

Moving Beyond the "Either Or" of Human Spirit and Profits

Reflections by Dar Gillett



Business owners and corporate executives seeking ways to create sustainable growth and profitability would do well to take a look at a movement that is transforming employees, managers and companies into sustainable high performing winners.

Having just returned from the International Spirit at Work Awards conference in NYC, I saw first hand the power of the Spirit at Work (SAW) movement and including where it's come from, where it is now, and where it might go in the future.

The International Spirit at Work, partners with EBBF, Spirit in Business and the World Business Academy to create the only global partnership dedicated to honoring with an award, companies that have implemented explicit spiritual practices, policies and programs inside their organizations. At this year's conference, nine companies were honored.

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The Spirit at Work movement has come a long way since I got involved back in the early 1980's in a NYC-based organization called The Business Initiative. TBI was dedicated to the view put forth decades ago by the late Willis Harmon (who is also the inspiration for the International Spirit at Work Award) that the business community, with its vast resources and capabilities, needs to step forward and provide leadership in making the world a better place.

As it became clear that one of the major problems facing humanity was not just the physical one of material survival, but also a spiritual one, namely people's spiritual health in the workplace, the movement began to take shape around spirit at work.

At that time, the main argument was: a) People are hurting within corporations; b) Company

management and maybe even the very nature of the modern financially driven corporation - too often stifles the spirit of their people. The dilemma was how to get corporations and managers to allow and even encourage spirit at work.

As far as convincing companies that there was something in it for them to care about their employees' spirit, the argument was fairly weak and even confusing. On the one hand some claimed that if you treated people right, then somehow your corporate performance would improve. If you did good things for your people, then (the argument ran) they would likely contribute more to the success of the company.

On the other hand, some in the spirit at work movement balked at that approach, arguing that we should not taint our argument for improved treatment of people (and the environment) with any claim that it would help improve profits. That was a kind of "selling out".

By this thinking, however, they bought into and contributed to the belief that we could only serve one purpose. It had to be either: serving corporate profits or serving the masses of spiritually oppressed people within corporations.

It seemed "common sense" that investing in the spirit of people would be taking away from the shareholder: profits would likely be hurt by the costs of serving the employees. That thinking has continued strong for decades since then. Even just last year, Charlie Derber, a Boston College Sociology professor, wrote a book entitled: "People Before Profit" as if they were separable. As if it was either-or.

A similar belief plagued early efforts to improve the quality of corporate products and services. In the early days of the Quality Movement, proponents had to deal with the traditional assumption that if you "invested" in creating greater quality, then you would naturally be raising costs - and thus reducing profits. It was a simple (but erroneous) perceived trade off between quality and cost.

The quality versus cost assumption has been proven false: companies who invest in quality have succeeded in actually reducing costs, thus raising their profits because of that very investment. Now, thanks in large part to the International Spirit at Work awards, we are seeing solid evidence

that the same thing is true in the spirit at work dimension as in the quality dimension: doing what's good for people and their souls not only does not hurt the bottom line, it can actually enhance it.

Winners of the International Spirit at Work Award Set New StandardThe winners of the ISAW award are blowing this old "either-or" assumption out of the water. They are not only doing great things for the human spirit of their organizations, but are also directing it toward the purpose of the company in ways that are resulting in improved corporate performance.

The Spirit at Work movement no longer has to argue for improved human spirit solely on the grounds that it's the "right thing to do" for the people. We now have a growing body of examples showing that when a company does invite Human Spirit into the workplace, it can do amazing things for both people and profits. It's the "right thing" to do for ALL the companies' stakeholders. It's good and right for the employee. It's also good for customers and the company - and its bottom line.

Human spirit wants to serve the highest good. When companies have high purposes, they draw forth spirit in spades. Inviting human spirit to serve the highest good, actually generates even greater human spirit and focuses it where it can do good - serving the company's customers and the greater society.

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