

*Four Wisdoms:
Reawakening Spirit in Work, the
Workplace, and Workers*

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Reawakening Spirit in Work, the Workplace, and Workers

The sword conquered for a while, but the spirit conquers forever! — Sholem Asch

On a flight home recently, I engaged in a conversation with a CEO of a Fortune 500 company who said he felt like most of the efforts his company had put to raising spirit had not worked. His company had created one of the best reward and recognition programs in the nation. They had tied pay to performance and had state of the art performance appraisal process and training programs. They had flexible work hours, family support programs, and a gym with personal trainers and yoga instructors on site. But instead of increased motivation they had experienced a declining morale across the company. All the models he had been taught in business school, bought from consultants, and read in the best-selling book and journals were not working and he wanted a new template. Plus, he wanted to feel renewed spirit in his own job. He had reached a point where he no longer believed he knew how to awaken spirit.

Renewing Spirit in the Workplace

Why is it when although the majority of managers are aspiring to increasing spirit within the organization, they continue to get the opposite? It may be because they are missing an understanding of one very simple, but fundamental truth—

Spirit is an intrinsic and natural state for all human beings, not one that can be created by external interventions.

In the Western World particularly, the major focus of business improvement efforts has been the identification of *external* sources of problems and the development of weapons or programs against them. From a very different viewpoint however, the field of developmental philosophy has long held that spirit results from joining harmoniously with the natural working of human processes. This divergence of perspective is very similar to the ancient Greek practices of health and medicine. The god of medicine is Asklepios, and the goddess of health, Hygeia, is Asklepios' daughter. They work from different philosophies which in turn led to different courses of action. With Hygeia, health was the natural order of things, a positive attribute to which people were entitled if they governed their lives wisely. The function of a physician, therefore, was to discover and teach the natural laws which ensure a healthy mind in a healthy body. The followers of Asklepios believed that the chief role of a physician was to treat disease and restore health by correcting imperfections caused by accidents of birth or life. Asklepios' followers were interested in treatment, and Hygeia followers were interested in healing. Treatment originates from the outside, healing from within. (See A. Weil, in *Spontaneous Healing*)

Spirit in the workplace is more attuned to a healing process, a process of making persons whole again. It is a matter of restoring integrity and balance. To understand the restoration of *spirit* in organizations, one must come to understand the innate, intrinsic nature of the process of human spirit. We must understand

that even when external interventions are introduced with successful outcomes, those outcomes represent activation of the natural intrinsic processes of *spirit* which, under other circumstance, can and probably have been operating without any outside stimulus. Spirit can renew itself. Renewal of spirit is a natural and innate process.

I. Natural Working of Human Spirit: Enabling Regenerative Spirit in Business & Work

Spirit is the vital principle or animating force within living beings, according to the American Heritage Dictionary. It is that which indicates that we are alive and significant, that our life matters. Spirit is interpreted as motivation when it is in a transactional setting, one where others expect something of us. It may be translated as *inspiration* in an artistic setting where we are seeking to manifest our creative expression. Or it may be perceived as “*being centered*” in a non-material sense when we are seeking to be attuned with a context. But all these facets reflect the same process. And it is innate in us as humans, working with a natural wisdom all its own.

Spirit is not manifested as calmness, serenity, or happiness even though it is a process of harmonizing a series of entities and elements. In fact, it is more commonly experienced as discontentment with current level of achievement, a challenging of the status quo, and an irrepressible tenacity in regard to principle. In the same way that alcoholic beverages are

called “spirits”, the human spirit is a powerful concentration of the essence of, not grapes, but wisdom born of consciousness regarding the “right working” of the world.

Four Wisdoms of Human Spirit:

In many native cultures around the world there are prototypes for the new template our CEO is seeking. The prototypes are based in a different set of beliefs and paradigms about how spirit works in homo-sapiens; the root meaning is “wise beings”. In our culture we have come to believe we have to “put something into” people for it to be there. The education system must teach us, the training department must train us. What if the answer was more about providing the space and capability for it to come out of us? This approach is more akin to the practices of many Native American tribes of North American. The processes of bringing youth and children into the tribal community are often referred to as the four wellsprings of Spirit or Four Wisdoms. The four wisdoms of spirit in this context might be depicted in the following ways.

*Wisdom One: Being “spirited” is a natural state of being for human beings. If you examine yourself for a moment you can observe that you only notice something called *your spirit* when it is blocked, that is when it is not flowing. That is because human beings want to be filled with spirit. Further it is a natural state for humans, in fact a natural wisdom of the human design. It emerges as a result of striving to be in perfect balance within ourselves and with the world around us, and to bring all systems into smooth running where energy can be exchanged freely among*

people and other living systems. When we are out of balance we have a longing to return to it. Business improvement processes can take advantage of this tendency to return to the natural condition of “open spirit”, one that is not blocked or impeded. Business improvement leaders instead tend to assume that some people will not be “motivated” and do not care to contribute rather than understand that this is a natural desire, even a longing, within human beings.

Wisdom Two: There is an in-built natural power in each of us that enables returning to this natural state. A second innate wisdom of the human *spirit* is that it has a natural in-built balancing power of its own. Human beings can and do renew their own spirit routinely without therapy, incentive programs, or even pep talks. It is part of “Mother Nature’s” gift and will work naturally when not prevented. The greatest single defect in modern management today may be the idea that workers cannot be motivated without some act on the part of management or some program to wake them up to what is important. This idea of external intervention has been preached so long in organizations that workers have in many cases even come to believe it themselves and blame external sources for their lack of spirit. But if you examine your own life you will notice that there is a natural restoration of spirit after periods of grieving, disappointment, or failure. Business leaders have not chosen to join with this innate power and wisdom in a work setting, and to allow Mother’s Nature to do her work.

Wisdom Three: Spirit is affected by relationships between ourselves and the context or worlds of our lives. A third innate wisdom emerges from the fact that the human spirit is whole and integrated and at the same time is connected with the systems

in which it exists. What is happening at home *affects* work, and vice versa. What is happening to our physical health affects our mind. But also, what is happening with the raw material of our trade as we work, affects spirit. When workers know they are working in ways that pollute the environment, even when they create justifications and defenses, the spirit is affected. When workers are asked to create products or services that they know are less than what is needed, or less than they are capable of, their spirit is inhibited. Again, these can be hidden from us by the nature of rationalization that is offered, but the spirit is not fooled. It seeks a way to keep itself alive, even with “lies” for a while, if that is the only choice. If you observe for a moment your own processes, you will see that not only does the spirit strive to be alive at every moment but will try to make sense out of any relationship in which it has to maintain itself. If we understood this nature of interconnectedness between our spirit and the world to which it connects and the search for equanimity in that connection, then we could join with the natural tendency of the spirit to be working toward harmony with its surrounding worlds.

Wisdom Four: Spirit is dependent on alignment between our personal thoughts and actions. A fourth innate wisdom of the human spirit is the indivisibility of thinking and behavior processes. When the human spirit is open and flowing it is because an experience of alignment exists, or it is seen as possible to achieve alignment between a person’s understanding of how higher order values get played out in the world for the benefit of all and the actions that the person takes in their own daily life. In modern organizations there is a tendency to work to change behavior through coaching, rewards, and discipline since these are things that can be seen

and managed as external sources. Without a great deal of consciousness in this process however, we may divide us from our spirit by creating conflict between what is thought and what actions are taken. A change process that does not seek to bring conscious alignment between thought and action risks dividing a person against themselves, which will divert the spirit and send it in search of wholeness again.

II. Regenerative Processes Necessary for Enabling a Renewed Spirit for Work

Almost all business improvement efforts unknowingly work out of tune with these natural wisdoms. But those organizations that have discovered how to be in harmony with them have set the model for competitive effectiveness and meaningful work for three decades. Although the following guidelines are not the whole story, they give a strong indication of the nature of principles that must be adhered to in order to nourish the natural wisdom followed by the *human spirit* and to join with the natural tendencies of the human spirit. It is a matter of bringing the right relationship to the following elements as work is designed, carried out, and improved.

Universal Processes of Regeneration: First and foremost, each and every person must have a “space” for their own unique essence to shine. This must be joined with each person working in a way, and toward an end, they feel is differentiated from the “run of the mill,” and ends that will make a difference for the future. The

means and methods they employ must ensure benefits to all the systems that are affected by their efforts and ensure an increased realization of the aspirations of these systems. To provide these benefits and this realization they must be “pulled by” evolutionary paradigms that allow the higher order virtues in all people and living things to be respected. An open and singing spirit will be the result of working with these processes in the creation of work. Let us look more closely at these elements and how they lead to regenerative work and spirit.

1. *The uniqueness of essence of each and every individual is discovered, engaged, and developed.* The ground for organizational design and organization of work must honor and value the uniqueness of each human essence. Essence is the core of each of us that makes us distinct from all others. In our society we tend to socialize this out of children as fast as we can, replacing it with personality characteristics that are so prototypical they are frequently categorized into models. Organizations then use them to engage people in “better understanding themselves”. But these models of personalities are not what is unique, but rather what is alike about us. The essence in each of us comes alive when we have space to “be ourselves” and to imbed this essence into something meaningful. This expression of essence is more likely to happen away from work, in our woodshop, or craft room, in the local charitable organization or at church.

In designing work that allows the human spirit to flower, attention must be given to helping everyone in the organization increasingly discover their own uniqueness and to embedding that uniqueness into the organization, its product offerings, and processes. *No* energy is put into comparing people as individuals, groups, shifts, or other collectives. Systems or processes that assume people should pursue “modeling” themselves after someone else are disassembled and people do not seek to be “role models”. There are no “low” and “high” performers, no “difficult people”, and no behavioral-based categories at all. No tests are provided to help people discover what “type” of learner or manager they are. Emphasis is on the uniqueness of each individual and finding more ways for that uniqueness to be discovered and embedded into the life and outputs of the organization.

2. Set out to be, and to create, that which is distinctive and meaningful, thereby making the expenditure of resources a worthy endeavor. The goal of designing work to draw on uniqueness is to enable the pursuit of distinctiveness in the organization and its products, ones that can be differentiated from all others in the field. The differences that are sought however, are the “differences that can make a difference” in what the products offer to people who use them, in how the creating of these products enables people to grow and develop, in how the earth is sustained and restored as a result of the

interventions made with natural cycles, and differences in how the communities that support and fuel the existence of the business are nourished and developed. The real focus is on how the human and natural systems effected by these processes are different in regard to what they can become, and in how they will be able to perform differently i.e., at higher levels of effectiveness. This differs greatly from the approach of an extraction mindset which asks only what one can get from the venture. The amazing result is that those who seek to make a difference, gain the greatest reciprocity. Those who seek to acquire the most are always in a battle for survival. Even in a business sense, our mothers were right.

This process of differentiation requires understanding entities in a way that is more deep and profound, and that seeks to uncover the essence of all the materials, systems, and entities that the business and its work practices encounter. In one DuPont of Canada system, this meant truly understanding the core potential of each raw material, not from an exploitive mindset, but from a value-adding perspective. They also spent time understanding the distinctiveness of the communities in which they settle and the technologies they employ. This process tends to move organizations away from reducing materials, communities, and technologies to mere tools, and instead creates an understanding of a systemic relationship among all living processes.

3. *Every act we take has a ripple effect that must be understood and for which accountability must be taken.* The overall direction for work comes from an understanding of what the interrelated and interconnected systems encounter when they engage with the products or services we offer. Are they able to achieve the aspirations they had when they chose us and our products, approved our expansion, invested in our assets, and “shared” the raw materials the planet offers? This is an education process that helps people understand that our cumulative action creates an effect. There are many entities along the way that will experience this effect, whether or not we are aware of it. There is an effect borne to the user, the environment, the community, and society, as well as to the investors in our effort. Consciousness of our effects, and the effectiveness that this enables for others, is what gives guidance to the direction we take in how we work, how we improve work, and how we evolve and redesign work.
4. *Use evolutionary paradigms to inspire toward universal virtues.* To give up our admiration of these, would be to kill a part of ourselves. The most effective way to invoke this natural tendency is to work from a particular form of principle—a paradigm, which demands that we be in a process of continuous personal development in order to achieve it. The paradigms are created out of the virtues that must be pursued in the working of our business. Do not confuse these with platitudes regarding ‘being the best’ or ‘valuing people’. These

statements are most often phrases of the 'ego' and have no ability to awaken and nurture spirit. The nature of paradigms that must be chosen are never achievable with one's current level of capability and consciousness. As a result, they implore, even require us, to evolve. This is the way of calling to the spirit. The spirit cannot be deceived but will resonate immediately with the right vibration.

III. Designing Business Improvements In "Right Relationship" To Evoke the Natural Wisdom of Spirit

To create an environment in the workplace that is nourishing to spirit and does not block its manifestation, the elements of regenerative processes must be linked and held in a yoked relationship. This is not complicated, but in fact emanates from common sense which is no longer common.

Wisdom One—Design Guideline: Accept Spirit as a Natural Force, not in need of External Stimulation

There is nothing to be done regarding the first wisdom but to accept that it exists. The work is on oneself and one's own belief systems. The best way to understand it in others and to see it working, is to start with seeing spirit working in ourselves. Only then can we understand how it is working in an organization. Try all these ideas on yourself first.

Wisdom Two—Design Guideline: Ensure that each person is increasingly able to bring their unique creativity to the distinctiveness of the business' product offerings

The in-built power of spirit has the fuel it needs to restore and open up spirit when the above two elements of this structure are brought into a tension relationship. This invites a sense of being “stretched” but for something meaningful. When work is the place where one’s unique capabilities and qualities can be used to creatively bring distinctiveness to the world, we cannot be restrained. This is one of the reasons parenting can be such an inspiring process. Who we are as a parent can be joined with the possibilities of a young life, and both the child and ourselves can each become a greater person. We do not want the child to be like anyone else in the world, but to be truly what they can be that is distinctive. In this and any situation, when we can see this complementary relationship coming together, we will take on increasingly difficult challenges, and persist even in the face of what seems impossible.

Wisdom Three Design Guideline: Work should connect every person on a daily basis to the effects produced by their efforts in a way that creates aspiration to be more virtuous in their contribution.

The natural understanding that we are in a reciprocal relationship with the world around us and all living systems, leaves us with a natural need to be working in a way that ensures not only the sustainability of all the living systems,

but evolution and development of them as well. As we increase our understanding of the *effects* of our endeavors, we feel a confronting demand to improve our synergistic rapport. However, this can lead to hopelessness and a loss of spirit when one lacks the capability to work from paradigms that offer something to aspire to, and from virtues that bring respect and indeed love for all living things. Working toward achieving highly ideal virtues, lets us stay in touch with the preciousness of our human and material world and what could be possible with proper feeding and tending. It is when we lose the ability or opportunity to see “unrealized possibilities” that we lose spirit.

The core reason that this set of processes is inspiring is that it requires the development and use of what might be called a reflective intelligence in the service of improving our judgment. The use of judgment, when accompanied by reflection, becomes a process of opening the door for the free flow of spirit. This is the reason that teenagers tend to rebel and become dispirited when their parents’ judgment is continuously substituted for their own. They will find other arenas where judgment is demanded when those at home are cut off. This is also part of the natural working of spirit. This striving for improving judgment beckons us to continuously test for alignment with our context and the many worlds of our lives. Judgment demands to be developed because without it the spirit loses a major instrument. If this development is carried out in a context where reflecting on our processes is a way of life, especially from early childhood, then judgment evolves rapidly and is a major source of spirit. If the development of judgment is aborted in one world, it will find a more receptive world. This is not different in the factory

or office. The number of leaders in the community, who came to their community service role seeking a path not offered in their boring and prescribed jobs, is innumerable. Spirit and the attendant judgment it fosters will find a path in which to flow.

Wisdom Four Design Guideline: Everyone in the organization must be linked actively to each of these in their work, not divided up by functions or hierarchical levels of the organization.

In order for thought and action to be increasingly aligned and inspiring, it is necessary to keep a connection in our awareness with all the elements, much as a symphonic chord is played . Our essence is increasingly discovered and displayed through striving to work in a virtuous way, and in taking increasing accountability for the effects of our acts on the world around us. Understanding the distinctiveness and diversity that can and does exist around us and the importance of this varied and viable set of differences to evolution, has an enhancing effect on character development as we let go of our narrow-minded views. Only as we develop strength of character and steadfastness regarding integrity of our effects does the spirit have a lasting and sustainable quality through which essence can shine. Otherwise, it is continuously masked by the socialized and politicized personality. The reflective intelligence built in pursuit of harmonizing our various worlds, lets us see when we are asking ourselves, or others are asking us to trade

off a higher value for the expediency of the moment. It is this nature of work, that make us conscious citizens of our nations and businesses.

IV. Caveat: Why Popular Business Endeavors Tend to Deplete Spirit

The CEO on the flight home, was caught in a trap that is so deceiving, it is difficult to see its destructive jaws. But a little reflection may highlight the reason he felt he was sliding further away from his objective with every program. A structure that shows what might be called the shadow-side of our regenerative process, may make this clearer.

Organizations today have created environments in which it is difficult for spirit to do its thing. Work is categorized into set tasks, proceduralized and made routine, limits are carefully defined for all work—both high and low—and human beings are categorized into levels and types. The easiest way to schedule is to increase the commonalty across skills rather than understand and enhance the uniqueness. Efficiency is pursued above all else rather than within the context of what would make the customer, the consumer, the shareholder, the community, and the earth more effective. A few things are measured but none of them in relationship to one another. As a result, it is not possible to determine true cost and efficiency, much less overall effectiveness for the world. Most of all there is rising pressure to increase the uniformity of product offerings, customer service approaches, work design across facilities, purchasing procedures; all in the name

of more productivity of resources. The human spirit is being closed out at work and has increasingly been seeking other venues.

What is not so obvious to the corporate leadership of today is that their own spirit is being blocked by current practices and the same wisdom works for them. The CEO on the flight spends one weekend a month in the inner city of a rust belt city, working with disadvantaged youth. He knows he is working against overwhelming odds of saving even one youth. He has so few resources it demands enormous creativity. But when he speaks of each youth by name, his face lights up and his language becomes caring and hopeful. He says he feels he is doing something that can make a difference for the future beyond his lifetime. He is learning about himself and about relationships, in some ways, for the first time. He has even come to see the basic good in people he says. And he can see what happens as a result of his attempts and it gives him an understanding of how to do better next time.

If he could only hear himself, he would have all the understanding he needs about what his company needs, what the people need, and indeed why he needs to start with himself and his own spirit as he works on the company.

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