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## Spiritual Leadership

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### Synonyms

[Spiritual Leadership](#); [Leadership](#); [Public Administration](#); [Workplace Spirituality](#); [Public Service](#)

### Introduction

Given an environment of seemingly unending crisis, the search for new models for effective leadership in the public sphere has never been more urgent. Cycles of domestic and global recession, international debt crises, multiple armed conflicts, and national and global disasters each challenge the leadership skills of public administrators. Often this calls for continuously improving processes, programs, and partnerships on a very tight budget as well creating, caring, service-oriented cultures for both public servants and citizens. Each of these challenges is a monumental task in and of itself and underscores the importance of identifying and understanding what constitutes effective leadership in public administration (Kellis and Ran 2013; Viagoda-Gadot and Beeri 2012).

Even in the midst of increasing uncertainty and chaos, there is still debate concerning the appropriate role of leadership in the public sector since the profession of public administration has yet to embrace leadership as a fundamental element of successful practice (Kellis and Ran 2013). This is in good part because public administration has traditionally been framed within its historic administrative, political, and legal traditions, each of which has its own view on the place and role of leadership. These distinctions have inhibited a robust exploration of the definition and function of leadership, which has caused the field of public administration to struggle for consensus on whether leadership, except at the highest levels of government, is a necessary responsibility of public sector executives and workers.

There are several reasons for this lack of consensus. One is because leadership has conventionally been portrayed as based in power, charisma, and transformational forces in the public arena (Burns 2009). There are also the assumptions that acts of leadership are reserved for the political elite, legislative representatives, top agency leaders, managers of cities, and other local governmental agencies or any other individuals who are granted political authority to make decisions through the democratic process. Following this assumption, lower level public workers are viewed as technocrats charged with unquestionably implementing the programs and policies resulting from these decisions. Finally, and

perhaps most importantly, the lack of a clear disciplinary home for leadership in general inhibits validating the relevance of leadership in public administration scholarship. How can public administration achieve consensus on a definition and practice of public administration leadership when there is no consistently agreed-upon general definition of leadership and no clear understanding of the boundaries of the leadership construct (Rumsey 2014)?

### **Spirituality: A Foundation for Leadership in Public Administration**

Given the above confusion, what is a logical process by which one may proceed in laying the foundation for a workable model for leadership in public administration? As in all theory building, when there is lack of a dominant paradigm (Kuhn 1970) and constructs are in the concept/elaboration stage of development (Hunt 1999), certain fundamental assumptions must be explicated that serve as theoretical foundation from which subsequent theory may be built. One such assumption for this is that the spirituality that underlies the world's spiritual and religious traditions, which at their core are based on loving and serving others (Fry and Kriger 2009), can provide this foundation. Within this context, "spirituality" refers to the quest for self-transcendence and the attendant feeling of interconnectedness with all things in the universe. The spiritual permeates all actions, including what we think and speak, the way we physically present ourselves, how we enter relationship, and the way we spend our time and money. Although spirituality is most often viewed as inherently personal, it can also reside or manifest in groups and organizations. From this perspective, a religion is an institution which has formed and evolved over time around the spiritual experiences of one or more founding individuals that also provides the context for leadership based upon the beliefs and practices inherent in that religion. Thus religion is concerned with a theological system of beliefs, ritual prayers, rites and ceremonies, and related formalized practices and ideas, while spirituality is concerned

with those qualities of the human spirit such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, personal responsibility, and a sense of harmony. From this perspective, spirituality is necessary for religion, but religion is not necessary for spirituality (Fry 2003). The common bridge between spirituality and religion is that both are based on a vision of service to others through love or other-centeredness as exemplified through the golden rule.

Although an actively researched area, the role of spirituality in the workplace is a relatively new field of inquiry (Benefiel et al. 2014). The extant literature has generally treated it as the missing attribute of both organizational life and organizational effectiveness in the absence of which an understanding of corporate reality remains limited and incomplete. Also seen as essential is a sense of transcendence, of having a calling through one's work or being called (vocationally), and a need for social connection or membership. The most widely accepted definition of workplace is offered by Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003, p. 13):

A framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employees' experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected in a way that provides feelings of compassion and joy.

Workplace spirituality has received some interest concerning its relevance for public administration. Bruce (1999) was one of the first to explore what it means for public servants to not be able to express their spirituality in a workplace where employees are considered, above all, fiduciaries of public money and property and encouraged to be technocrats who, know, obey, and enforce the law in a value-neutral, dehumanized workplace. Others note that there are elements of spirituality inherent in public service as a "calling." Drawing from public service motivation (PSM) theory, Bozeman and Su's (2014) review revealed that the majority of definitions of PSM view public service as a calling that attracts persons more likely to be motivated by intrinsic aspects of work than by monetary awards. Frederickson (1997) refers to the "calling of the public service,"

which is based on benevolence at the heart of the “spirit of public administration.” For Gawthrop (1998), public service is based on duty as a love or an intense inner commitment to a cause that extends beyond the needs of the moment. There is also research indicating that public service employees are more spiritual in their attitudes than others in terms of transcendence, compassion for others, the experience of interconnectedness, and life meaning (Houston and Cartwright 2007).

## Spiritual Leadership

A special issue on spiritual leadership in 2005 in *The Leadership Quarterly* served as a vehicle for advancing the field of spiritual leadership as a focused area of scholarly inquiry (Fry 2005). In that issue, Dent et al.’s (2005) qualitative review of 87 articles led them to propose that there is a clear consistency between spiritual values and practices and leadership effectiveness. In a second review, Reave (2005) argues that values that have long been considered spiritual ideals, such as integrity, honesty, and humility, have a positive influence on leadership success.

A theme emerged from the special issue suggesting that fundamental to both workplace spirituality and spiritual leadership is an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by calling or transcendence of the self within the context of a community based on the values of altruistic love. Satisfying these spiritual needs in the workplace positively influences human health and psychological well-being and forms the foundation for both workplace spirituality and spiritual leadership.

One model of leadership that has been tested widely is based on spiritual leadership theory, which is intentionally couched at the spiritual level so that it can be applied in both religious and nonreligious organizational settings (Fry 2003, 2008; Fry and Nisiewicz 2013). In addition to the foundational assumption concerning spirituality discussed above, the theory also adopts a foundational definition of the leadership construct based on the work of Kouzes and Pozner (2012) who define leadership as the art of mobilizing

others to want to struggle for shared aspirations. Building on this foundation, spiritual leadership involves intrinsically motivating and inspiring workers through a transcendent vision and a corporate culture based on altruistic love. It is viewed as necessary for satisfying the fundamental needs of both leader and followers for spiritual well-being through calling and membership; to create vision and value congruence across the individual, empowered team, and organization levels; and, ultimately, to foster higher levels of employee well-being, organizational commitment and productivity, social responsibility, and performance excellence (Fry 2003, 2008; Fry and Nisiewicz 2013).

Essential to spiritual leadership are:

1. Creating a vision wherein leaders and followers experience a sense of calling so that their lives have purpose, meaning, and make a difference
2. Establishing an organizational culture based on the values of altruistic love whereby leaders and followers have a sense of membership, belonging, and feel understood and appreciated

While there are innumerable theological and scholarly definitions of love, we focus here on a definition based on the golden rule (Fry 2003). Altruistic love in spiritual leadership is defined as “A sense of wholeness harmony and well-being produced through care, concern, and appreciation of both self and others” (Fry 2003, p. 712).

The source of spiritual leadership is an inner life or mindful practice. Inner life speaks to the feeling individuals have about the fundamental meaning of who they are, what they are doing, and the contributions they are making. Inner life in spiritual leadership is a quest for a source of strength that fuels hope/faith in a transcendent vision to love and serve others. It includes personal practices such as meditation, prayer, religious practices, yoga, journaling, walking in nature, and organizational contexts (e.g., rooms for inner silence and reflection) to help individuals be more self-aware and conscious from moment-to-moment and draw strength from a higher

**Spiritual Leadership,**  
**Fig. 1** Model of spiritual  
 leadership



power, be that a nondual being, God, philosophical teachings, pantheistic divinity, or orderly humanistic social system (e.g., family, tribe, nation state) (Fry and Kriger 2009; Fry and Nisiewicz 2013).

Figure 1 depicts how the spiritual leadership model works. A commitment to an inner life or mindful practice positively influences spiritual leadership, which is comprised of hope/faith, vision, and altruistic love. Spiritual leadership then produces a sense of spiritual well-being through calling and membership that, ultimately, positively influences important individual and organizational outcomes such as:

1. Organizational commitment – people with a sense of calling and membership will become attached, loyal to, and want to stay in organizations that satisfy these spiritual needs.
2. Unit productivity – people who experience calling and membership will be motivated to foster work unit continuous improvement and productivity to help the organization succeed.
3. Life satisfaction – people with a sense of calling and membership will feel more fulfilled by having a sense of purpose and belonging and therefore will perceive their lives as richer and of higher quality.

Research on spiritual leadership theory to date reveals that it predicts a number of important individual and organizational outcomes across various countries and cultures. These outcomes

include being positively related to organizational commitment, job satisfaction, altruism, conscientiousness, self-career management, sales growth, job involvement, identification, retention, organizational citizenship behavior, attachment, loyalty, and work unit productivity and negatively related to interrole conflict, frustration, earning manipulation, and instrumental commitment (Benefiel et al. 2014).

### Spiritual Leadership in Public Administration

Scholars have also begun to explore the role of spiritual leadership in public administration. Ferguson and Milliman (2008) discussed the key reasons why most organizations have not developed effective core organizational values and concluded that leadership based on spiritual principles is important as is articulating a higher cause or purpose, being authentic, and being in service to developing and empowering employees. In advocating whole-soul (spiritual) leadership, Fairholm (2004) assumes that people have only one spirit, which manifests in both their personal and professional lives and thus leadership must engage employees at this level. Spiritual leadership from this perspective integrates these two into a comprehensive system that fosters continuous growth, improvement, self-awareness, and self-leadership that links one's interior world of moral reflection with their outer world of work and social relationships. This translates into public administrators who are more organizationally sophisticated, better able to deal with public issues

and policies as well as facilitate success in an increasingly complex world. Recent research by Fairholm and Gronau (2015) focused on the leadership practices of local public administrators and whether they displayed elements of spiritual leadership so that the best in people is liberated in a context of continuous improvement of self, culture, and service delivery. Themes that emerged from their study of municipal managers revealed that what seemed essential from a spiritually sensitive leadership perspective was building community and individual wholeness, fostering an intelligent or learning organization, setting high moral standards, and inspiring others toward service.

Although the research is limited, spiritual leadership theory has received promising support in studies of public sector organizations. A study of municipal employees conducted in a medium sized Texas city, which included different departments such as police, fire department, administrative, parks and recreation, and utilities, found strong support for the spiritual leadership model, especially concerning the role membership plays in positively influencing employee commitment and unit productivity (Fry et al. 2007). An extensive mixed method study of the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL), a public service agency that operated within the further education sector in the United Kingdom, revealed that CEL's CEO and her leadership team exemplified spiritual leadership in action as evidenced by high levels of spiritual leadership throughout the organization. These findings were gleaned as a result of a two-phase longitudinal study on organizational effectiveness and well-being that included administering the spiritual leadership survey to all staff as well as conducting a vision/stakeholder analysis to establish a baseline and raise key issues for organizational development interventions (Fry and Altman 2013).

## Conclusion

Regardless of the current lack of consensus of the value of leadership in public administration, it should be clear that leadership and the importance

of developing effective leaders in public administration at all levels is imperative given the increasingly complex administrative, political, and legal challenges they face. Forces such as generational turnover due to baby boomer retirements at all levels of government and nongovernmental agencies make it all the more critical that developing and nurturing the leaders that will follow them be given the necessary leadership models, methods, and tools to be successful. Most importantly, the current practice must be changed whereby leadership education and development resources are primarily deployed at the executive level with little assessment of the needs of public administrators throughout their careers before they reach such pinnacles of success.

Based on fundamental assumptions concerning the nature of spirituality and leadership, it is proposed that workplace spirituality implemented through spiritual leadership can serve as a model for public administration that will empower public sector leaders to more effectively deal with the daunting challenges they face in an increasingly unstable, chaotic, and frenzied task environment. Given the emerging research on public service motivation and the revelation that public sector employees are more altruistically motivated and have a calling to serve others (Bozeman and Su 2015), it seems logical to adopt a leadership model for public administration that reinforces these spiritual qualities.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Authentic Leadership](#)
- ▶ [Ethical Leadership](#)
- ▶ [Group Leadership](#)
- ▶ [Leadership and Consensus Building](#)
- ▶ [Leadership and Culture](#)
- ▶ [Leadership and Empowerment in the Public Sector](#)
- ▶ [Leadership Development](#)
- ▶ [Leadership Effectiveness](#)
- ▶ [Leadership Models](#)
- ▶ [Leading the Ethical Organization](#)
- ▶ [Managerial Leadership](#)
- ▶ [Motivation and Leadership](#)

- Positive Leadership Behavior
- Public Administration Theory
- Servant Leadership
- Theories of Leadership
- Transformational Leadership

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