# Stakeholder Self awareness and Willpower: Exploring Spirituality in the Workplace

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## ABSTRACT:

*In an uncertain environment, the business community is challenged with diverse requirements pressing it to cope with change and ambiguity. The current paper suggests a novel framework based on spirituality and religiosity to support its primary stakeholders-business practitioners, academicians and students alike. The framework lays special emphasis on the outcomes of self-awareness and willpower, often regarded as soft, but crucial skills in enabling business performance. Further development of the model and propositions are suggested as well.*

## INTRODUCTION:

The business community at large with its practitioners, academicians and students seems to have reached a crossroads with a variety of factors pushing and pulling upon it. At a broader level there is uncertainty in the political, environmental, social, technological, economic and legal (PESTEL) environment, which ultimately has ramifications for all stakeholders. This naturally has an impact at micro levels upon practitioners as well as the academic community, especially the students, what with a strong demand for innovation, empathy, creativity as well as self control and willpower emerging from fluid situations.

As practitioners struggle to cope with evolving business parameters the need for innovation and creativity becomes critical (Daft, 2014). At the same time business leaders are required to develop soft skills such as self-awareness and empathy. Still another quality that seems paramount for business success is that of willpower (Duhigg, 2012). Business schools are directly responsible for feeding the existing framework with a qualified labor resource that can navigate through these times by demonstrating these requisite skills. As such, faculty and students are expected to be adept at the abovementioned qualities by the time they graduate putting business schools under pressure to adapt to these requirements.

The present paper proposes a framework based on spirituality and religiosity to address some of these issues especially as related to the outcomes of willpower and self awareness. It examines how spirituality could be used to enable willpower and self-awareness at an individual level. We start with exploring the concept at spirituality and covering the literature regarding some of the work done so far with regards to the outcomes of willpower and self awareness. In the next part of the paper, a formal model with propositions is discussed.

### Spirituality & Religiosity in the Workplace:

Over the past decade or so the area of spirituality and religiosity in the workplace has gained a lot of interest, both from practitioners and academicians. Spiritual practices such as meditation have featured prominently in mainstream media as an effective means to achieve a variety of business outcomes from employee related issues such as reduction of absenteeism to increased firm productivity. Premier business schools such as those at Columbia and Harvard Business School have incorporated related subjects in their curricula. Researchers too have carried out a variety of studies that tend to lend support to these claims (Kolodinskly et al., 2008; Giacalone & Jurkeiwicz, 2010, Neal, 2013).

However, as the field grows, and possibly due to the rapid rate of its growth there is still no clarity let alone

unanimity in understanding what spirituality actually means. Since spirituality is another one of those terms that tends to be defined based on specific individual frameworks, almost every researcher presents her or his own understanding of the concept, which often differs from others', thereby convoluting an already amorphous idea. Furthermore, many definitions of spirituality focus on humanistic qualities such as compassion, honesty, purposefulness etc., which can be considered more as outcomes of spirituality rather than spirituality itself (Koenig, 2008). Still others refer to spirituality in terms of a particular religious framework, which makes the necessary ingredient of generalizability virtually impossible.

In this paper, we use a comprehensive definition of spirituality as presented by Shinde (2014) based on his study of over 300 participants belonging to three major spiritual traditions of the world, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Shinde points out that the concept of spirituality has three main dimensions viz., Belief, Practice and Universality. Based on a statistical analysis of these dimensions Shinde was able to create a scale to actually measure the concept of spirituality at an individual level. The scale was called the Universal Scale for Spirituality (USS). The definition of spirituality as provided in this work is as follows '*an individual's journey towards finding a Higher Power (irrespective of how this Higher Power is conceptualized, whether as God or as a Higher Self), supplemented by consistent efforts made towards this purpose and characterized by a universal outlook'* (Shinde & Fleck, 2015). As such, a spiritual person is one who has high levels of belief in a Higher Power, and actualizes this belief through consistent effort (practice) while maintaining the attitude that no one method fits all and that every individual has her or his own way to relate to this higher resource.

So, how could spirituality is related to the qualities that businesses strive for in individuals, specifically willpower and self awareness?

## Spirituality and Self awareness:

Like spirituality, the quality of self-awareness has also gained tremendous popularity in the area of business, especially leadership (Daft, 2014; Goleman, 2013; George & Sims, 2007). A survey at the graduate School of Business at Stanford University suggests that this is the most valued quality in business leaders (Toegel & Barsoux, 2012). Individuals with high levels of self awareness are deemed to be in tune with themselves allowing them to make better decisions at the workplace as well being more genuine, open to feedback and more values based. Goleman considers this quality as foundational to his much cited quadrant of emotional intelligence (or focus) which consists of three additional qualities, namely, empathy, self regulation and social skills. As we shall see a little later, the quality of willpower, which is intimately related to self regulation and control, could also ultimately be related to spirituality.

It must be noted here that the very idea of self awareness that has found so much popularity in today's society was originally rooted in Eastern spiritual thought and gradually found its way to the West over the past few decades, especially since the 1960s. As such this paper simply completes the circle by tying the concept of self awareness, which was developed profoundly by luminaries such as Maharshi Ramanna, and were brought to the West by students of Eastern thought such as Paul Brunton and George Alpert, to that of spirituality (Goldberg, 2010). According to these traditions self awareness is rooted in spirituality (belief, practice and universality) and at its zenith is the culminating experience of spirituality. At such a stage this awareness often translates into the awareness of others as no different from oneself. This is expressed in the ancient Sanskrit dictum, "Tat Tvam Asi" (Thou art That). Mitroff et al. (2009) point out that such awareness can result in a leadership style that is self assured, free of anxiety and one of genuine concern for other stakeholders (also called empathy[1]).

[1] For more information on how empathy is related to spirituality, please see the article, *what spirituality can bring to leaders and managers: Enabling creativity, empathy and a stress free workplace* (Shinde & Fleck, 2015).

## Spirituality and Willpower:

What is willpower? The dictionary definition of willpower is simply, "the ability to control yourself" (Merriam Webster, 2015). This self control is critical to success especially in academia for students. The need for self control and willpower has never been more considering the diversity of demands and distractions on stakeholders; as Herbert Simon so succinctly put it, "Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention" (Hindle, 2008). There is a plethora of studies that show the importance of willpower over other more emphasized qualities such as intelligence (IQ) in academic success (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Baumeister & Tierney, 2011; Mischel et al., 1972). In fact these studies and others point out that self restraint is critical to success in other areas in life such as the workplace and business as well (Duhigg, 2012).

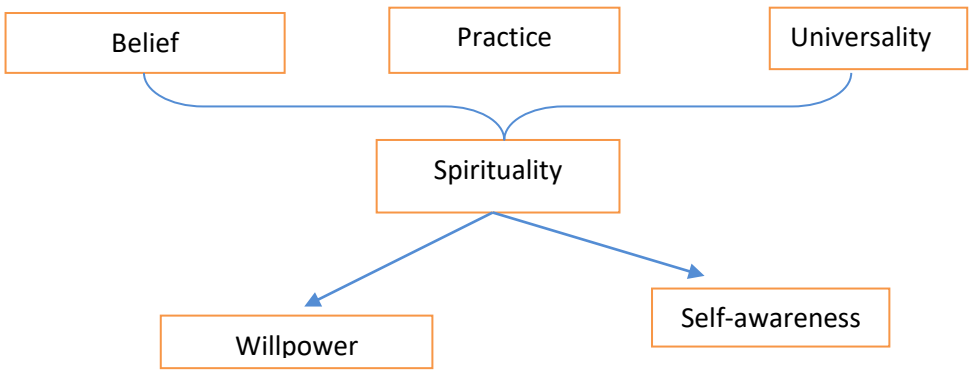
One of the vital components of organizational success is the ability of an organization and its people to make changes to cope with environmental demands; unfortunately a lack of willpower is amongst the most prominent reasons for the human inability to make changes. Findings from the Stress in America Survey (2014) conducted annually by the American Psychological Association suggest that27% of their respondents found a lack of willpower to be a critical factor in their incapacity to make useful life changes. Other cases show that willpower is a key ingredient to control emotional responses and provide excellent customer service (Duhigg, 2012). Still other research demonstrates that willpower is required to practice ethical mindfulness in organizations (Thomas et al., 2004).

All in all, willpower is antecedent to numerous success related outcomes in the workplace from productivity, concentration, ethics to flexibility and customer service. Unfortunately, studies indicate that willpower is all too scarce in today's world. According to the Values in Action Survey (as cited in Baumeister & Tierney, 2011) which had more than a million participants, willpower is the number one quality that most people consider themselves to be lacking in. Thankfully, a number of techniques have been identified to increase willpower. More pertinently, willpower itself seems to be boosted by practices associated with spirituality such as meditation (McGonigal, 2011).

## Measuring the Relationship between Spirituality, Self Awareness and Willpower:

Considering the above information and the possible linkages between the variables of spirituality, self awareness and willpower, the present study proposes that stakeholders in the business world would tend to benefit from viewing spirituality as a resource to improve business practices, processes and products mainly by enabling components of emotional intelligence such as self awareness and the elusive quality of willpower. Further development of the above model would include developing clear hypotheses as to how the various components of spirituality (belief, practice and universality) could be related to the discussed outcomes. This could be pursued with a mixed method approach of using validated survey instruments such as the USS Universal Spirituality Scale, (Shinde, 2014) and also using experimental research design to measure differences between populations that are involved in spirituality vs. those that are not.

**Figure 1. Framework to measure the impact of spirituality on willpower and self awareness**



Exploring the model a bit further, let us examine the various relationships between the variables involved. Propositions based on these relationships are also suggested.

### Belief and Willpower:

It seems intuitive that those with a strong belief in the transcendent would also have higher levels of confidence in their ability to restrain themselves from particular actions. This might be further supported if the belief system encourages self-restraint as a virtue and/or discourages self indulgence as a vice. This is often evident in religion based belief systems, which use a degree of Pavlovian methodology to encourage certain behaviors with the promise of reward and discourage others with the threat of punishment. A study by McCullough & Willoughby (2009) suggests that the relationship between religiousness and health outcomes could be the result of the influence of religiosity on the self control and regulation process. Interestingly in their research, which examines numerous studies that explore the connection between religion and self control, the authors found that intrinsic religiosity (which is more based on individual belief and connectedness with the transcendent) had a greater correlation with self control than extrinsic religiosity (which caters more to the social aspects of individual religiosity). Considering that spirituality as defined above is more related to the intrinsic aspects of religions, it would not be surprising if individuals with a high level of belief in the transcendent, irrespective of whether they view it in religious terms or not, would exhibit greater levels of willpower. Thus, the study proposes that

*P1: Individuals with high levels of belief will have greater levels of self control*

### Belief and Self Awareness:

A belief in the transcendent is traditionally considered part and parcel of self awareness. As discussed earlier, the concept of self awareness itself is rooted in ancient philosophies of the east such as Buddhism, Vedanta and Taoism. The self in such traditions often has a strong transcendental aspect; it is rarely understood in purely psychological terms such as personality, emotions, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions etc., which is a modern accretion to the term as can be seen in any recent textbook that claims to study the self (McShane&Von Glinow,2013). In its earliest conceptualization, the self is often identified with transcendent concepts such as reality, God, wisdom, eternity connectedness. It is often an ideal that conveys perfection. In Zen Buddhism for example, the understanding of the self (Kensho) is equated with the concept of Satori or enlightenment (Kapleau, 1989). We see a similar identification of the self with Truth or Reality from the dictum, “I am That, Thou Art That, All is that” of the Upanishads (Raphael, 1992). It stands to reason that belief in the transcendent self is therefore important to develop the quality of self awareness, which is considered so critical to modern leadership and management.

### Practice, Self Awareness, and Willpower:

Literature indicates that spiritual practices are useful in developing key ingredients for self awareness such as attention management (Goleman, 2013). A study conducted by Katherine Maclean of the University of California, Davis suggests that sustained meditative practices improve the individual’s ability to focus for longer periods of time on tasks that involve visual discrimination (Maclean et al., 2011). Practices such as mindful meditation, and mantra meditation and especially those related to focused attention meditation techniques (Colzato et al., 2012) would allow practitioners to manage attention, and develop concentration, without which, it would be difficult to become aware of internal impulses and indications that are critical to timely decision making (Goleman, 2013). In another study, Brefczynski-Lewis et al. (2007) found that meditation increases concentration and provides the willpower to ignore distraction. Traditionally of course, such practices have been used extensively in various spiritual traditions.

Interestingly, an important aspect of managing the self includes the quality of Self regulation and control.

Goleman points out that the availability of large amounts of information not only makes it difficult to focus attention. But the ability to focus itself is hampered by the distractions that keep attracting our attention on a daily basis. These distractions, which are ever increasing in the age of social media and the internet naturally, lead to a deficit in attention. Research shows that the self regulatory mechanism within the human brain is mainly a function of the prefrontal cortex. This area of the brain regulates both the ability to restrain and the ability to perform an action. As previously indicated meditation has the ability to increase self control, this is possible because at a physiological level it brings about changes to the prefrontal cortex that is crucially related to regulatory and control behaviors. Meditation essentially has the ability to actually further develop this region of the brain (Luders et al., 2009). In a study by Sara Lazar, a neuroscientist at the Harvard Medical School and her colleagues, researchers found that beneficial changes to the attention management mechanism within the brain could take place in as little as eight weeks of regular meditation (Lazar et al.,2005).

With this relationship between meditation and attention management and self control in mind, the next propositions suggested are given below:

*P2 Meditation will lead to increased self-control in the individual, and*

*P3 Increased self control will lead to increased self awareness within the individual by enabling greater attention management.*

## Universality, Willpower and Self Awareness:

One of the salient features of a spiritual outlook is that it involves a non judgmental and universal attitude (Shinde, 2014). This attitude allows individuals to take a neutral, non reactive and even empathetic stance towards issues that might otherwise elicit responses of flight or fight. This too maybe a function of spiritual practices; however, I propose that the quality of universality intrinsically allows the individual to consider situations from a more objective and non personal perspective. Importantly, it also allows for individuals to consider others' positions by "putting themselves in another's shoes". Such a perspective can reduce anxiety as corroborated by new research in psychology (Schwartz & Gladding, 2011). A lack of anxiety in turn can prevent the depletion of willpower reserves within the individual since coping with stressful situations usually results in a corresponding reduction of willpower (Galliot & Baumeister, 2007). The present paper posits that such an attitude of empathy and acceptance will allow individuals to become further aware of themselves by opening themselves up to others' positions. This is similar to the Johari Window wherein the individual develops a better understanding of a situation based on feedback from others (McShane & Von Glinow, 2015).

*P4 An attitude of universality will allow individuals to develop greater self-awareness by becoming more accepting of others' positions.*

*P5 An attitude of universality will prevent the depletion of willpower in individuals by allowing them to more easily disassociate themselves from their own viewpoint and accepting others' perspectives.*

To conclude, the present paper is a brief exploration of how the various stakeholders within the business community might benefit by developing elusive but increasingly important characteristics with the help of spirituality and religiosity. In exploring this possibility, it examines the relationship between self awareness, willpower and spirituality. It further breaks these constructs down into measureable variables of attention management, self control, belief, practice and universality. Finally, it examines these constructs in the light of recent research and proposes a framework to measure these relationships.

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