DOES REAL LEADERSHIP REQUIRE SPIRITUALITY?

Hilary Jane Grosskopf

In business, we often rely on logic and reason to make decisions.

Logic guides our decisions, our interactions, and our actions. However, as a leader, many decisions about people and approaches to collaboration involve more than straightforward logic. Have you ever found that in order to make the right decision and move forward, you must often defy the boundaries of structure and logic? An element of spirituality is necessary in order to be a successful leader because leaders must acknowledge that we are all interconnected, that we have limitless potential beyond our control, and that the most important decisions involve empathy.

Spirituality is a dimension of our experience that cannot be explained by logic or science; however, it is a powerful and omnipresent aspect of the human existence. Spirituality is the quality of being connected with a human soul rather than physical things or science. Spiritual humans believe that we are all connected and that there is a larger force than physics and science behind the universe and our experience. Spirituality is not a religion; it is guided by practices, not beliefs. It shows through in the decisions you make and the actions you take. Successful leaders embrace spirituality, as well as structure and logic, to move the team and vision forward.

Interconnectedness

Leaders must acknowledge that we're all connected as humans and you can see this truth manifested on a micro level by looking at your team. When a team member comes into work sick, others quickly get sick as well. When a team member operates with an attitude of negativity or animosity in their interactions, the rest of the team is affected, and they communicate with a fearful or negative tone. When one team member arrives at work flustered or upset, it affects the other members of the team. It works the other way too. When one team member has healthy habits like eating greens and drinking tea, others follow. When a team member confidently communicates with a positive tone, others do the same. When a team member arrives overjoyed because they got engaged or just feel inspired, others share this emotional high.

So you can see from these examples, we're all connected in energy on the physical, mental, and emotional level. The same is true with connection to all of humanity. This is why it's important to look at decisions ethically—not just from what is the most good for me, my team, or my business but in terms of what is best for the world at large. Today in business, all decisions revolve around making decisions in the best interest of "the business." It's the most straight-forward and easiest method, because it's all about logic, but it's shortsighted. What leaders often ignore is the fact that making decisions starting from thinking about what is best for "the business" first does not always result in the best decision for the team members, the business, or the world.

So, what is the answer? Which should you prioritize: yourself, your team, the business, or the world? The answer is that leaders must think on all levels, but especially start by thinking through decisions by considering what will maximize the good for the individuals (yourself included), the team, and the world. People—the team members—are what make the business

thrive in the short-term and long-term. When leaders begin with making decisions based on what is best for the people (the individuals on the team, the team as a whole, and customers) this results in better business. Business also depends on resources, so considering the impact on the environment and the world at large is also important. Leaders that want their team or business to sustain and thrive make decisions on behalf of the people and the world and then consider how that will affect the business in the short-term and long-term before making an action plan.

People work for a mission and vision for the world, not a business. A business is really a specific project that (should) makes the world a better place. No matter how large or small, the business actions impact the world because everything is connected. All actions have a reaction. The energy you give another person or the world at large will ultimately come back to you in some form. With access to the Internet and access to world travel, we can see more clearly than ever before how our actions, no matter how far away or seemingly siloed, have impacts on ourselves, our team members, and the world at large.

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Therefore, leaders must want team members, peers, and partners to succeed regardless of the outcome or return on investment to the business because this is how we all reach our full potential individually and collectively. Imagine if others gave you skills, knowledge, and experiences that could be the missing link for you to find your purpose and path toward it. When you give your team members the knowledge, skills, and experiences that enable them to get the work done but develop them as people as well, they become better humans no matter where they go or what they do. This leads to the notion that we are all connected in energy. When you give selflessly because it feels right and because you know we are all interconnected, no matter what business we work for, you will be given to and taken care of in return.

Action: Treat other people as you would want to be treated. Respond to e-mails and calls; don't ignore them. Spend time mentoring team members, giving them skills and knowledge, and giving them opportunities to learn and grow.

Empathy

Leadership requires the ability to be curious about the pain and emotions of others. By ignoring or resisting the feelings of your team members, you're blocking out important information that needs to be released or worked out. By making space for team members to convey their feelings to you and express discomfort, frustration, or constructive feedback, you are moving the team forward by releasing unconstructive energy from your team system. It allows them to release and have new focus for work or new clarity to move forward. They will trust and respect you more as a person for providing a kind avenue to express this pain and release it confidentially.

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When I was a new leader, early in my career, I was asked to take on a new team member as a transfer from another team in the department. My leader, the department director, told me that she would transfer over to my team over a period of two weeks. I welcomed the possibility of managing another team member. I could definitely use some additional help and liked the idea of expanded responsibility. I had some doubts about this specific transition though, from a human perspective. For one, I had been at the company for just four months and she had been there for eight years. Also, our age difference was 6 years; she was 31 and I was 25 at the time. I can't say that I wasn't intimidated by her tribal knowledge and experience. However, I knew I'd have some valuable skills to teach her as well.

During her first two weeks on my team, I felt resistance and a communication block between us. It was like there was something unsaid. I was at a point where I didn't take things too personally, so I didn't think she necessarily had a problem with me, but I noticed she didn't open up to me or make eye contact in our meetings. I invited her out to lunch the following week and she gladly accepted my invitation. We went to an open-air casual restaurant close to the office. We ordered at the counter and sat down across from each other at the table with our water glasses. I said, "So what's up? How's it going to far?" She looked at me with a hesitant smile, looked down, and started crying. I was pretty shocked. I froze for about 20 seconds before walking over to the other side of the table to sit next to her and comfort her. Over the next hour and a half I learned that she had applied for my position as a promotion and got turned down despite being at the company for 8 years. This shocked me. I had no idea. I could understand how this was awkward and even painful for her to be on my team now given the age and experience difference in addition to this background situation. She said she wasn't upset with me—I didn't have anything to do with the decision—but she was upset about the situation and the leadership. She questioned if she should stay at the company at this point.

I saw a core of truthfulness, vulnerability, dedication, and good intentions behind her words and her gaze. My leader had told me that she was an extremely valuable member of the team and the company. The time we spent talking through the issue and the time I spent understanding her perspective allowed me to understand and suggest what we could do to make the situation as beneficial for everyone as possible. I didn't hold power over anyone. I'd help her gain the skills and experience the top-level leadership may have felt she lacked so she could grow and be considered for a promotion in the future. We stayed until we reached a mutual understanding. I received the eye contact and a gaze of agreement and trust.

That lunch wasn't logical or "fun" per se. We could have easily spent that two-hour period at the office keeping up with our ever-growing workload or doing training. She may have stayed at the company for the paycheck despite no one noticing or acknowledging her discomfort. I could have ended the conversation 5 minutes in and suggested she remain under a different leader given her doubts and resistance toward me. However, it felt right to work through it.

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There was potential for connection and human-centered progress there. We returned to the office more aligned. We weren't necessarily more productive in a way we could measure but she remained on the team (long after even I left) and we also became good friends.

Though it's easy to ignore or actually fear confronting the unsaid and the subtle resistance we feel in others, it's essential, and often allows the team to move forward. Stagnant energy was released in order for us both to move forward. The awkwardness and resistance were no longer present and a focus point. This definitely did positively impact our collaboration and productivity but it affected things much larger than that, too. The whole team vibe shifted to a much more positive, radiant place. I can't imagine (and don't want to imagine) what would have happened if we didn't have that lunch, both for the progress of the team and human connection.

Please note I'm not saying that every team member should know the intimate feelings and details of the past of each and every team member in a company. This interaction was not spoken of with the team or others in the company after our lunch. This is often the role of the leader: to practice truthfulness and transparency yet balance that with respect of privacy and anonymity in a way that serves the individuals and the collective peace and progress. I'm also not suggesting that a leader should act as a therapist for team members. This approach to developing empathy in leadership is spiritual with balance of objectivity; that is allowing the team member to express his or her emotions and to help them get the personal support he or she needs outside of work. The leader is focused on cultivating the conditions at work for the team member to feel his or her best and therefore be able to contribute to the whole as well.

Action: Observe your team members. Make time in one-on-one meetings for talking openly about life and welcome questions and suggestions. By empathizing with your team members, you will operate as a more cohesive whole.

Surrendering Control

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As someone with responsibilities and expectations, it seems like a leader should hold control tightly to move forward successfully toward goals. However, leadership is a lot about non-attachment and surrender. Leaders that are control-obsessed or hold too tightly to expectations are ignoring a key human-centered aspect of leadership. This aspect is growth and limitless potential of the individuals and the collective. The simplest example of this is delegation. Leaders must delegate work to team members. Even if you have a very skilled team, you don't have total control over it. Leaders have to trust team members and know mistakes will happen. If mistakes are taken as failures, leaders will never be able to retain or build a strong team.

A larger example of surrender is in allowing people to grow and evolve in their career as well. This includes leaders themselves! After I led a team for about two years, there came a day when it didn't feel right anymore. I had asked to promote my three team members, since they had performed fantastically over the past year, and my request did not get approved. At the same time, I realized that I also felt that a new opportunity was calling for me that I couldn't quite envision specifically yet but it included writing a book. I finally had to listen to this call because otherwise I felt I was blocking a huge transformation and move forward for everyone. I needed to allow this release to happen. So, contrary to logically staying in a stable, well-paying job, I left my job in order to provide the company with budget to promote my team. That's the direction I suggested and it happened shortly after I left. Though transitions and change are hard at first, it was a move forward for everyone. I had to release control over my career and logic in order to move forward in the direction something larger was pushing. It worked out for the best and it was the clear path forward.

Over-planning and over-scheduling on a day-to-day basis also holds leaders back from deeper engagement and potential. Many leaders crave time for "strategy." Really, what they are craving is open time for exploring new potential and exercising their creativity.

Schedules in business are often planned to the minute and days become cycles of to-do lists and operational fires. Leaders often don't have time to stop and think: how could we do this better to put a sustainable solution in place to avoid the fires and issues? This takes leaving open time for strategic thinking, brainstorming, and creativity that don't have a known outcome or ROI. However, without spending the time to explore and invest in a better solution, one will never appear. Therefore, this time for creative thinking and problem solving is the only way to evolve. Creative thinking and strategic time are actually not luxuries but necessities for a company to evolve and sustain in our fast-paced world of business. The person that will come up with the best solution is the one that knows the problem or field best. It is a good investment of time to practice creative thinking and problem solving even when the use of time isn't logical or there aren't proven results. As you practice creative thinking and place your focus on the goal, the solutions come and the results are invaluable.

Leaders largely overanalyze and over plan schedules, goals, and forecasts because they want to achieve outcomes in order to win and to succeed on their terms. However, the reality is that we don't have all the control. It's a fun game to see how closely we can control nature and reality in order to grow a business—and that's largely what the game is—but when we over schedule and over plan, we don't leave room for the reality of uncertainty and unknown potential.

Leaving time for spontaneous connections, exploration, and conversations makes way for unlimited potential beyond expectations or planning.

By overanalyzing, planning, and over scheduling you limit possibility. You actually rule out really amazing things that the universe may have served you beyond what you could have imagined or planned. Leaving time for spontaneous connections, exploration, and conversations makes way for unlimited potential beyond expectations or planning. I'm not suggesting that we drop all the plans and throw the forecast out the window. Even if a natural disaster does happen, it's unlikely and people need plans and collective objectives in order to stay aligned. Though spiritual leaders respond to the moment, they are able to hold a vision and work toward it.

Action: Allow team members to learn and grow. Schedule time for personal reflection, team brainstorming and bonding, and creative exploration. Realize when there is resistance or a new opportunity calling and release control in order to embrace new potential.

# A Human-Centered Approach to Leadership

Spirituality is the dimension of our experience that is free of institutional structures and organization of power. It is what inspires and motivates us at the deepest level, beyond explanation. It is what makes you decide to take one job over the other despite the fact that they pay the same amount and are seemingly equal opportunities. Spirituality is more about practices than beliefs, and so it helps us to find where we truly belong and how we contribute. As leaders, it helps us to define our culture and the practices that truly serve our team or organization.

Spirituality is not the only dimension of experience that matters. We still need structure, especially in business and also in the world at large, to align and move forward collectively.

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However, we need more of a balance. A lack of spirituality in leadership can limit potential and compromise human-centered experiences and actions. If you aren't quite ready to call yourself a spiritual individual, that's understandable. However, notice that these truths could support you, your team, and the world as you continue on your leadership journey. **Consider leading with an open, giving mind, and approach work with curiosity rather than control.** ⌑
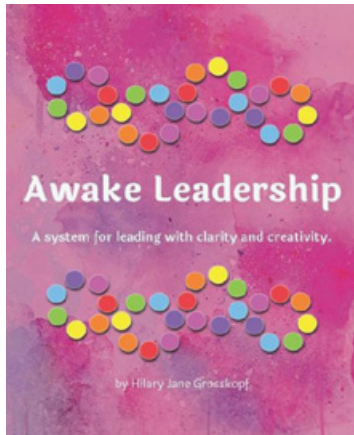
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