

SPIRITUAL ENERGY IN MANAGEMENT

The Summary Report of the MODEM Research Project: “The Hope of the Managers.”

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This Project Report is dedicated to the memory of
ALAN SAUNDERS, 1938 - 2001

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Introducing MODEM – the sponsor of the project

A modem is a device for facilitating two-way communication and the organisation, MODEM, which sponsored this project aims to facilitate two-way communication between management and ministry. MODEM sees its purpose as to integrate the theory and practice of management with the theology and practice of ministry. In the first eight years of its existence MODEM has mainly sought, through its activities, books and other publications to communicate management theory and practice to the churches and their ministry. (E.g. Management and Ministry CPN 1996.) But what about movement the other way? What can management practice and theory learn from theology and spirituality? This project report is about MODEM’s first major attempt to communicate insights from spirituality and theology to management and the world of work.

“**Management and Spiritual Energy**” is the title of the full report of the project and may be found on the MODEM website www.modem-uk.org or may be obtained from the Reverend Canon Bryan G.E. Pettifer, 23 Curlew Drive, CHIPPENHAM, Wiltshire, SN14 6YG, tel:01249-659823, e-mail: bryan@bpettifer.fsnet.co.uk .

1. “The Hope of the Managers” research project.

“Spirit”, “Spiritual” and “Spirituality” are not words, which people find easy to define. If we were to communicate something about spirituality to the worlds of work and management we needed to declare some of our assumptions and we did this as follows:

Assumptions:

1. Persons are best understood as whole beings with interconnected physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects.
2. It is the spiritual aspect of persons and the spiritual energy at work within them, which is the least well understood and the most in need of investigation.
3. There is something, which may be called the spirit of an organisation, which is derived from the deep bonds occurring when people share common values, principles and a sense of purpose greater than themselves.
4. The spiritual energy in persons and the spirit of an organisation may serve purposes, which are good or evil and the ethical evaluation of the purposes at work is therefore very significant in investigating the spiritual aspect of persons and organisations.

In the light of these assumptions we set out our purpose as follows:

Purpose:

To investigate the energy at work in managers,
to identify any spiritual dimension in that energy and
to reflect on its significance for the practice of management.

“To identify any spiritual dimension in that energy” would clearly involve some significant interpretation but that came later and although it was clear that the focus of our investigation was “spiritual energy” it was not a concept that came into the participants descriptions of their experiences at all

Our Method

We chose to work with people of any faith or none and therefore it would not be appropriate to begin with religious ideas. Instead our method was to work inductively, that meant to start with people’s own experiences and to ask them to share those experiences with a small group in what we called “action learning sets”. We invited them to reflect on experiences in which they had been lifted to a new level of performance and achieved far more than they thought possible. We asked them to use their own words to describe what happened and talk about their experiences in the language they would use with a friend. [See Appendix 1 The brief for the action learning sets.]

We recorded what they said as they said it. It was therefore a very open-ended kind of research. In collating all this material we brought together statements on similar topics from different people. Thus many statements by different people from different contexts are grouped because there was a common theme running through them. We did not begin with pre-arranged themes and fit their material into them. The themes were the result of collecting the participants statements together and noting the themes they expressed or implied. We found their stories very moving and sensed immediately that we were mining a rich vein of material. However we had to struggle for some time to discern the meaning of the evidence. It was very open-

ended research and produced a mass of material, which was difficult to sort out and even more difficult to interpret.

2. The evidence – a sample of the participants’ statements

Now here is a small sample of what the participants said, which takes up between a third and a half of the full report. They had talked both of individual experiences and also of experiences of great achievements by a group. The examples, which follow come from the latter, the group achievements. Having collected the participants’ statements together under themes we then sorted the themes under four main headings as follows:

- (a) the **Purpose** of the organisation,
- (b) the **Context** within which the managers were working,
- (c) their personal and group **Attitudes**,
- (d) the **Nature and Source of the Energy**.

The first three headings formed the basis of our findings and they will be discussed in the section 3, which follows. The fourth heading led to an analysis of the nature of the energy as it emerged from what the participants said and formed the basis for asking in what sense it is a spiritual energy. This is the subject of section 4 of this paper.

The energy described – (a) purpose

They said that the corporate energy comes from confidence in a common sense of purpose. They talked of a shared vision, of the role of leaders and founders and of a vision, which defines an organisation’s values and becomes part of its corporate culture. Here are some quotes:

Vision and Leadership

Some people saw vision and purpose as coming from a leader: ‘the impetus of a vision can start off by an awareness of failure’; ‘been where a very dynamic person has come in to lead - their personality has got everybody going’; ‘he was a very good trainer - left a team of people who could operate without him’; ‘each level of leadership has to be good to make it hum’.

Founder and Values

‘Whoever set the company up, set an acceptable set of ground rules - a way of operating that we can all work with - a way in which we like working’; ‘great companies have a sound in the woodwork that was put in by the founder which sustains them’; ‘this awareness of what makes the organisation tick - the wonder of what’s going on - I recognise it as energy’; ‘the embodiment of the organisation and the values of the organisation in the people who work there’; ‘empowerment, guiding principles’.

(b) Context.

The vision, the culture, the values, the ground rules are all crucial aspects of the context and they can be crucial in enabling the flow of energy in an organisation. The context can liberate people and enable people to pull together.

Enabling

The energy can be released, some felt, by enabling it: 'freeing up of potential'; 'it can happen in a small way - a small team'; 'they probably have the energy, but you've found the way to release it - that's magic'; 'don't determine everything that happens - enable it to happen'; 'if people have confidence in you, you have a new view of yourself'

Freedom and Pulling Together

A number of people described a sense of freedom: 'one day you had people just doing their job, the next there was real enthusiasm, a sense of empowerment, all of a sudden being given the power to change things'; 'just this enormous energy that poured out'; 'a liberation, a freedom, a sense of: "We can really contribute to this and make changes"'; 'it changed the whole organisation around, a lot of enthusiasm, a real buzz about the place.

What happens when people know they are respected: 'Observed a group working together, burying their natural rivalries, demonstrating mutual respect'; 'could see a benefit in it - make things better in the future - that what they wanted was listened to - they owned it'.

(c) Attitudes.

Shared attitudes in groups are very significant in enabling energy to flow. Therefore respecting people, including those from whom one differs, is crucial, so too is confidence in oneself and in each other, team spirit, drawing out people's potential, affirming them and their capabilities and enabling them to give of their best.

Collective Belief and Confidence

Confidence and a collective belief were described as a source of energy: 'there was great excitement'; 'the limits on company thinking had shifted'; 'self-belief in each individual had a synergistic outlet'; 'absolute belief that everybody would do their bit, but at the same time there is support for one another'; 'an electricity that was not there usually - we can make this work'; 'confidence became invested in it from other national bodies - government and national agencies'.

Working with People

People experienced energy emerging from working with others as equals: 'saw the aim as not telling them how to run their operation, but rather working alongside them'; 'energy soared amongst the people running the programme'; 'overwhelmed by being treated as equals and having things learnt from them'.

When team spirit is strong: 'Feeling of all being in it together – all have jobs to do and get on with it as a team'; 'a focus on people – openness – giving confidence.'

Motivation

People are energised when they are trusted, empowered, self motivated and fulfilled: 'What brought people together was adversity'; 'part of something bigger than myself - the bigger the team sense the more you feel you can achieve - away from my little self'; 'when they are trusted, empowered people believe they can deliver'; 'liberation of people being given the opportunity to realise their ambition - self-motivated and a sense of personal fulfilment.'

Adversity, Rules, Low Trust

A number of people talked about low energy levels in conditions of adversity, rules or a climate of low trust: 'lots of negative attitudes'; 'people not involved would look in and say we don't do things that way here'; 'a lot of the organisation were happier as they were'; 'rule makers had very low energy'; 'lawyers and accountants sabotaged it'; 'based on the assumption that the other person will take advantage, there was lack of trust and lack of co-operation'; 'created a shared vision and shared objectives - then someone snuffed it out'.

(d) The Nature and Source of the Energy.

Images of the Energy - Interaction, Fusion, Chain Reaction

When asked what the energy **was**, they replied: 'when individuals are working well together there is this compound produced'; 'it's something to do with people being supported or stimulated'; 'the content of the group is not as important as it's ability to tap into the source of the power'; 'the fusion of all the elements creates something far, far greater'; 'the energy growth was a bit like a forest fire feeding on itself'; 'a bit like a chain reaction - not any negative energy around'.

The Nature of the Energy – Elusive and Mysterious

The energy cannot be taken for granted: 'energy is only released in an organisation when change takes place'; 'you don't get the energy boost unless you know you've given it all you can'.

And the nature of the energy cannot be defined: 'We're describing the effects of the energy rather than the energy itself'; 'it's elusive and we can't control it'; 'maybe we're entitled to treat it as a mysterious phenomenon'; 'I feel it is something I am given, rather than I produce myself'.

3. The findings – conditions for the release of spiritual energy.

It soon became evident that the participants were describing the experience of an exceptional energy, which had excited them and led them to achieve far more than they had anticipated. As we reflected on their descriptions of their experiences and analysed what they had said we found that the material identified the conditions or circumstances, which made possible the release of this exceptional energy. This formed our main conclusion from the investigation as follows.

This investigation has found that three primary conditions or circumstances made possible the release of an exceptional energy in the experiences described by the participants in this investigation. The conditions are as follows:

- 1. An inspiring purpose – something achievable and worthwhile and which the participants found to be stretching and requiring special effort.**
- 2. A liberating and empowering context - one in which the participants were free to take decisions, to develop their potential and to work creatively with others.**
- 3. An attitude of hope, confidence and commitment - ready to seize the opportunities on offer.**

This analysis of the condition for the release of spiritual energy led on to discovering two further implications, which follow from it. The first is that they also suggest aspects of a spirituality appropriate to the work place and the second is that they say something very important about how the work place should be managed and how people should be treated in it.

4. Implications for spirituality in the context of people's working lives.

We have talked of an exceptional energy but is it a spiritual energy?

The adjective 'spiritual' is sometimes defined as that which gives meaning and purpose to life and from this it follows that the spiritual aspect of persons is the integrating function, which enables them to find meaning and purpose in life. As we reflect on the descriptions, which the participants gave of their experiences of an exceptional energy it seems apt to describe what they experienced as a spiritual energy. They spoke of meaning and purpose and it focussed their activity.

From this it follows that **a spirituality appropriate to the work place, will be about developing those qualities and attitudes, which make people receptive to spiritual energy.** Some of the characteristics of spirituality in this sense are identified in the remainder of this section.

Although the source of the energy was, for most of the participants, hidden, there was nonetheless a sense that the energy could be relied on. It was available to everyone provided that they:

- were open to it,
- were ready to act in reliance on it,
- had a worthwhile sense of direction, a collective belief and well established values,
- offered support and trust for employees,
- empowered people and gave them freedom to act,
- as a group gelled together, producing synergy.

Certain attitudes were identified, which make people open and receptive to spiritual energy:

- faith, belief and confidence in oneself,
 - - in the goals of the organisation,
 - - and in something beyond oneself,
- commitment to the vision and purpose of the organisation,
- commitment to the working group,
- responsive to challenges,
- willing to take risks,
- ready to give and receive support,
- open to sharing the energy.

Finally it has been suggested that spirituality is about interconnectedness with self, others, nature or the environment, and God or a higher power. This investigation

showed clear evidence of the participants being connected to self (e.g. self-confidence and commitment), to others (e.g. synergy in a group), but there was a lack of evidence about connectedness to nature or the environment and they were reticent in identifying the source of the energy.

5. **Implications for how people should be treated and managed in organisations.**

In the late 1980's and 90's, there was a move from an established model of personnel management to a normative model of human resource management. Some of the features of this model of human resource management are as follows:

- greater concern for culture, values, organisational climate and management style,
- developing a common sense of purpose and shared commitment to change,
- empowerment and development of individuals.

This investigation identified a convergence between the condition for the release of spiritual energy and this normative model of human resource management.

This convergence will now be illustrated by comparing the three conditions for the release of spiritual energy with features of this human resource management model, which occur in the participants' descriptions of their experiences.

An inspiring purpose:

- mission, vision and common purpose,
- participation in developing a common culture,
- greater consensus, flexibility and commitment.

A liberating and empowering context:

- a "can do" culture, encouraging initiative and responsibility,
- empowerment drawing out capabilities and potential,
- encouraging co-operation, teamwork and complementary skills,
- building synergy.

An attitude of hope, confidence and commitment:

- positive and hopeful attitudes towards the future,
- trust and confidence between people,
- developing inter-personal skills,
- openness in place of defensiveness,
- seeking co-operation and conflict reduction.

We conclude that the quality of human resource management is likely to be a determining factor in whether the release of spiritual energy is facilitated or inhibited in an organisation.

Postscript – a Christian interpretation

At an early stage in the investigation one of the aims set out was "To offer for consideration a Christian interpretation of the spiritual energy". In the event this aim was not pursued with the participants. However "A Spiritual and Theological Reflection" from a mainstream Christian standpoint was prepared and is included as Appendix 2 in the full project report, "Management and Spiritual Energy".

Appendix - The brief for the action learning sets.

The actual brief sent to the participants in advance was as follows:

"The aim of the research project is to explore the energy at work individually in managers, and corporately in organisations, and in what ways and to what extent it is a 'spiritual' energy. We believe that this in itself is a worthwhile activity for all of us. It will offer us the opportunity to make and implement more conscious decisions about ourselves, and our work, through making this energy more explicit and harnessable.

Task of the Day - Set A

Please think about 2 or 3 individual experiences at work, which lifted you to a new level of performance achievement, perhaps achieving something you thought was impossible. Choose one to describe to the set.

Please describe the energy you felt arose within you. How would you describe this energy to a friend?

At the end of the set discuss whether the set feels there are common features in what you have been sharing.

Task of the Day - Set B

Please think about 2 or 3 experiences at work where the organisation has seemed to be at a new level of performance, which you thought impossible. Did the energy generate a momentum to increase that sense of moving forward? Choose one to describe to the set.

Please describe the energy you felt arose within the organisation. How would you describe this energy to a friend?

At the end of the set discuss whether the set feels there are common features in what you have been sharing."