



PUT YOUR SPIRITUALITY TO WORK

Conversation Starters for the Workplace

3.15 WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW... MAY ENERGISE YOU!

As leaders, we certainly have invaluable experience to offer in our day-to-day leadership. And, we also have the opportunity to tap into an infinite source of energy and growth when we are willing to “not know” all the answers.

SOME YEARS AGO, a corporate executive asked William to coach and do a 360-degree feedback with one of his human resource managers who was having difficulty relating to his peers. The evening before they started their work together, William and the manager met for dinner just to get to know each other. For the first 30 minutes they talked about their backgrounds and work experiences; although William found the conversation interesting, he didn't feel that they were connecting at a deeper level.

So William said, “Up till now, we've talked about what we already know and what we've already done. Let's talk about what we don't know: the mysteries and uncertainties we're facing. What are the things we've aspired to, but haven't yet actualised? What is it that we lie awake at night wondering about?”

This sparked a conversation that was truly provocative and energising. They became so engaged that they both leaned forward across the table, eager to hear each other's next thought. Ultimately, they learned far more about the deeper part of each other, and it gave William an excellent basis for the work they were about to do together.

As leaders, it's easy to fall into the role of being “the expert”, “the one with all the answers”. But with a spiritual orientation, in which we attune ourselves to the mystery of the transcendent, we are able to go beyond this role and become comfortable with – even energised by – the uncertainty of “not knowing” and “letting things unfold”. For example, André Delbecq, former dean of the Santa Clara University School of Business, describes how he embarked upon designing a new course on spiritual leadership for executives and MBA students:

When I began to put together the course, I really didn't know what I was doing. Now this is a tough thing for a senior academic. Your whole sense of self is made up of your expertise. The whole currency is to know all of the answers before you open your mouth. And here I was, entering a field that I was obviously not an expert in.

However, my spiritual path was to give up the need to be the expert and just allow it to unfold, and at this point I had discovered what it meant to surrender. Once having arrived there, it unfolded wonderfully; everything I needed was given to me.

From our own experience, we know that when we face the unknown and don't have "the answers", *fear* can arise – fear of being embarrassed, fear of losing credibility, fear of things turning out badly. We've often seen, in ourselves and others, two unproductive ways that leaders sometimes deal with such fears: (1) they act as if they are "in control"; or (2) they become paralysed.

Ricardo Levy, Chairman of Catalytica, Inc., USA, is one executive who has taught us a great deal about the energising effect of "not knowing". He once told us about the lesson he learned when he faced the realisation that he would need to replace several CEOs he had previously hired to run a few of his subsidiaries:

I began to question, "How should I deal with this?" In retrospect, I could have used one of the more important spiritual lessons that I have recently learned: the ability to quiet the mind and let the unresolved issue sit while discerning the right path. In a strange way, by following my action-oriented personality I ended up being paralysed. If I had been more seasoned in my ability to live in the unknown and accept it, I probably would have made a replacement decision about those CEOs much sooner.

As leaders, we certainly have invaluable experience and expertise to offer in our day-to-day leadership. And, we also have the opportunity to tap into an inner source of energy and growth when we are willing to "not know" all the answers. The French novelist Andre Gide sums it up in this way:

One does not discover new territories without losing sight of the shore for a very long time.

So, ask yourself: *What is one area of my leadership that I could re-energise if I were willing to "not know"?*

This article is an excerpt from the book, *Put Your Spirituality to Work: Spiritual-Based Leaders*. To download the full book of articles, as well as additional book chapters, articles, workbooks, and research on the subject of "spirituality and human values for leadership and work", visit our website: www.globaldharma.org