of the Korean financial crisis. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 34(2), 221-237.
- Lee, H. (1999). Transformation of employment practices in Korean businesses. *International Studies*

- of Management & Organization*, 28(4), 26-39.
- Leigh, P. (1997). The new spirit at work. *Training & Development*, 51(3), 26-41.
- Lewin, R. & Regine, B. (2001). *Weaving complexity and business*. New York: Texere.
- Malone, P. F. & Fry, L. W. (2003). *Transforming schools through spiritual leadership: A field experiment*. Paper presented at the 2003 National Academy of Management, Seattle, Washington. Available from <http://www.iispiritualleadership.com/index.htm>.
- Mitroff, I. I. & Denton, E. A. (1999). *A spiritual audit of corporate America*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Paik, Y. & Sohn, J. H. D. (1998). Confucius in Mexico: Korean MNCs and the Maquiladoras. *Business Horizons*, November-December, 25-33.
- Park, G. (2004). Economic restructuring and social reformulating: The 1997 financial crisis and its impact on South Korea. *Development and Society*, 33(2), 147-164.
- Park, G. & Kim, A. E. (2005). Changes in attitude toward work and workers' identity in Korea. *Korea Journal*, Autumn, 36-57.
- Park, W. & Yu, G. (2002). HRM in Korea: Transformation and new patterns. In Z. Rhee and E. Chang (Eds.), *Korean business and management: The reality and the vision* (pp. 367-392). Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym International.
- Tipton, F. B. (2007). *Asian firms: History, institutions and management*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
- Yim, H. (2002). Cultural identity and cultural policy in South Korea. *The International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 8(1), 37-48.