



# A Framework for Leader, Spiritual, and Moral Development

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## Abstract

Interest in spirituality in the workplace and in leaders' spirituality has grown in the last two decades, paralleled by the emergence of spiritual leadership theories and research. Despite evidence that spirituality is important to many leaders, the literature fails to adequately address the intersections of spiritual, leader, and moral development. A whole person and integrated approach to these three types of development seems beneficial to individual leaders, businesses, and society. In this article we first review spiritual, moral, and leader development literature. Then, drawing on the theory of being-centered leadership, we present a framework which addresses the parallel and intertwined nature of spiritual, leader, and moral development. Our proposed framework includes markers of the three types of development and is inclusive of multiple spiritual development traditions. Four practices and processes of spiritual development are also explored and related to leader and moral development processes. Implications for theory, research, and practice are presented.

**Keywords** Spiritual development · Moral development · Leader development

## Introduction

Leaders' spirituality has received growing attention in the academic literature since the 1990s (e.g., Delbecq, 1999; Fairholm, 1996; Oh & Wang, 2020), but the nature of leaders' spiritual development (SD) and its relationship to leader development (LD) and moral development (MD) remains minimally addressed. Organizations have implemented interventions to support SD in the workplace, such as mindfulness training, meditation rooms, and spiritual chaplains (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Miller & Ngunjiri, 2016). Taking on a more plural and inclusive nature than previous decades (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012), spirituality has also been integrated into university-level management, leadership, and business courses, and into executive leadership coaching (Allen & Fry, 2019; Delbecq, 2000; Trott, 2013). There has also been a growing interest in the role of spirituality in leadership and business ethics (Anderson & Burchell, 2021;

Craft, 2013). Together these streams of literature highlight a need for greater understanding of SD's, LD's, and MD's intersections.

The purpose of this article is to introduce a LD, SD, and MD framework that extends upon Fry and Kriger's (2009) theory of being-centered leadership (TBCL) and its five levels of being. In the TBCL, each level depicts different worldviews of reality that moves from lower-order stages of knowing and being to higher-order stages, representing different levels of consciousness (Wilber, 2000, 2006). Our framework contributes to understanding of LD's, SD's, and MD's intersection at the different levels of being and is inclusive and reflective of multiple spiritual traditions. Each level includes LD, SD, and MD with corresponding modes of knowing (epistemology) and being (ontology) in terms of truth, justification, self- versus other-centeredness, and what constitutes happiness. The framework supports leaders, and those who aid their development (e.g., coaches, trainers, mentors, human resource professionals, higher educators), in reflecting on the leader's current development level, in planning for further development, and in embracing practices and processes that facilitate the leader's growth. The framework also provides a foundation for further LD, SD, and MD research.

To introduce our framework, we explore the nature of leaders' LD, SD, and MD and introduce the TBCL. We also

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explore the connections between these development types. Next, we offer a framework for leaders' LD, SD, and MD within the five levels of being. We then review SD practices and processes that might impact LD and MD and explore opportunities for applying our framework (e.g., executive coaching, training) before closing with implications and suggestions for future research. This paper, therefore, contributes to understanding of the relationship between SD, LD, and MD, and provides a framework that illustrates how SD can foster MD and LD at the higher levels of being.

## Leaders' Spiritual Development

Spirituality, including religiously-based spirituality, plays a role in many leaders' lives and leadership (e.g., Allen & Williams, 2015, 2017; Benefiel, 2008; Fairholm, 1996; Judge, 1999; Pruzan, 2008). Consistent with a whole person approach to LD (e.g., Campbell, 2007), engaging leaders on the interactions of their spirituality, inner life practices (e.g., mindfulness, prayer), leadership, values, and ethical behavior seems appropriate given the association between these constructs (Reave, 2005). SD and LD seem likely to occur in parallel as individuals mature and are impacted by experiences or interventions (e.g., training).

Tanyi's (2002, p. 506) definition of spirituality aligns with the concept of leaders' SD:

A personal search for meaning and purpose in life, which may or may not be related to religion. It entails connection to self-chosen and or religious beliefs, values, and practices that give meaning to life, thereby inspiring and motivating individuals to achieve their optimal being. This connection brings faith, hope, peace, and empowerment. The results are joy, forgiveness of oneself and others, awareness and acceptance of hardship and mortality, a heightened sense of physical and emotional well-being, and the ability to transcend beyond the infirmities of existence.

The relationship between leadership and spirituality has been widely discussed and investigated (e.g., Benefiel, 2005, 2008; Benefiel et al., 2014; Delbecq, 2008; Fairholm, 1996; Fry, 2003; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Judge, 1999; Pruzan, 2008). Growing research suggests that leaders' spirituality may contribute to leaders' and organizations' performance (Oh & Wang, 2020). This increasing interest has been ascribed to social trends such as greater materialism, leaders' and organizations' ethical failures, and ongoing and continuous change resulting in leaders seeking anchors of meaning, purpose, and connection amidst growing social and ecological consciousness (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013).

Adapting Benson et al.'s (2003) definition of SD, we suggest that leaders' SD can be defined as the process of

growing leaders' intrinsic capacity for self-awareness, either within or outside of a religious tradition or belief system, whereby leaders develop their inner life practice, seek alignment and unity with their higher power, increasingly transcend themselves to become other-centered, and generate and experience meaning, purpose, and connectedness through their leadership. A higher power may be a God or gods, a set of altruistic humanistic values, nature, a benevolent life-giving force, a deep inner self or light (e.g., for atheists), Ultimate Concern, or the "mystery that bears a thousand names" (Allen & Fry, 2019; Bieber, 2010; Delbecq, 2010, p. 191; McGhee & Grant, 2017; Valusek, 2014).

The evident importance of spirituality in leaders' lives suggests that spirituality is a relevant factor in developing and sustaining leadership that is rooted in leaders' *inner* (e.g., joy, peace, and serenity) rather than *outer* (e.g., material or financial success) world (Pruzan, 2008). SD presumes that leaders' inner transformation (e.g., moral development) precedes meaningful outer impacts (e.g., ethical behavior). Leaders often live with the "frantic pace of executive life" (Delbecq, 2000, p. 118), the pressure and complexity of their decisions (Allen & Williams, 2017), and the impact of their actions on others. Their spirituality is bound to their identity and is an inner *place* and source from which deep, profound, and sometimes painful and anxiety-provoking questions of meaning, purpose, values, ultimate reality, and morality emanate (Weinberg & Locander, 2014). The workplace is an implicit and essential outlet for spirituality (for meaning, purpose, and connection or belonging) and a place where leaders may spend much of their waking hours. However, a leader's SD needs may still be seen as something to be pursued outside of working hours (Allen & Fry, 2019).

The spiritual aspects of leadership elude typical scientific and economic rationality and shift the paradigm for identifying leadership's goals. Spirituality places a different emphasis on factors such as identity, purpose, values, responsibility, reputation, and success in leadership (Pruzan, 2008; Reave, 2005). For this reason, as well as the moral benefits of regarding leaders as whole people whose inner well-being, dignity, and fulfillment are valued, leaders' SD is a priority, regardless of any apparent ethical or performance-related benefits to organizations.

Acknowledging a potential shadow side to organizationally-supported SD, SD should not be used to manipulate leaders, to extract more short-term performance, to subjugate individual identity to organizational ideals, or to invade leaders' private lives (Allen & Fry, 2019; Mabey et al., 2017; Tourish & Tourish, 2010). Abusive uses of spirituality contradict spiritual teachings which "urge the practice of treating others with love and compassion: showing respect, demonstrating fairness, expressing caring, listening attentively, and appreciating others' gifts and contributions" (Reave, 2005, p. 657).

Allen and Fry (2019) explore the challenges organizations might face in determining how or if to support leaders' SD (e.g., a leader fails to respect others' beliefs). Miller and Ewest (2015) propose various models for organizations to become faith-safe or faith-friendly, allowing employees to bring their whole selves to work. These models vary according to an organization's support for spiritual and religious expression, and can be applied to leaders' SD in various forms such as retaining a secular or neutral organizational identity, discouraging religious or spiritual expression at work, respecting leaders' spirituality or spiritual needs by tolerating or accommodating expression, or actively encouraging SD as part of whole person LD.

In summary, SD and LD appear to be related and SD may create opportunities to positively impact LD. Organizations might consider a potential role for SD in their LD programs, just as leaders in their own agency should consider the role of SD in their own personal and leader development.

### Theory of Being-Centered Leadership

Fry and Kriger's (2009) TBCL describes five levels of being (ontological levels; nature of existence) and their subsequent ways of knowing (epistemology; how leaders come to know reality) as a spiritual journey that provides the context for effective leadership. The levels emerged from analysis of the ontological paradigms underlying the world's six major religions: Islam, Jewish, Christian, Buddhism, Hindu, Taoism (see also Wilber, 2000, 2006). At each level, the leader's way of knowing the world aligns with their leadership approach and specific leadership theories. Figure 1 displays the levels.

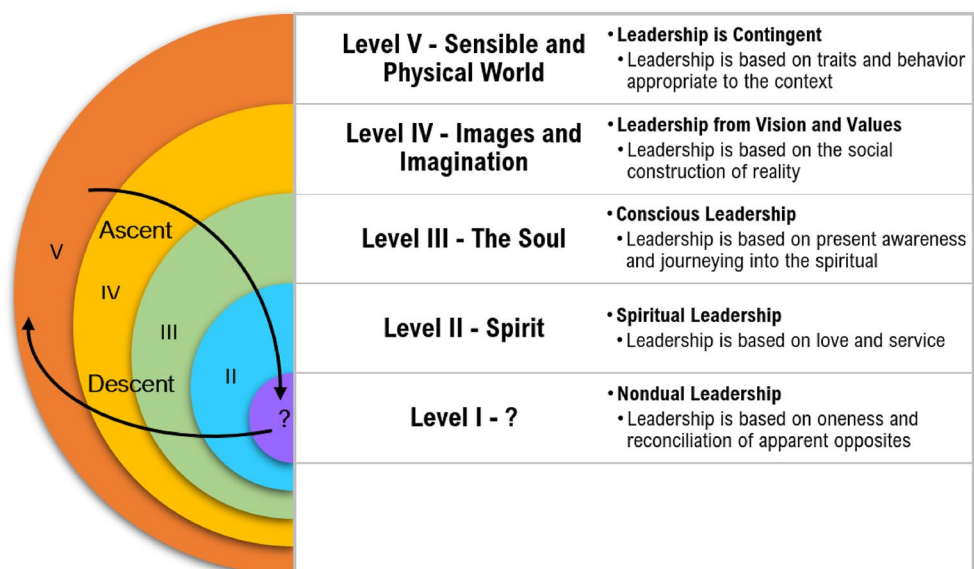
The five levels of *being* and *knowing* can also be used to represent broad stages in a LD journey. An individual's

psychological states, feelings, self-awareness, motivations, moral sensitivities, values, learning system, happiness, and personal theories of what constitutes leadership (including the leader's self-identity and understanding of what it means to lead) are consistent with and appropriate to their level of being. Individuals ascend the levels through seeing reality in new ways (e.g., spiritual awareness) but descend as they attempt to enact their new perspective in reality, with the potential to maintain a higher baseline level over time. Like Kegan's (1982) constructive developmental process, individuals become aware of their once unconscious meaning-making lens that they were subjected to (e.g., becoming conscious of an emotion or need creates some ability to control or influence it).

At Level V, leaders are aware of "the physical or sensible world", at Level IV of "images and imagination", at Level III of "the soul and its content", at Level II of the "spirit", and at Level I of the "non-dual" (Fry & Kriger, 2009, p. 1672). The non-dual awareness implicit in Level I is the center of all major world religions and represents awareness outside of dualities or binaries (e.g., 'us' and 'them'), recognizing the unity and connection of all things and being in unity with one's higher power (Fisher, 2019).

Leaders at Level V have self-concepts and identities that are focused on *having* or *doing*, being grounded in the physical world around them and experienced through their senses. Their focus is on the evidence of success inherent in positional power, such as office location, furnishings, and privileges (e.g., private restrooms). Economic validations of superiority (e.g., salary, stock options) may be excessive and such leaders may be narcissistic, enjoy prominence and publicity, and be unable to accept responsibility for mistakes or failures. Fry and Kriger (2009, p. 1673) contend that Level V

Fig. 1 Levels of being. Adapted from Fry and Kriger (2009)



“is where most current theory and research on leadership has been conducted and written about”. Therefore, LD theories focused on Level V would develop the leader within that level, promoting more material success. In contrast, at Level II and I leaders are self-transcendent with greater concerns about loving, serving, and including others. They perceive the connections between people, institutions, nature, and all other things in the universe. Level II and I leaders steward resources and relationships to serve greater society through their organizational or extra-organizational roles. Serving in leadership roles within specific organizations may only be one expression or a partial fulfillment of their sense of meaning and purpose. Such leaders’ development is internally motivated, rather than determined by the organization’s practices or context.

The full set of levels is discussed further in our framework which is presented after a review of foundational LD and MD literature. It is important to note that Fry and Kriger’s (2009) TBCL is a descriptive theory that emerged from the analysis of the world’s six major religions and did not specifically address SD, LD, or MD or delineate the developmental process, which our framework attempts to do.

## Leader Development Models

LD focuses on individual leaders’ development while *leadership development* expands the collective leadership capacity of a team, unit, or organization (Day et al., 2021). The present article addresses LD. LD models can be broadly classified into those that focus on stages of development (stage-based models), processes of development (process models), and outcomes of development such as competencies (outcomes models), although many models fit all three categories. Given the lack of maturity of empirical LD research (Day et al., 2014, 2021), we draw upon both academic and practitioner-oriented models and literature below.

Stage-based models outline stages through which leaders progress, as demonstrated in models by Bennis (2004), Charan et al. (2011), Dotlich et al. (2004), Lord and Hall (2005), and Torbert (2004). Some reflect the idealization of Campbell’s (1968) *hero’s journey* whereby transformative experiences of diversity (work and life experiences) and adversity (Dotlich et al., 2004) develop leaders’ skills and virtues (McCall et al., 1988), preparing them for future challenges. These models are not shortlists of competencies. Rather they refer to holistic complexes (or strataplexes) of learning, including broad cognitive shifts in “information processing and underlying knowledge structures” (Day et al., 2014, p. 67), as well as identity and MD (Day et al., 2009). Movement through the stages is not always linear or unidirectional, as leaders may regress when facing setbacks or new challenges and contexts (e.g., Bennis, 2004). LD

also takes place within the broader context of ongoing adult development including psychological, physical, moral, and identity-related changes (Campbell, 2007).

Process models examine how leadership is iteratively learned, as exemplified in models by Avolio (2011), Luthans and Avolio (2003), McCall et al. (1988), McCauley et al. (2010), Reichard and Johnson (2011), Thomas (2008), and Torbert (2004). For example, the Center for Creative Leaderships’ model (McCauley et al., 2010) describes a cycle of assessment, challenge, and support driving leaders’ growth. Awareness, through inquiry or assessment (e.g., 360-degree feedback) or natural occurring feedback (e.g., follower mutiny), triggers intentions to learn or change stimulating the development of new skills or perspectives. Leaders thereby come to know their tendencies and limitations, moral compass, and effects on others (Kegan, 1982; Thomas, 2008). Internal triggers, including spiritual awakenings, support more enduring change where external triggers (e.g., performance evaluations) may simply stimulate attempts to satisfy or impress others (Rothausen, 2017).

Outcomes models align to skills and behavioral theories of leadership (Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020) and focus on the development of leadership styles, skills, or qualities (e.g., McCauley et al., 2010). Rothausen (2017) suggests that LD competency lists (e.g., human, conceptual, and technical skills) serve organizations’ needs more than leaders’ needs through emphasizing short-term performance. Such checklists might distract developing leaders from focusing on their inner humanity, including the “common good, morality, and altruistic-love-directed outcomes” (Rothausen, 2017, p. 812). Kennedy et al. (2013, p. 12) state that because “leadership is understood as an emergent outcome of fluid, uncertain, and complex relational situations” between leaders, followers, and situations, LD through simply learning competencies (e.g., certificate programs) is increasingly questioned.

In sum, the categories of LD models demonstrate a pattern evident in SD and MD models, whereby stages, mechanisms or processes, and outcomes of development can be observed. As already noted, SD and LD seem likely to occur in parallel, and SD shows potential to positively influence LD.

## Spiritual and Moral Development

Adapting Mujtaba et al.’s (2011) description of MD, leaders’ MD can be defined as growth in a leader’s moral awareness, ability to determine or intuit right from wrong, and act in a manner consistent with an internalized moral and values framework. MD, therefore, refers to the inner learning and change that ultimately influences outer ethical leadership and behavior. Ethical practice must be founded in a



philosophical framework as “one cannot simply ‘be’ ethical in isolation” (Mabey et al., 2017, p. 760). This framework may include spiritual or religious teachings, another learned worldview such as secular humanism, or can be developed in relationship to one’s higher power.

Religious individuals may be expected to be more ethical due to religious teachings and emphasis on inner morality and outer ethical behavior (McGhee & Grant, 2017; Vitell et al., 2009). However, Craft (2013) identifies a growing realization that spirituality, mindfulness, inner religiosity, and commitment to MD are better predictors (e.g., Fernando & Chowdhury, 2010; Vitell et al., 2009). Consistent with suggestions about the role of SD in MD, Mabey et al. (2017) advance that personal integrity and inner transformation (not external regulation) cultivates a personal spirituality through which ethical leadership becomes possible.

Rest’s (1986) well-known four step model of moral deliberation (awareness, judgment, intent, behavior) suggests that moral action begins with awareness of actions’ consequences including their effects on others. Chugh and Kern (2016) describe a similar awareness concept titled psychological literacy in their model of ethical learning (akin to MD). To the extent that individuals become more aware of their inner thoughts, feelings, being, and higher power, and of others, their capacity for moral awareness and ethical leadership is expanded. A spiritual individual roots their decisions and behavior in their relationship to their higher power and inner spiritual life practice (e.g., meditation or prayer), creating opportunities for moral awareness, reasoning, decisions, and actions. Spirituality in its developed form is not bounded by rational and conscious deliberative decision making but guided by moral intuition or inner awareness and concern for the impact of current decisions or actions on others. This is especially relevant given how decisions and behaviors are often automatic and outside of conscious awareness (DeTienne et al., 2021).

### Moral Development Theories

Kohlberg’s (1981) theory is frequently cited in discussing leaders’ MD (DeTienne et al., 2021) and provides a familiar starting place for examining parallels in SD and MD. Like Socrates, Kohlberg’s theory takes a rationalist approach, suggesting that MD can be encouraged through exploring moral dilemmas. Kohlberg’s three levels and six stages of MD describe a path from obedience and avoiding punishment (typical of young children) through to a law-and-order orientation (typical of most adults). The latter represents a conventional approach where obeying rules is seen as vital to societal functioning. Beyond this conventional approach, abstract ethical principles and values become dominant in the post-conventional moral reasoning level, allowing rules to be challenged when they contradict certain human rights

or deeper values and principles. Kohlberg’s post-conventional level aligns with a shift from obeying moral rules, such as those dictated by a religion, culture, or organization, to a spiritual approach where principles dominate (e.g., love, forgiveness, and humility; Fry, 2003).

While useful as a reference point in MD theory, Kohlberg’s work is not uncontested or the only theory of MD that is applicable in understanding the parallels of LD, SD, and MD. In particular, Gilligan’s (1982) critique suggests that Kohlberg’s model and scale has a male bias, overemphasizing individuality and justice, and failing to account for women’s connectedness and caring. Gilligan’s care theory of MD has been argued and shown to apply to both genders (Donleavy, 2008; Simola et al., 2010). Her approach to MD is applicable to the current discussion in that spirituality is also grounded in caring or love (Fry, 2003) and does not promote dispassionate detachment when engaging in moral determinations or actions. Gilligan’s care theory proposes a developmental sequence from “(1) initial self-concern, through (2) exclusive other-oriented concern to (3) the balanced concern for both self and others” (Donleavy, 2008, p. 810). These MD stages resonate with SD as both allow individuals to become more self-aware and other-centered, and see relationships as central (Donleavy, 2008; Fry, 2003). Care theory is also more situated within real relational contexts rather than abstract principles. It addresses balancing care for self and others in stage 3, starting with those immediately around oneself and within the limits of one’s resources (Donleavy, 2008), consistent with spiritual notions of simultaneous self-care and care for others.

DeTienne et al. (2021) and Egorov et al. (2019) address alternatives to constructive development theories (e.g., Kohlberg, Neo-Kohlbergian theories such as Rest) affirming that not all decision making is rationale and deliberative, and drawing attention to growing arguments and evidence of the affective, intuitive, and automatic nature of moral decision making and action. A continued and sole focus on rational and intentional theories seems unlikely to overcome the moral judgment-action gap or support leaders’ MD. In their proposed four-stage ethical development process, Egorov et al. state that ethical competence is encouraged as leaders become knowledgeable about moral reasoning and moral intuition, learn to be self-aware of moral intuition and emotion, understand moral pluralism (differing moral positions of leaders, followers, and organizational cultures), and then integrate both moral reasoning and moral intuition into their learning and development. Egorov et al.’s (2019) position is compatible with SD in that their description of the process of becoming aware of moral intuitions and emotions is implicit in contemplative spiritual practices such as prayer and mindfulness, as well as in spiritual discernment (discussed in later practices and processes section). Through such development, individuals can overcome the “brain’s use

of subconscious mental shortcuts” (DeTienne et al., 2021, p. 430) to respond to situations that raise obvious or more subtle ethical challenges.

Chugh and Kern’s (2016, p. 474) ethical learning theory describes that ethical learners “possess a central moral identity (they care about being ethical), psychological literacy (an awareness that a gap exists [between their ideal and actual ethical behavior]), and a growth mindset (the belief that purposeful effort can improve ethical behavior).” Their theory denies that perfect ethical behavior is possible (bounded ethicality) but suggests that creating psychologically safe contexts to learn from small failures can advance learning without the threats which cause individuals to engage in self-protective responses to maintain and protect a favorable ethical self-image. In a similar way, SD encourages individuals to examine the darkness within situations and themselves in an ongoing way through spiritual practice, allowing continual learning gains, and making peace with failures. For example, Delbecq (2000) taught his management students to practice the Ignation practice of Examen in which beauty, goodness, and truth, and mischief and darkness are identified in day-end reflections as a means to avoid carrying *baggage* from day to day. In Chugh and Kern’s theory, self-protective mechanisms in response to this baggage has the potential to create a false view of oneself as ethical which cumulatively leads to the denial of unethical behavior and reinforcement of false notions of oneself being ethical, blocking further ethical learning.

DeTienne et al. (2021) summarize a broader range of alternative MD theories including moral identity (e.g., Blasi), domain theory (e.g., Turiel, Nucci, Bergman), moral automaticity (e.g., Bargh, Heide), moral schemas (e.g., Narvaez) and moral heuristics (e.g., Gigerenzer, Sunstein). These theories resonate with the concept that development and developmental interventions cannot rely on the rational models implicit in traditional ethics training or teaching with an emphasis on simply making the correct ethical decisions, but must engage the deeper person (e.g., identity, authenticity, worldview, competing values, learned behavior, affect) as SD implies. In fact, the LD, SD, and MD literatures all describe a role for developmental interventions that bring unconscious (or automatic) motivations, information processing, and actions into awareness, which combined with the ability to determine right action should encourage ethical leadership and behavior. For example, Vu and Burton (2020) discuss Buddhist mindfulness and Quaker discernment practices as encouraging moral reflexivity and awareness. Delbecq (2000, 2013) describes the role of Eastern and Western spiritual practices in developing leaders to live and lead more consciously moment-to-moment, enabling more ethical behavior.

MD theories from Kohlberg and Gilligan through to more recent contributions (DeTienne et al., 2021) highlight the

potential for spiritual awareness and practice to improve leaders’ moral intuition and awareness and ethical behavior. These MD models and theories identify parallel stages, processes, and outcomes that resonate with SD and LD.

## Leader, Spiritual, and Moral Development Framework

Our SD, LD, and MD framework is presented in Table 1, extending upon the TBCL and other concepts already provided. Our framework also reflects notions present in other writings and religious and spiritual development models (Barrett, 2003; Benefiel, 2005, 2008; Delbecq, 2000, 2013; Kriger & Seng, 2005; Weinberg & Locander, 2014). Each level is presented in relation to the ways of knowing and being implicit to the SD levels, indicators of LD and MD, and conventional (for examples see Megheirkouni & Megheirkouni, 2020) and non-conventional LD and MD interventions.

### Nature of the Levels

In the TBCL, each higher level of knowing and being is holistic (Wilber, 2000), meaning it transcends but includes the lower levels of consciousness (Wilber, 2006). Lower levels can be activated or reactivated as individuals ascend and then descend to a lower level, even in a single day (Fry & Kriger, 2009). Leaders experience more subtle (and more complete) levels of being as they move toward and then regress from Level I. Each level can manifest or unfold in any particular activity depending on the level of self-awareness and SD of the individual at that time. More importantly, every individual has all these levels potentially available, independent of their current stage of development, as evident in those who unexpectedly sacrifice themselves for others or experience passing awareness of the unity of all things (Ataria, 2016).

Our framework is most like stage-based models, examining a parallel progression of LD, SD, and MD. However, it also reflects process and outcomes development models. Like process models, the framework centers on awareness as a change, learning, and development catalyst and views spiritual or inner life practices (e.g., meditation, prayer) as essential to the leader’s transformation and progression through the levels (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013). The framework’s development outcomes are not a list of competencies to be mastered but are rather byproducts and mechanisms of SD (e.g., spiritual awareness). For example, while mastering prayer or meditation might be necessary for progression, mastery of these specific skills (e.g., for reducing stress) is not the desired outcome.

**Table 1** Leader, spiritual, and moral development framework**Level V: Contingency leadership based on leader traits and behaviors appropriate to the context**

*Ways of knowing and being:* The leader focuses on the physical and observable world through their five senses. Success is measured materially. The leader creates and transfers knowledge through active engagement in worldly affairs. Comparable leadership theories include situational, trait, path goal, and contingency theories

*LD indicators:* Effective leadership requires developing appropriate diagnostic tools to discern the characteristics of tasks, subordinates, and the organization, and to adapt leadership to produce effective outcomes

*MD indicators:* Level V leaders are outwardly ethical to the extent that it is instrumental to their success and reputation and allows them to avoid penalties or punishment, aligning to egoistic stages of MD evident in Kohlberg's (1981) naïve hedonism and good boy and good girl stages and Gilligan's (1982) self-concern stage. Moral awareness and intuition are likely to be low

*Interventions:* Conventional LD and MD addressing this level focuses on interventions (e.g., training, mentoring) that guide leaders in identifying problematic situations, determining and planning appropriate decisions and behaviors, and mastering certain skills within a managerial discourse that is transactional and results in outer more than inner success. Attaining certificates or degrees may be a mark of the leader's success

**Level IV: Leadership from vision and values based on the social construction of reality**

*Ways of knowing and being:* Leadership involves using images and imagination, such as creating a compelling vision or establishing strong cultural values and symbols, with an emphasis on the subjective experience of individuals and groups as they develop awareness and knowledge

*LD indicators:* Effective leadership creates agreement on a socially constructed reality, motivating followers to higher levels of commitment and performance. The focus is on leaders' legitimacy and vision, as well as the ethical and cultural values which individuals and groups should embrace or reject. Leadership may be self-centered or prosocial. Comparable leadership theories include transformational, charismatic, and leader-member exchange theories. These theories leave open the possibility that the vision and values of self-serving leaders may result in deception and exploitation of followers

*MD indicators:* Level IV leaders contribute to the construction of their organization's ethical norms and values, and appreciate the need for rules and order, aligning to Kohlberg's (1981) law-and-order developmental stage and potentially to Gilligan's (1982) other-oriented concern stage. Leaders' perceptions of what is ethical are typically subjective and based on what is good for the organization (or themselves) but are rule-based and lack a greater social consciousness. However, the leader may show evidence of moral awareness or intuition, seeing what benefit the organization or collective

*Interventions:* Conventional LD and MD interventions at this level clarify the leader's vision and organization's culture and values, and assist leaders in learning (e.g., training, coaching) to unite an organization around a subjectively ideal vision, set of values, ethical code, and culture. Development efforts are predominantly leader and organization-centric but may focus leaders and followers toward higher order and self-transcendent values and purposes. The aim of interventions (individually or collectively) is generally to further the organization's goals and effectiveness (e.g., Charan et al., 2011)

**Level III: Conscious leadership based on awareness of the individual psyche or self in its relation to others and the journey into the spiritual**

*Ways of knowing and being:* Level III is where leaders recognize and commit to the spiritual journey of self-transcendence and interconnectedness. Leaders begin to realize the futility of the leader-centered and materialistically rewarding way of life at Levels V and IV and the lack of meaning and suffering inherent in it. Spiritual awareness may arise from psychological and existential crises relating to the lack of meaning and joy in previous levels of being. Leaders become committed to *being* rather than *having* and *doing*. Level III is the inner life component of the framework which is the source of spiritual leadership (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013). Leaders at this level are not continually focused on the past or future but are able to be in the moment (sometimes termed mindfulness or presence), aware from moment-to-moment of all of their experiences, thoughts, feelings, and body sensations. They experience the soul (Fry & Kriger, 2009) as separate from the fleeting and distracted nature of the mind and senses. Self-awareness and self-transcendence begin to emerge and become more dominant. Each of the major spiritual traditions of the world proclaim that without this level of conscious spiritual awareness, an individual will perceive themselves simply as the sum of their individual thoughts, feelings, emotions, and body sensations (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Kriger & Seng, 2005). Comparable leadership theories include ethical, authentic, and relational theories

*LD indicators:* Leaders cultivate a spiritual practice (e.g., daily routine of prayer, meditation, reading, or similar action) dedicated to self-transcendence that focuses more on enlisting and leading others than simply coping with them. This level results in communication based on cultivating universal spiritual values that are common to the world's spiritual traditions (e.g., love, respect, humility, honesty, compassion). This practice, which is foundational to a leader operating at Level II with consistency, is the source of hope and faith in a transcendent vision of serving key stakeholders through altruistic love (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013)

*MD indicators:* Level III leaders have expanded moral awareness, reasoning, and intuition through their awareness of their self, the spiritual dimension of self, and others. They are increasingly likely to focus on justice, mercy, forgiveness, relationships, care, and altruistic values in both conscious and unconscious decisions and behavior. Aligned with Kohlberg's (1981) social contract development stage and Gilligan (1982) balanced concern for self and others, their emerging moral and spiritual reflexivity (Egorov et al., 2019; Vu & Burton, 2020) allows them to look beyond rules and their own viewpoint or culture to principles and values, including recognizing when rules must be resisted or changed. The leader's growing spiritual practices strengthen awareness of moral emotion and intuition, and their higher power, giving them access to recognize and influence more subtle and unconscious influences, schemas, and habits. They are also increasingly able to confront ethical failures, supporting ethical learning (Chugh & Kern, 2016). Failure to maintain humility, to accept ethical failures, and to perceive contradictions between their moral self-image and actual behavior may derail their MD (e.g., religious piety)

**Table 1** (continued)

*Interventions:* Conventional LD and MD interventions addressing Level III might target psychological approaches to enhancing awareness including mindfulness, perspective taking, role-playing, ethical dilemmas, sensitivity training, or psychometric tests that build awareness of self-relative to others (see psy expert discourse in Western, 2017). Some experience-based LD assignments (McCall et al., 1988; McCauley, 2006), as well as naturally occurring experiences and spiritual crises, such as bereavement (e.g., Thomas, 2008), may result in suffering and deprivation, bringing similar moral and self-awareness and reduced egocentrism. Non-conventional interventions help leaders to learn spiritual practices (e.g., meditation, prayer) that cultivate the spiritual awareness needed for passage to Level II. However, inclusion of such practices in LD or MD are likely to be more common in faith-based organizations and personal learning outside of the workplace (e.g., reading, workshops, religious teaching)

#### **Level II: Spiritual leadership based on love, service, and presence in the now**

*Ways of knowing and being:* Building on Level III's commitment to more consistently love and serve others through self-transcendence and deepening connectedness with all things in the universe, Level II leaders more readily and consistently seek to understand and empathize with stakeholders' perspectives and respect their opinions and dignity as human beings

*LD indicators:* Leaders at this level do not feel threatened by other cultural standards or different religions (Delbecq, 2008), experiencing inclusion and diversity as another way of expressing people's similarities and unity as human beings on a spiritual journey. For example, in Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama emphasizes that when contingent differences are removed, all people are essentially the same (Goldman-Schuyler, 2012). Leaders at this level see themselves as stewards of resources and relationships (Delbecq 2004). The Level II leader's social identity is rooted in inclusion of the other. The leader's service extends beyond the boundaries of the organization and its mission to serve greater society and steward the natural resources (e.g., corporate social responsibility, sustainable development, and voluntary service). Their development is no longer controlled by or focused on just the immediate organization; the quality of their leadership is a consequence of their development as a spiritual person. Comparable leadership theories include spiritual, Ubuntu, and servant leadership

*MD indicators:* Level II leaders exhibit the beginnings of post-conventional moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1981) through their application of principles, such as basic human rights (e.g., life, liberty, and justice) that transcend cultural, religious, or institutional rules or regulations. Their care for others extends beyond those in their immediate surroundings toward the greater community (Gilligan, 1982). Their decisions and actions are guided by their spiritually contemplative lifestyle, a desire to serve, and awareness of the connection of people, community (Grandy & Sliwa, 2017), the natural world, and their higher power in the past, present, and future, which creates a sense of responsibility and investment in cultivating loving relationships

*Interventions:* Conventional LD and MD interventions that might indirectly and unintentionally address this level of SD include LD outplacement assignments that embrace service to others (e.g., nonprofit board service, voluntary community service), extended immersive cross-cultural assignments, and Foucauldian postmodern confessionals (e.g., executive coaching) venturing into leaders' personal hopes, dreams, desires, and anxieties (soul guide discourse, Western, 2017). Non-conventional and extra-organizational interventions that may impact the leader's SD on both Levels III and II of the journey of self-transcendence include efforts to maintain and expand spiritual practices and self-care (e.g., spiritual retreats and workshops, fasting, solitude, simpler living styles), the support of spiritual directors and companions (e.g., Allen & Fry, 2019; Benefiel, 2008), or spiritual group mentoring (e.g., Delbecq, 2013)

#### **Level I: Non-dual leadership based on oneness and constant reconciliation of apparent opposites**

*Ways of knowing and being:* Leaders at Level I perceive a transcendent unity. It is an ideal stage of being that is more aspirational, suggestive of a post-conventional morality (Kohlberg, 1981) that is not just rational but reflects in transformation of the leader's being and realized ability to connect and care for others (Gilligan, 1982). Few, if any, Level I leaders reside or work within organizational contexts. The world's wisdom traditions refer in one way or another to this level of being as so inclusive that it contains both pure emptiness and pure fullness or completeness. It is the recognition of the unity of all things in and with one's higher power that transcends the dualism characterizing conventional patterns of thinking and being (e.g., *us* and *them*, *within* and *outside* the organization)

*LD indicators:* The goal of this level is the transcendence of all opposites (dualities) and the realization of self-actualization. Separations dissolve and there is no distinction between the leader and the led. The leader responds to each situation moment-to-moment within a unique context and configuration of forces. Few leaders ascend to this level for extended periods of time, but examples include Jesus, Buddha, or Krishna. No specific leadership theories capture this level. However, many of history's greatest leaders exemplify it through their post-conventional morality, compassion, wisdom, and ethics. Furthermore, the highest ideals of values-based leadership theories (e.g., spiritual, transformational, servant, ethical, and authentic) might be a partial reflection of leadership at this level

*MD indicators:* Perceiving the transcendent unity of all things, leaders at Level V epitomize post-conventional moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1981), mastery of their moral intuition and emotions (Egorov et al., 2019), and love and care for all (Gilligan, 1982), with the wisdom gifted by their spiritual journey and higher power. Their awareness of ultimate reality, beyond culture, time, and self, define their perceptions of what is good

*Interventions:* As Level I is the ultimate level of development, there are no LD interventions that apply to this level. Leaders at this level seek wisdom from many sources including wisdom texts, their higher power, and their trusted advisors. However, Level I leaders are also teachers, where teaching and learning are intertwined and unified

The highest levels represent a state of being rarely achieved and exemplified in leaders such as Jesus or Buddha, who demonstrate universal concern for mutual respect and love, transcending the confines of specific cultures. Like models of LD such as Bennis's (2004) or Clinton's

(2012), leaders in Level III and II may seek to share their learning through mentoring others and establishing institutions (e.g., creating institutions of learning, social movements) that support learning, dignity, connection, unity, and universal human rights. The highest levels reflect the



MD ideals of Gilligan's (1982) balanced concern for self and others (addressing the *inner* and *outer* simultaneously), as the leader becomes progressively unbounded from societal norms and more expressive of love and unity, and Kohlberg's (1981) post-conventional morality (universal ethical principles).

While the term *level* implies a progression and that those closer to Level I are more advanced, Perrin (2007) and Gollnick (2005) question the generalizability of stage-based SD models, highlighting the cultural context and highly subjective and personal nature of SD. Like Perrin and Gollnick, we see the framework as a way of organizing information into patterns that provide a metaphorical and subjective guide, noting that movement through the levels is an iterative progression that is not unidirectional. Individuals progress by iteratively moving toward (and away from) Level I through a journey to greater depths of humility and surrendering one's self-will to one's higher power. Fisher (2019) discusses how stage-based SD models in the Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and Buddhist traditions are assumed to be non-linear and how individuals may travel between the stations in a unique order or *path*, depending on their circumstances and SD needs. Hence, the levels are not a measurement framework but rather as a guide for reflection and goal setting.

The framework recognizes that as leaders move through the levels, even transiently, it is only at Levels II and I that they experience self-transcendence, and in doing so, discover more meaningful, purposeful, relational, and ultimately connective ways of seeing the world and being in it. The levels are not a prescriptive set of steps to check off but are discovered and experienced as the leader develops their inner consciousness (Wilber, 2000) and moves beyond self-centeredness. Based upon SD writings and traditions, it is then possible to identify inner life practices that are relevant to leaders' contexts that support their SD, resulting in similar and desirable changes in their LD and MD.

## Processes and Practices for Spiritual and Moral Development

Leaders' SD can be enhanced through self-chosen interventions and experiences (e.g., development assignments), as well as externally imposed circumstances or experiences (e.g., life's hardships). Organizations can assist through providing access to SD opportunities (e.g., executive coaching with spiritual component) that support whole person LD (Allen & Fry, 2019) and MD. While some practices and processes are mentioned as examples in Table 1, below we explore four specific practices and processes in more detail, drawn as examples from the literature and contextualized in our framework. *Spiritual direction*, *contemplative practices*, and *discernment* are SD practices and processes evident in

multiple spiritual traditions, including secular humanism. *Spiritual crises* are not self-chosen experiences but are periods of spiritual anguish which can be embraced in terms of harnessing the experience for development (Benefiel, 2008). These practices and processes are likely to concurrently support LD and MD as previously discussed and illustrate some of the interventions, processes, and experiences of SD.

Many LD and MD interventions (e.g., training workshops or certificates) align with modern obsessions with formal learning that promise to accelerate development and external success, and to target organizations' immediate problems (Egorov et al., 2019; Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020). However, SD requires readiness, practice and experience, and embracing new ways of knowing and being that do not follow any standard time frame and are sometimes opposed to the worldly norms endemic to Levels V and IV. The four practices and processes discussed may involve others (e.g., mentors) who provide guidance from spiritual traditions by sharing knowledge and experience, but the actual inner transformation is a personal journey that others cannot control or take on behalf of a leader (Rothausen, 2017; Weinberg & Locander, 2014).

## Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction has a long history in all spiritualities and religious which reflect similar themes of spiritual friendship and growth goals in the leader's relationship with their higher power (Delbecq, 2004; Marby, 2014). Marby explores the history of spiritual direction in religions from African spirituality to interfaith, humanist, and eclectic worldviews. Seeking spiritual guidance or direction is, therefore, an age-old and diverse practice. Like coaching and counseling, spiritual direction is typically a one-on-one facilitative and dialogical relationship between a spiritual director, as a guide on spiritual experiences, traditions, and practices (e.g., prayer), and a directee, as a person seeking SD, usually within a specific faith tradition (Allen & Fry, 2019). Spiritual direction reflects each religion or worldview's unique rituals, vocabulary, philosophies, and theology.

Spiritual direction in a LD or MD context is not a conventional intervention. Like discernment and contemplative practices (discussed below), it may be unusual as an organizationally sponsored intervention outside of religiously oriented institutions (Allen & Fry, 2019). However, with the growing acceptance of spirituality as a relevant issue in the workplace (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013), the notion that employees and leaders need spiritual support and desire to integrate their spiritual selves into work and leadership roles is gaining recognition. Within our framework, spiritual direction can assist leaders with awakening to their spiritual nature (Level IV moving into Level III) or with seeking the wisdom of those with experience, insight, and knowledge

of SD paths (Levels III and II). Spiritual direction can also occur through spiritual friendship, mentoring, and companionship (Benefiel, 2008; Weinberg & Locander, 2014) or through group-level spiritual mentoring (Delbecq, 2012). Allen and Fry (2019) advocate that executive coaches can fulfill the basic functions of spiritual direction under specific conditions (e.g., privacy, confidentiality), such as reflecting on and assessing leaders' spiritual well-being, introducing inner life practices (e.g., mindfulness), and providing referrals to resources or communities for further support. However, true spiritual direction goes beyond what coaching typically allows and might be privately sought or supported by organizations, including through workplace chaplaincy programs (Miller & Ngunjiri, 2016). Spiritual direction does not directly aim to improve moral awareness, intuition, or action, but its implicitly reflective nature and the resulting spiritual growth should enable LD and MD.

### Contemplative Practices

Contemplative practices foster the conscious spiritual awareness inherent to Level II. Delbecq (2000, p. 122) expresses that when leaders enter the contemplative space, they “relinquish [the] pretense that the ego and intellect could resolve the many spiritual issues that power and wealth create for senior business leadership”. Examples of contemplative practices include meditation, prayer, yoga, journaling, scriptural readings, creating art or music, solitude, silence, pilgrimage, service, fasting, and other forms of self-denial and asceticism (Delbecq, 2008, 2010; Dhiman, 2019; Perrin, 2007; Rothausen, 2017).

In contemplation, a leader begins to nurture a spirituality that facilitates more refined programs of change and transformation which may redefine the leader's individual and social identity (including moral identity). Contemplative practices allow exploration of self-limiting emotional schemas for happiness from childhood that are based on needs for survival, security, affection, esteem, power, and control, as well as over-attachment to or over-identification with any particular group or culture (Keating, 1999). Through such changes, questions or issues such as the leader's agenda, predispositions, prejudices, fears, and sources of anger are addressed. This inner realignment process is painful but is described as *necessary suffering* (Fisher, 2019).

Leaders in Levels III and II must develop and refine the ability to be aware of the present moment by withdrawing attention from past memories based in anger and resentment, as well as future imaginings that produce worry and fear (Delbecq, 2008; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013). In doing so, leaders are more able to be in touch with subtle feelings and intuitions supporting a better understanding of organizational contexts, followers' needs, and moral issues (Egorov et al., 2019). Conscious awareness is thus a process of

waking up and being present, moment-to-moment, and then forgetting in order to discover new insights and possibilities (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Vu & Burton, 2020). This awareness awakens a capacity to live more wisely, lovingly, and fully (Delbecq, 2008).

While contemplative practices (e.g., meditation) are well described in spiritual writings, they are not just about mastering techniques but rather about being transformed by them. Leaders' SD requires mastering contemplative practice in the face of boredom, crises, and perceptions of failure, learning to persist and regularly use the practices, understanding the practices within the values, tenets, and community of one's worldview, spirituality, or religion, and interpreting the practice's outcomes (e.g., how journaling influences perceptions of one's failures as a leader).

There is little evidence in the literature that contemplative practices are common in conventional LD or MD programs, but including such practices is discussed in the literature (e.g., Allen & Williams, 2015; Delbecq, 2000, 2010; Dhiman, 2019; Grandy & Sliwa, 2017; Vu & Burton, 2020). Mindfulness is increasingly being introduced into business schools (e.g., Sanyal & Rigg, 2020) and leadership training (Reitz et al., 2020). Contemplative practices can also be fostered in coaching (Allen & Fry, 2019). Contemplative practices such as mindfulness can facilitate moral reflexivity and enable responsible and ethical action (Vu & Burton, 2020). Delbecq's (2000, 2010) elective MBA course and Trott's (2013) praxis with working adult students provide models for teaching contemplative practices in pluralistic leadership training and higher education programs.

### Discernment

Discernment focuses on recognizing the spiritual or ultimate meaning of events and circumstances in individuals' lives, discerning good impulses and choices from bad, and is grounded in the basic intention to love and serve others (Delbecq, 2004) consistent with a care ethic (Gilligan, 1982). Koenig (2014, p. 237) characterizes discernment as:

A process that encourages seeing clearly enough to make well-considered decisions which take into account and integrate the multiple dimensions of life, i.e., intellect, affect, body, relationships, principles, values, work, income, expenditures, play, creativity, religious community, etc., with a particular concern for God, transcendent reality, or a unique system of values.

Discernment is achieved through inner reflection, spiritual reading, contemplative practice, or consulting one's spiritual community or peers. Focal dilemmas or decisions might include business, ethical, personal, or vocational choices. Discernment seeks to overcome false separation

of the sacred and worldly, enabling freedom from subtle influences that distort strategic decision making for leaders and organizational stakeholders, thereby facilitating ethical behavior (Delbecq, 2012). Discernment-like practices appear in all major spiritualities and religions (Bieber, 2010; Dhiman, 2019; Koenig, 2014).

Calling can be defined as, “a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation” (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 427). A leader’s calling and vocation, as one example of discernment, can be explored through discernment. This is especially relevant to Level III, where issues of meaning and purpose arise.

Contemplation plays an important role in discernment as a means to mute egoic, self-centered impulses (e.g., fear, anger, hubris, greed, anxiety), as it requires being present in the moment and open to what is transcendent in the situation, enabling leaders to reflect deeply on their motivations (Bieber, 2010; Delbecq, 2008; Koenig, 2014), akin to Egorov et al.’s (2019) moral intuition and Vu and Burton’s (2020) moral reflexivity. Delbecq et al. (2003) note similarities between discernment and current decision theory, although discernment goes beyond the rational by embracing the affective, intuitive, and even mystical. Discernment emphasizes a culture of engagement with internal and external stakeholders, the need for openness and safety in sharing information, inclusive listening, aspirations for more creative and courageous outcomes, process norms intended to inhibit undue haste, and reflexive moments for verification. In many spiritual traditions, discernment is practiced through individual contemplation, group prayer or ritual, and communal discussion (Delbecq, 2000; Vu & Burton, 2020).

Discernment is clearly discussed in a leadership and organizational context within Christian traditions (e.g., Benefiel, 2005; Delbecq et al., 2003) and evidence of the same intersection of decision making, spirituality, and leadership is evident within other traditions (e.g., Dhiman, 2019; Sidani & Al Ariss, 2015). Vu and Burton (2020) suggest that Buddhist mindfulness, which we have described above as a contemplative practice, and Quaker discernment practices both support managers’ moral reflexivity and self-transformation in a business context. Teaching discernment is not typical in conventional LD or MD programs. However, in reaching and moving beyond Level III, leaders require the ability to integrate spiritual awareness into their leadership. Development toward Level II prescribes a greater awareness, interconnection, and service of others which can be supported through discernment practices that ground decisions and plans in stakeholder-consciousness and altruistic values. Discernment can be incorporated into spiritual direction, friendship, mentoring, and coaching (Benefiel, 2006; Delbecq,

2010, 2012; Delbecq et al., 2003). Delbecq (2000, 2010) provides a model by incorporating discernment practices into his MBA courses, including Lakota Sioux practices of listening to the voices of future generations when considering decisions that might affect them (e.g., corporate social responsibility).

## Spiritual Crises

Spiritual crises are periods of desolation that are so disconcerting that they have been called the dark nights of the soul (Perrin, 2007). Individuals experience a spiritual void, feelings of abandonment by their higher power, the loss of gifts (e.g., peace, prosperity), and fruitlessness from spiritual practice (Benefiel, 2008). The dark nights, labeled by Christian mystic and poet St. John of the Cross (Perrin, 2007), are also called “the shaman’s sickness, the spiritual desert” and spiritual emergencies (Ataria, 2016, p. 337). The spiritual crisis experience is paralleled in many religions and spiritualities, suggesting universality (Fisher, 2019).

Dark nights reflect an eruption of a deep sense of meaninglessness and spiritual isolation, where individuals may grieve their own nature (Perrin, 2007). Perrin (2007, p. 254) notes, the “natural light of one’s own capacity to know and make sense out of things no longer functions in any familiar way”. However, the dark nights’ ultimate role is spiritual purification and detachment from worldly perspectives, dependencies, and limited understandings of one’s higher power. Like Thomas’s (2008) crucibles of leadership, Islamic Sufi traditions use the metallurgical analogy of purification of the heart through love during the dark nights (Fisher, 2019). St. John describes a three-way path for spiritual transformation, including the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways, each punctuated by a dark night experience (Perrin, 2007).

*The awakening or purgative way.* The dark nights can be depicted through the levels of knowing and being, beginning when leaders at Levels V and IV become aware of a spiritual reality and seek the consciousness of being in Level III. This phase is titled the awakening (Benefiel, 2005) or purgative way (Perrin, 2007) and assists the leader in overcoming dependence on their senses, rational mind, and the material world (Fisher, 2019). The leader recognizes the need for a relationship with their higher power or for a spiritual life. They perceive a higher power who gives good gifts (spiritual and material gifts such as hope or opportunity) and a spiritual path that adds a dimension to life. However, they may still suffer from previous addictions and attachments. After a time, spiritual gifts begin to disappear as the individual must mature beyond dependence on such rewards. This brings confusion as inner life practices (e.g., prayer) that once brought reward remain fruitless. In frustration some may abandon

their spiritual quest (Benefiel, 2008). Despite this first dark night's turmoil, on the outside the leader may be acting with greater integrity, charity, and forgiveness (Perrin, 2007) as evidence of MD.

*The illuminative way or recovery.* Entering the illuminative way or recovery, leaders learn that the spiritual journey enables their transformation and they embrace contemplative practice, enter silence, and listen more (Benefiel, 2005, 2008; Perrin, 2007). They commit to the Level III way of being: striving to transcend the self-centered ego to become more other-centered (Barrett, 2003). In a second dark night (Benefiel, 2008), contemplative practices no longer succeed, their higher power seems distant, and new paths seem blocked. The leader then learns to simply desire to be connected or in union with their higher power, rather than seeking the rewards of the awakening or purgative way.

*Unitive way or dawn.* Ultimately, through perseverance and grace (unearned inspiration, strength, forgiveness, or gifts), the leader enters the unitive way or dawn (Benefiel, 2005, 2008; Perrin, 2007). The inner spiritual transformation in this stage is sometimes compared to psychotherapy's outcomes, transformational learning experiences, and post-traumatic growth, which represent existential crises leading to deep inner changes and create new lenses on the world (Ataria, 2016; Fisher, 2019). Shifts in priorities and values provide new reference points for ethical awareness and judgment. The leader may begin to experience the reality of Level II and briefly perceive the connection or union of all things at Level I (Fisher, 2019; Fry & Kriger, 2009). Leaders may also experience this state briefly and return to ego-centered Levels V and IV. Leaders committed to the spiritual journey learn to live more frequently and fully in this place of letting go and being. The result is other-centeredness and connectedness (Perrin, 2007), allowing leaders to become more energized, joy-filled, persistent, and productive. McGhee and Grant (2017) suggest such fulfillment aids ethical action.

During the spiritually dry periods of spiritual crises, spiritual directors, friends, mentors, or coaches can counsel leaders by providing reflective and emotional support (Allen & Fry, 2019). A spiritual director or pastoral counselor with knowledge of spiritual crises may provide insight and assist in reflection on the transition. The transformation results in a focus on the outer world after the inner world becomes more integrated (Weinberg & Locander, 2014). Leaders may consequently reform their leadership style and organization (e.g., more ethical and stakeholder-centered policies), requiring support of leadership trainers, coaches, and consultants for both the leader's and organization's development (Benefiel, 2008). Conventional LD and MD do not address this process in training or education. However, organizations can consider a role for coaching, mentoring, and chaplaincy support (Miller & Ewest, 2015; Miller & Ngunjiri, 2016).

## Discussion and Further Research

With the growing interest in the intersection of spirituality, leadership, and ethics, this article has reviewed and integrated the literature on LD, SD, and MD, recognizing that these forms of development have largely been addressed in separate bodies of literature. Delbecq (in Allen & Williams, 2017) noted that about 80% of leaders in most surveys see spirituality as important to their leadership (see also Allen & Williams, 2015; Judge, 1999). Therefore, while secularization has contributed to the privatization of faith and spirituality in the West (Ewest, 2015), the integrated nature of LD, SD, and MD must be recognized.

Our framework extends the TBCL (Fry & Kriger, 2009) by proposing that the five levels of being can be applied as a framework for understanding, tracking, and guiding leaders' LD, SD, and MD. Four SD practices and processes were elucidated illustrating the mechanisms of leaders' SD, as well as how their SD can be encouraged and supported. Our framework addresses a void in the literature, supporting further research. It offers a foundation for ongoing development of integrated theories and models that consider the whole person. Our framework also aligns with trends (e.g., Kennedy et al., 2013) in LD and leadership theorizing that emphasize the emergent, relational, collective, personal, complex, and contextual nature of leadership through focusing on the leader's ability to be aware of others, to be ethical, to expand one's lens on the world, to focus on connections and belonging, to overcome dualisms like leader and follower, and to give expression to personal meaning and purpose.

Although the TBCL (Fry & Kriger, 2009) has been widely cited, we are unaware of any studies applying or validating this theory. Given the subjective and experiential nature of SD, future qualitative studies might attempt to validate our framework and provide more nuanced narratives of development paths from the perspective of leaders from different spiritual traditions, testing the framework's applicability across religions, cultures, and contexts. Research examining the outcomes of the four SD practices and processes for LD and MD is also needed. Further empirical studies are also needed on how leaders and organizations view the benefits and hazards of engaging in leaders' SD. Quantitative studies examining the relationship between the SD stages, leadership effectiveness, and ethical behavior can validate the importance of SD for LD and MD.

The framework's levels can be used by leaders and LD and MD practitioners for reflection on current and future development stages, answering questions like: What is my current and next stage of development? What practices and processes might support me in furthering my



development? The framework also provides guidance on practices, processes, and outcomes that may be helpful in applied contexts such as in coaching and mentoring, higher education, training, designing developmental assignments (e.g., cross-cultural assignments), organization-wide spiritual support (e.g., chaplaincy, meditation workshops and facilities), and integrated development programs.

## Conclusion

Approaches to LD and MD that overlook spirituality's essential role in leaders' worldviews, needs, development, and identities are incomplete. Our framework attempts to further understanding of parallels in leaders' LD, SD, and MD, thereby supporting leaders' growth and examining new pathways for enhancing leaders' inner MD and outer ethical behavior. We have also examined the spiritual practices and processes that aid leaders' SD, highlighting that these practices seem likely to positively impact leaders' LD and MD. Further research is needed to validate the framework and practices through examining leaders' experiences, behaviors, and effectiveness.

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## Declarations

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