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At work, be spiritual but definitely not religious!

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Employees forming reflection groups on the meaning of work, managers inviting to practice a minute of introspection before the beginning of a meeting, meditation training... For several years already, the tools supposed to help develop the spiritual dimension of work and professional involvement have been spreading in Western companies.

A simple search on the Internet leads to an impressive number of links to websites of consultants and trainers, as well as a host of press articles praising the merits of the spiritualization of management and workplaces. Yet, at the same time, conflicts related to religious practice at work are multiplying. But then, what spirituality are we talking about?

Spirituality versus religion?

The star these days seems to be mindfulness meditation. This tool of introspection of Buddhist origin would be the absolute solution to the stress and meaninglessness of today's organizations. It is a tool, it must be specified, emptied of its religious substance (a point underlined almost systematically in the advertising arguments of its promoters), "laicized" to be put at the service of the populations of a necessarily secularized Western world. Spirituality in the workplace is therefore in fashion. It would even have become a management tool.

Yet, at the same time, religion in Europe and North America continues to see practitioners and their employers coming before the courts. The balance between the religious freedom of employees and the power to coerce of employers seems to be difficult to find on a subject as sensitive as the expression of religiosity at work. On the one hand spirituality is invited to enter offices and workshops. On the other hand, religiosity, if it is not completely taboo, often poses problems.

Spirituality is not an easy concept to define. Most scientific articles point out that there are almost as many approaches of this notion as there were research studies interested in it. However, we can

identify four elements common to all the many definitions proposed in the scientific literature on this subject: the search for the meaning of life and human activity, the relationship to transcendence, the relationship to others and the quest for happiness.

Spirituality to respond to changes in work?

In the context of professional activity, spirituality would correspond for each person to the contribution of work experience in the construction of the meaning of life.

How can this renewed interest in the spiritual dimension of work be explained? Three reasons are given.

The first would be the loss of credibility of companies' discourse on their projects and their values. This phenomenon is well illustrated by the reactions to the recent Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal.

Companies previously identified by their trade would have become project receptacles whose primary purpose would no longer be to produce goods and services, but to implement business flows to generate value creation. Moreover, the discourse of companies on their values and their commitment to social and societal responsibility would have been damaged by the succession of scandals such as Enron, Parmalat or, more recently, Volkswagen. In this context, people would be pushed to seek by themselves the meaning of their professional activity, in particular by investing their spirituality in the realization of their work.

The second reason would be linked to the transformation of the ways in which people are involved and work is carried out. The activity has evolved towards a functioning centered on teams, situations and reaction to events. Working no longer means simply getting involved in well-defined processes as a body or brain, but often necessitates being creative and reactive, mobilizing emotions, imagination, sociability, responsiveness, etc. Work leads individuals to become involved as a whole person in constantly evolving situations that involve constant interactions with colleagues, customers, suppliers, etc. As spirituality is part of the person, it finds there an entrance door into the workplace. At the same time, it would be a way for employees to cope with increasingly stressful and uncertain work and employment situations.

The third reason is the space that work has taken in people's lives. The places in which individuals could traditionally seek and find meaning in their lives have changed. The family has evolved from the extended model to the nuclear model. Religious practices have become more personal and less communal. Urbanization has distended neighborhood relations. Many people now spend more time in the company with their colleagues than at home with their families. The actual daily working time of full-time employees in Western countries is just over eight hours, while 75% of people see their children for only two hours a day and one quarter for no more than one hour. The workplace would gradually have become the main place of socialization and action, and work would have become the preferred means of seeking meaning in life and contributing to the functioning of the world.

Spirituality, performance and management

While some authors have proposed to use this affirmation of the spiritual dimension of work as a basis for rethinking the ways in which organizations function, the majority of approaches to spirituality at work have focused on the articulation of two ideas:

- The spiritual investment of employees improves their behavior and their work and produces performance;
- The company and its management must encourage employees to invest their spirituality in their professional activity.

According to the most widespread discourse, it is through work that each employee must seek the meaning of his existence and must try to participate, with his colleagues in projects that transcend his action and situation.

Be spiritual rather than religious

Management must create a working situation that is favorable to this investment. But we see three paradoxes in these approaches to spirituality at work.

Indeed, if people are thus invited to invest their spirituality in work, it is however often on condition that the latter does not follow the ways of religion. Religion is frequently associated in the scientific literature with dogmatism, rigidity or proselytism.

In fact, religious behavior is more often illustrated by the wearing of clothing or an object than by proselytism or radical behavior. Yet according to many scientific articles (which are also real pleas for spirituality in the workplace), these behaviors are undesirable within the walls of the company.

The individual would thus be invited to invest himself as a whole person and to mobilize his spirituality... Unless the latter is religious. The case of this one company from Paris visited during one of my researches clearly shows this posture. It provides its employees with a meditation room, but prohibits the practice of prayer. Moreover, its manager recognizes without problem that he systematically tries to discourage any expression of the religiosity of his employees.

The employee, responsible for everything

Starting from the observation that contemporary organizations would be marked both by a loss of sense of work and of the projects to which it contributes, it would be up to people to cure these ills by getting even more involved, and more personally, in their work. To fill the lack of meaning of the activities would thus no longer be the responsibility of the company, but that of the employee. Yet, even if it is legitimate and necessary, profit does not summarize the liberal enterprise's project. The latter is above all to carry out an activity that contributes to the progress of the world by involving employees.

The spiritual dimension of work is linked to the individual's quest for the meaning of his existence, but it can only be achieved if the company integrates the involvement of its employees in the realization of a project. It is then his responsibility to give this project a meaning and purpose connected to the common good.

Formatting and individualism

Finally, mobilizing the spirituality of individuals may produce more normalization than personalization of behaviors.

The injunction to spiritual investment in work outlines a new standard of involvement, both more personal and binding. The person is called to invest his spirituality in his professional activity, but not his religiosity. The tools (meditation, reflection groups on meaning, etc.) and managerial practices that encourage it define the time and form of this investment. Employees are encouraged to seek the meaning of their work, but without questioning the functioning of the company.

The risk here is to come to define what a good or bad spiritual investment is and to constrain the expressions of personalities rather than rethink the work from their diversity. Spirituality is a personal process. Its expression should reveal the diversity of the employee population.

The spiritual dimension of work that the French philosopher Simone Weil had so well highlighted is not a management tool. It is above all a way of defining work as an activity carried out by a person interacting with others to contribute to the functioning and progress of the world.

More than a resource that can be mobilized by management in search of performance, spirituality is an invitation to rethink work and its organization, with the singularity of the human person as a starting point and key concept.

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