

# Spirituality and family business



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Work and family are the two most important aspects of a man's life – work gives meaning to our existence and family shapes our lives.

Family businesses are unique institutions that encompass both these important aspects.

People associated with family businesses play multiple roles as family members, parents, owners, business leaders, managers and members of the community. The overlap can be curtailed but rarely be eliminated.

Teilhard de Chardin has so beautifully stated, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience." How can then one take out this spiritual aspect of our existence from having an effect on the way family and non-family managers decide and behave while playing different roles?

## Spirituality in business

In the business world, competitiveness is associated with profitability. Spirituality, on the other hand, is assumed to occasionally shift the wheels of business into neutral and allow time for a momentary slowing down and reflection period such as during national tragedies and recessionary times. In actuality, corporate cultures that push spirituality to this role dismiss one of the deepest dimensions of the human condition.

Many people find the thought of spirituality in business disturbing and consider it a sensitive and touchy personal issue not to be mixed with business. It has to be left at the company parking lot. For some, it is a weekend affair. They fail to appreciate that the Spirit is not so much a thing, but a system that is of essence to the subject under consideration - "Team Spirit" or "Human Spirit" or "Sportsman Spirit" or "Entrepreneurial Spirit".

## Spirituality

*Spirituality consists of:*

- Understanding the meaning of existence and pursuing the purpose of uniqueness
- Having faith and belief against the odds and overcoming the odds with little feeling of pain and stress
- Discovering the basic nature and dwelling in it - satchitanand
- Deriving the sense of self-worth through personal growth and not through possessions
- Control over the desire for sensuous pleasures and unscrupulous consumption beyond what is necessary for survival – simple living, high thinking
- Complete ownership and responsibility for self – no begging, no bragging, no complaints, no blame
- High self-esteem, respect for others, love for all creatures
- Balance in all situations – no undue bias or preference
- Pursuit of perfection, acceptance of the outcome
- Harmonious existence with enlightened detachment
- A quest – not a destination.

Spirituality attempts to answer bigger issues of life: Who am I? What do I stand for? What is my purpose? How to make my life meaningful? An organization also needs to ask these questions to formalize its vision and values. Family business owners who are spirituality oriented are able to have sustainable all-round growth and harmonious relationship.

## Family business & spirituality

When a family business forms, it brings with it the spirituality (core values and sense of purpose) and the religious beliefs of the founding members. It is impossible to have spiritual and religious beliefs and not let the decision making and actions be affected by them.

Spirituality encompasses all aspects of a family business – family, business as well as ownership.

## The family aspect

Spiritual orientation and practices help in preserving the delicate family fabric and fosters the "family spirit".

- The family that eats together and prays together stays together. Families that pray together spend time together - quality time when the focus shifts from the ego self to a higher self. Studies have found that prayer leads to



intimacy and helps people get closer and can help end disagreements.

- Forgiveness, empathy and gratitude are the outcomes of spiritual orientation and are also the pillars of any relationship. Religious rituals such as celebrating forgiveness day and thanksgiving also help in this respect.
- Spirituality thrives on family rituals that in turn foster unity and integration. Families start looking forward to rituals and they become something that says “family” and “home” to us. Kids love traditions and family rituals, because it fosters a sense of belonging and security. This is the way humans live, celebrate and rejoice. This is also how we pass our values and traditions onto future generations.
- Going on pilgrimage together with multiple generations is a great opportunity for the family to foster the feeling of togetherness in serving the higher authority, i.e., God. It is when children walk along the grandparents and cousins sleep together and share their jokes and experiences that the bonding strengthens.
- Actions speak louder than words. Children learn by watching. Spiritual families have healthy children capable of leading happy healthy lives.

### The business aspect

Entrepreneurship or business is a spiritual journey and purpose seeking process. Spirituality is about seeking meaning and purpose, which come from work and lead us to become true Karmyogis. Given that we spend so much of our lives doing what we do to earn a living, and given that our work is most often the place where we make a contribution to the world, it makes sense to bring spiritual considerations to the way we run our business.

Moreover many new concepts like servant leadership, stakeholder theory, vulnerable leadership, social responsibility of business, triple bottom-line, diversity and inclusion are emerging that necessitate organization with a human face and spiritual orientation.

Employees also seek purpose and meaning and want to work for a cause, not just a living. With empathy, tolerance, charity and practice of other spiritual qualities like integrity, family businesses are able to have

long tenure loyal and proud employees. Due to regular practice of some kind of religious and spiritual rituals, the family and non-family members are often pulled towards the ethical high ground. This also provides them moral reminders that deter them from cheating.

### The ownership aspect

Spirituality oriented family business owners behave responsibly as stewards and trustees, always think and act in the best interest of the family and its business, treat ownership not as a privilege but as an obligation, promote professional management, have the ability to let go, develop other interests and hobbies to keep them productively engaged and focus on their role as entrepreneurs and less as managers.

These owners consider their inherited and created wealth as a loan to be repaid in multiples to future generations – within the family (through estate) as well as non-family (through philanthropic initiatives). There is recognition of an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of family and community.

### Leadership agenda

Family leaders that are spirituality oriented are able to clearly articulate their vision and values; be fair and look fair; learn openly; listen attentively; practise stewardship; appreciate others; gradually detach themselves; develop successors; think

of community development; recognize individual needs; promote community feeling; respect individuality; lead by example; command respect; support the governance process and actively lead through the change process. They radiate trust, excellence, enthusiasm and energy.

The challenge is to preserve spiritual orientation while one is enjoying power and affluence. Maya Angelou so beautifully narrates this plight of human spirit – “..... as human beings become more affluent, as their living standard and style begin to ascend the material scale, God descends the scale of responsibility at a commensurate speed.” ■

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