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# A MATTER OF BEING

## DEVELOPING SUSTAINABILITY-MINDED LEADERS

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**Abstract.** In a world that is in need of more individuals acting with the social and environmental impact of their decisions in mind, what would it take to develop sustainability-minded leaders? This article shares the findings of a qualitative descriptive exploratory study where 16 leaders championing sustainability initiatives were interviewed in order to learn from them, understand what information played a role in their actions, how they thought, and what motivated or inspired them to act in a “business-as-unusual” way. In this article, the results of the original study are briefly summarized, and new findings related to the particular role spirituality played for these business leaders are presented. Following the innovative approach of this journal in addressing the question “now what?”, this author then provides suggestions for adult educators, corporate trainers, and coaches on how they could develop the sustainability mindset by incorporating activities that engage the higher self of the audience.

**Keywords:** leadership and sustainability; spirituality; sustainability initiatives; sustainability mindset

### INTRODUCTION

The Maslow’s values are the values people live for, when they don’t have anything to live for. — Joseph Campbell

A few years ago, this author was intrigued by business leaders who, without being asked to do so, personally took on initiatives that engaged their organizations in making a positive social or environmental impact. Why were they doing it? Without a doubt, the economic, environmen-

tal, and social crises we face on a daily basis are wake-up calls signaling that something is not quite right about the way we have organized our modern life. Business plays a major role, shaping the way we produce, sell, consume, and dispose of the products we consume, not to mention the role corporations play in promoting a materialistic lifestyle, one that is exported throughout the world. Corporate social and environmental responsibility is increasingly seen as a new aspect of doing business (Shrivastava, 1995; Dunphy, Benn, & Griffiths, 2003), yet relatively little research has focused on the role leaders play as champions of sustainability initiatives (Sharma, 2002; Visser & Crane, 2010). The responses of individuals to the human impact on environmental changes has been studied in the psychology of sustainability (Stern, 1992), but these do not shed light on the motivations of a leader to champion an initiative that can have a positive impact, and there is little knowledge on how sustainability initiatives bring personal fulfillment or meaning to the individual (Visser & Crane, 2010).

Existential lenses have been used to explore if the business case can be a driver for leaders (Howell & Higgins, 1990) as opposed to moral and altruistic motivations (Andersson & Bateman, 2000; Alexander, 2007; De Colle & Werhane, 2008); consequently, it was not found to be a sufficient motivator on its own. Visser and Crane (2010) identified a typology of sustainability manager types—Expert, Facilitator, Catalyst, and Activist—that were shaped by the sources of meaning in the managers' life and work. Brown (2012) studied 33 leaders from multinational corporations in North and South America, Europe, and Oceania who had engaged in initiatives that impacted thousands of people. He focused his study on how they designed and engaged in these change initiatives in relation to their developmental stage or “action logic” (Torbert et al., 2004).

While these studies explore leaders who engage in sustainability initiatives, along with their worldviews, values, and motivations, how adult educators could intentionally accelerate the development of a broader, more sustainable mindset has not been sufficiently explored. Understanding how we could develop a sustainability mindset has a direct impact on shaping a new generation of leaders, an area of major urgency since we need to increase the number of individuals with the motivation and ability to lead with this new mindset (Vinkhuyzena & Karlsson-Vinkhuyzena, 2014).

The lack of scholarly research on this topic today does not differ from when this author initiated her doctoral study some years ago. She wanted to know what information played a role for leaders championing sustainability initiatives, how they thought, and what motivated or inspired

them to act in a “business-as-unusual” way, given that the path they followed was insufficiently explored (Piper, Gentile, & Daloz Parks, 1993: 121)—an observation supported by Henriques and Sadorsky (1999) and Salzman et al. (2005), who all called for further research, particularly of the descriptive kind, on this topic. To this point, a qualitative case study of 17 organizations engaged in corporate social responsibility initiatives explored the connection between leadership and sustainability, suggesting “the need for leadership theorists to better understand the factors prompting certain leaders to adopt a focus on sustainability” (Quinn & Dalton, 2009: 27). The implications of leaders’ decisions and actions extend beyond their lifetime and can therefore, if understood, “bring a spiritual, ethical or philosophical dimension to leadership processes” (Allen, Stelzner, & Wielkiewicz, 1998: 76). This author thought that if one understood the key factors that were leading these atypical managers to action, one might have some guidance on how to intentionally develop the next generation of leaders. This becomes even more urgent given the expanding adoption of the U.N.-supported Principles for Responsible Management Education, which aim at transforming the contents and values taught in business schools around the world.

This article presents the findings of the doctoral study, particularly the role spirituality played in the leaders’ motivation to act with a sustainability mindset. Spirituality is of particular importance, given that much of management education related to sustainability focuses on facts, processes, and rationales, with little consideration for the power of spirituality and values to motivate sustainable actions. The reasons for neglecting spirituality come as no surprise given that the working environment in Western society has been kept secular, with people’s religious or spiritual life maintained quite separately (Neal, 2008a). As Andre Delbecq puts it, “speaking of God, transcendence, or spirituality in the context of work was out of bounds” (Delbecq, 2008: 485). Ethics—that is, the values behind leaders’ decisions—has not been an openly discussed topic in the workplace until a wave of corporate scandals became public in 2008 and 2009. Learning how to speak from a spiritual place remains, to this day, an important yet difficult life skill (Hicks, 2003). Martin Rutte, founder and board member of the Centre for Spirituality and Workplace at Sobey School of Business in Halifax, Nova Scotia, indicates that people have not developed a language to talk about spiritual themes, especially outside religious settings (personal communication, July 13, 2009). Yet there is a tendency to look for a more integral approach to individuals in organizations, one that considers the spiritual aspects, human developmental stages, mental models, and impact on sustainability-related behaviors (Wilber, 2001; Cooperrider, 2004; Edwards, 2005; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2005; Scharmer, 2008; Brown, 2012).

## THE STUDY

The research was designed as a qualitative descriptive exploratory study. In order to examine the insufficiently explored phenomenon of business leaders championing sustainability initiatives, the multiple case method was used to gather data from an elite group of outstanding individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998: 90; Creswell, 1998: 55). Sixteen exemplary individuals were selected (see Table 1). They were currently or had been in leadership positions, championing sustainability initiatives despite the fact that doing so was not initially part of their job description. A detailed description of the methodology is presented in the Appendix.

Name	Gender	Industrial area	Age	Position
Anthony	M	Retail	75	CEO-Founder, medium size US multinational corporation (MNC)
Jack	M	Technology	70	Former VP of Product Development, large US MNC
Raul	M	Technology	66	Former CEO, small US MNC
Stephen	M	Food	61	Chairman, large US corporation
Harry	M	NGO	60	President-Founder, association of corporations, NGOs, and government
Malcolm	M	Household products	56	VP, medium size US corporation
Diego	M	Coffee	56	President-Founder, small US corporation
Howard	M	Apparel	53	Director, medium size US corporation
Kevin	M	Pharmaceutical	53	VP, large European MNC
Ronald	M	Restaurant	53	Global Senior VP, large US MNC
Daisy	F	Apparel	53	Former Global Director for Research, Design, and Development, large US MNC

Shani	F	Food	49	Director, Legal Affairs, large US MNC
Barry	M	Coffee cooperative	47	President-Founder, small international cooperative
Stanley	M	Restaurant	45	Former President and Owner of large US franchises in Europe
Janine	F	Food	39	VP, R&D, large European MNC
Nelson	M	Food	37	VP, Investor Relations, large US corporation

TABLE 1: Demographics of the Individuals Studied

In broad terms, the study explored the following questions:

1. What do business leaders need in order to begin or champion initiatives that contribute to the common good of communities or the environment?
2. How and what do business leaders learn about implementing these initiatives?
3. How could educators or coaches support the process?

## THE FINDINGS

Each question was explored from a variety of angles. The statements of the interviewees were grouped into thirty-five “families” or categories covering a) what created the readiness to act (personal mission and social sensitivity), b) aspects related to engaging in action, such as learning strategies utilized, contents learned, helpful attitudes, and mindset, and c) advice for adult educators provided by the participants of the study.

Figure 1 shows how readiness was first connected with “intentionality to act,” meaning that these leaders engaged in actions not by chance but by being very intentional. The intentionality was found to be rooted in the development of social sensitivity, and in a sense of “personal mission.” The social sensitivity, in turn, was found to be developed either in the early years of their life (through their upbringing or role models of their childhood and teenage years) or by some kind of “awakening” as adults. Some clearly unique aspects were found, such as childhood experiences, meaningful encounters, and traumatic triggers (e.g., the

loss of a loved one, accidents, health issues) as well as transformative ones (i.e., the experience of becoming a parent). On the other hand, some aspects of adult awakening were of particular interest since these could provide guidance for adult educators; some examples would be information the leaders received about the state of the planet, people pushing and challenging them to reflect or act, and time to ponder the quality of a “fragmented” life that was inconsistent with their personal values. In addition, these aspects created certain feelings (i.e., guilt, sadness, despair, anger, need to act) which related to a heightened sense of responsibility, desire to share knowledge with others, and need to put their gifts or skills in action.

Findings connected to engaging in action provided rich information on how these leaders learned to implement their initiatives, what they did, what personal attitudes they found helpful, and what mindset they shared. Some of the factors that helped in the implementation process were personality traits, like persistence or having an entrepreneurial spirit.

The study (Rimanoczy, 2010) offered a rich insight into the phenomenon of business leaders championing sustainability initiatives. A clear pattern of awareness, passion, and action emerged from the interviewees’ reports of their experiences (Rimanoczy, 2013). The data obtained provided lessons applicable to leadership development with a focus on sustainability, guidance on how to structure a sustainability lecture for a non-sensitized audience, and informed the practice of executive coaches as well as this author’s own practice as a legacy coach. The findings were also utilized in the design of a graduate course that aims to develop the “sustainability mindset” and which has been taught since 2010; more recently, it has become the focus of a global network of academics promoting the sustainability mindset ([www.LeanIntoSustainability.org](http://www.LeanIntoSustainability.org)).

For educators and consultants, the study provides useful insights into the paradigm shift that took place for these business leaders, data about their preferred learning methodologies, and implementation techniques and strategies that worked for them. An important component of the paradigm shift was the “being” orientation (Adams, 2008), a construct that includes the scrutiny of values, the search for purpose, introspective practices, and a sense of connectedness with all that is. These aspects fall under the concept of spirituality, and are key in the development of future leaders who can act with the environment and social needs in mind, transcending the traditional self-interest and narrow focus of business (Lopez, Martinez, & Specht, 2013).

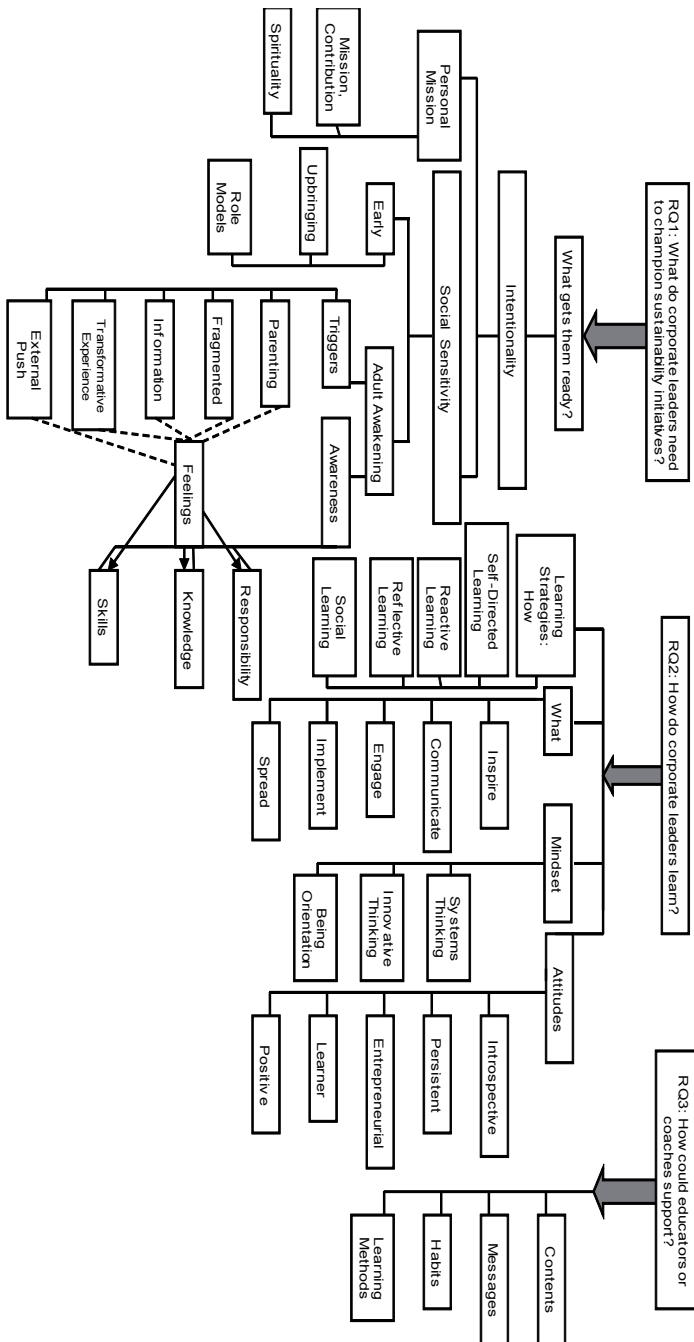


FIGURE 1: The Findings Map



For the purpose of this article, the data gathered in the original study was looked over with a new lens—the lens of spirituality, with particular focus on how the dimension of “being” manifested in the discourse of the interviewees as an element of their “sustainability mindset.” In addition, since the study provided guidance in the design of a program to develop such a mindset, “being”-related commentaries by students in various offerings of the course are also included in this article.

The data collected from the interviews and the course suggest that adult educators may well be able to play a role in intentionally fostering or developing the aspects of “being.”

## **CREATING READINESS**

Based on the literature review, this author used two umbrella categories to describe what created the intentionality to champion the initiatives: personal mission and development of social sensitivity. This author found that spiritual elements played an important role for both.

### ***Intentionality Developed through Personal Mission***

In exploring their intentions and missions, the interviewees used a large number of constructs: spiritual mission, survival mission, need to find meaning, need to act, life dream, social mission, legacy, personal contribution, mortality awareness, religion and spirituality, personal commitment, and purpose. While these constructs are all slightly different and refer to different phenomena or motivations, they are nevertheless related. The participants used these constructs in order to reflect on and share their perspectives without being limited by the meaning they personally gave to (and the emotional load of) a particular term. For example, seven participants failed to resonate with the idea of a life-goal or mission. Conversely, thirteen participants (and among them, some of the seven themselves) did mention the need to act: “I have to do this, there is no way not to do this” [Kevin]. A person who rejected the idea of a personal mission inspired by a higher being indicated, however, the intense conviction “of doing the right thing” [Raul]. A person who did not recognize herself as spiritual talked instead about having strong values guiding her [Janine]. A person who indicated that he was not thinking of a legacy talked about having a life dream to create a different organization [Howard]. A person rejecting the idea of a spiritual mission manifested a deep and passionate need to make a change in the world [Anthony]. There was not a particular trend that distinguished employees from founders of their own organization.

The findings indicated that only two—Malcolm and Diego—wondered what their mission was, and had the sense that there was something they had to do but did not know what it was. For the others, the personal mission was not something that prepared them; instead, they recognized the initiative as their mission in retrospect, and thinking of it as a personal mission worked as a reinforcement. This fits the findings of Kroth and Boverie (2000), who indicated that individuals in their study were able to keep to a stronger motivation when they were conscious about their purpose, or when they had reflectively come to think of it as their life mission. Intentionality phrased as a personal mission was also something not present beforehand in the studies of Kovan and Dirkx (2003) and in the experience of Cohen and Greenfield (1997), cofounders of the environmentally and socially responsible Ben & Jerry's. The impact of thinking about a personal mission seems to be part of a cyclical process—not a one-time transformational event, but an evolving process, or perhaps a spiral, which fits the concept of cumulative transformation (Lamm, 2000; Daloz, 1999)

There was a rather emotional response from several individuals towards one term or another, whether it was rejecting a higher being, a calling, a spiritual motivation, or a religious inspiration. On the other hand, there was a positive reaction to terms which are more religion-neutral, such as the need to act, life dream, personal contribution, personal commitment, or making a difference.

Nevertheless, thirteen individuals responded positively to the question about the influence of spirituality on their initiatives. While some influence of religion or spirituality in creating readiness was anticipated, the response was larger than expected. This coincided with the unexpected findings in a study of American Indian entrepreneurs, who stated that the most influential aspect of their career was spirituality and not the traditional motivation for profit (Hunt-Oxendine & Dent, 2010); thus, this author was driven to take a deeper look into spirituality and the workplace.

### ***Spirituality and the Workplace***

Alvin Toffler foretold the technological third wave in 1980. Some have indicated that the spiritually-based firm is the organizational fourth wave (Wagner-Marsh & Conley, 1999). Neal (2008a), who reviewed a wide array of management practices and spirituality-related programs in organizations, describes spirituality in the workplace as “about people seeing their work as a spiritual path, as an opportunity to grow personally and to contribute to society in a meaningful way.” Spirituality, however, is a

concept foreign to classical organization and management theory, where managers are expected to be impersonal, and controlling of workers in order to achieve results (Taylor, 1947). “Under this organizational regime, managers and other employees were expected to complete their allotted task without involving their essential self, apparently reflecting the global triumph of rational, scientific consciousness” (Ackers & Preston, 1997: 678). To this day, most corporations keep rationality and legality (as proposed by Taylor) as their preferred guiding practices. Labbs (1995) observes that spirituality may be an essentially human need, but it is not something that companies have traditionally allowed employees to express in the working environment (p. 61). There is little role for consciousness in today’s mainstream managerial paradigm (Baets & Oldenboom, 2010).

Yet something has slowly begun to change. Corporations have started to address spirituality in different forms (Wheatley, 1992; Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Butts (1999) observes that some companies encourage employees to participate in programs that include meditation, prayer, and guided imagery—visioning or “futurizing” (p. 328). Less than a decade ago, Management, Spirituality, and Religion (MSR) emerged as a new field of inquiry in management studies. For its 2011 conference, the Academy of Management selected the terms “Balancing, Enlightening, Transcending” as part of the theme “West meets East,” and, following a tradition initiated a few years ago, continues to offer a meditation session for every morning of the conference as well as a retreat after the event. McCormick (2010) cites the increasing practice of mindfulness meditation in the workplace. In this author’s study, Jack, Malcolm, Daisy, Anthony, Raul, and Harry mentioned different types of programs and trips in which they took leaders through experiences that addressed deep spiritual questions.

Ashmos and Duchon (2000) identify five groups of factors as the cause of the increasing attention paid to spirituality in the workplace. One is related to downsizing, company restructuring, and layoffs that in the past decade negatively impacted the morale of the American workforce (Brandt, 1996; Hamel & Prahalad, 1994). They also found that the urban population was losing valuable community connections it once had through extended family, neighborhoods, and churches (Conger, 1994); the workplace, therefore, becomes the main link to other people and to satisfying the human need for connection and contribution. The third factor identified by Ashmos and Duchon is the growing interest, in America, in Eastern philosophies (Brandt, 1996). Yoga, Zen Buddhism, and Confucianism, which encourage meditation, are finding increasing acceptance. Fourth, some suggest that the large baby boomer generation is aging and facing death, and is therefore showing a growing interest in

reflecting on life's meaning (Brandt, 1996; Conger, 1994). The last factor mentioned is market-led—corporations are facing increasing competition and are in need of creative ideas because of globalization. But creativity is difficult when employees are unhappy and fail to find their work meaningful. Thus, the purpose of including spiritual practices is not always clear; it may relate to a new technique for creating engagement and employee loyalty (Taylor & Bell, 2010) as well as for enhancing wellbeing or providing meaning to work (Karakas, 2010).

Neal (2008a) identifies five trends as contributing to the growing interest in spirituality in the business environment: 1) The changing psychological contract for work—corporations no longer guarantee job stability, so employees turn inward and seek balance in their own spirituality; 2) Changing demographics and aging of the workforce—baby boomers comprise the largest segment of the population in the United States and in some other Western countries. As they go through a mid-life crisis and approach retirement, they become reflective, re-assessing their own lives, values, priorities, and how they want to spend the rest of their days; 3) The Millennium Effect, which is an accentuated “new year's effect”—a time to look back on where we as a civilization have been, at what our future looks like, what goals we want to set; in sum, asking all kinds of spiritual questions; 4) Increased interest in self-help groups and personal growth; 5) Focused attention on the fragility of life and the importance of being fully present and valuing the moment, especially in light of September 11, 2001 and terrorism.

### ***Intentionality and Social Sensitivity***

The data of this author's study indicated the emotional impact of learning about large social and environmental problems. For several of the participants in the study, this awareness is an important factor that has been leading them to ponder the meaning of their lives, their contribution to the problem, and their role. Neal (2008a) notes that traumatic or difficult events trigger deeper questions which she calls “the key spiritual questions”:

Who am I and what are my deepest values? What do I really care about?

What is my purpose in life? Why am I here and what am I meant to do?

If I am true to myself, what should I be doing next?

The connection of awareness, passion, and action is reflected in these questions which were mentioned by several of the participants in this

study, and which emerged as a result of learning about the impact of industrial practices on the environment (Anthony, Kevin, Raul, Stephen, Jack) or on communities, i.e., health issues in the case of Daisy, poverty in the case of Barry and Diego, alienation in the workplace in the case of Malcolm. The connection between learning about environmental or social challenges and the deeper introspective questions has also been observed among students participating in a program for developing the sustainability mindset at Fordham University's MBA.

I am one of seven billion people on this planet that call this place home. Yet I was ignorant enough to not acknowledge that I am in this systematic machine, that grinds time with consumption, and those have become the two main loses [sic] in my life. Time wasted with no real benefit or contribution, and excess consumption with no real reason or justification. (Saad)

This was the first class where I consciously reflected after each video / reading / discussion in order to determine if I was contributing to or helping to solve the problem. This class showed me that unless we make a conscientious effort to ensure we are treating the planet correctly, a lot of the items we are accustomed to taking for granted, will no longer be there for future generations to enjoy. (Elizaveta)

My original personal learning goals focused on learning about energy consumption and the issues surrounding power generation and on living a healthier life in terms of food consumption. Although we have touched on these topics and I have learned about them and how they affect us and what we as individuals and a society can do to help curb the effects on us and the environment, my learning goals based on the most recent readings and videos have changed dramatically. I would now like to learn more about myself as a person as I feel that is the start to becoming a whole person and therefore knowing what is important to me so I can be a more sustainable individual. (Reina)

Rabbi Michael Lerner (2000) refers to this as an "emancipatory spirituality" (p. 165), which manifests in actively working for environmental sustainability and a focus on the transformation of the world.

Spirituality for the individuals in this study was not about accepting a specific belief system, nor about religion or conversion. They were seeking to understand themselves as they experienced a sense of purpose and meaning, one that went beyond that found in the performance of tasks as described in the job design literature (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). This was equally observed among the MBA students:

I'm also realizing that sustainability is about learning about yourself, and who you are as a person as a means of taking the next step and living the

most sustainable lifestyle for yourself. One thing I'm learning through this class is that I think sustainability is partly a personal experience where we need to first discover ourselves and what is important to us, our values, how we think as a person, then we can effectively move forward and work on what is important to us. (Charles)

Moore (2008) examined authentic leadership in a four-year ethnographic study of a leadership course and found that among the younger generation, having a meaningful job according to their own standards was more important than achieving the corporate mission. One of Moore's students, Carrie, put it this way: "I know I'll be moving on in two to three years, so I'm less likely to be interested in achieving an employer's vision. I'm more interested in fulfilling my own vision" (p. 26). So, while the participants in this author's study had an average age of fifty-three, it is possible that finding meaning is also important for the younger generation—albeit for different reasons. Why would a young person, not traumatized by a loss, care about the deeper questions? Jung found the explanation in the fact that the first half of life is threatened by life, and that the second half is threatened by death (Campbell, 2004). This was confirmed by Andre Delbecq, who teaches a spirituality course for college students (personal communication, August 17, 2009). One of the two youngest participants, Nelson, mentioned spirituality as an important aspect in his life. The other one, Janine, said it was not, although she also indicated that she felt a need to act for the greater good earlier in her life, then forgot about it, and that now it was surfacing once again. She was afraid it would disappear again, thus indicating a desire to stay in touch with that part of her spirituality. Joseph Campbell (2004) associates spirituality with a sense of bliss, and recommends to "Follow your bliss. Just stay with it, and there's more security in that than in finding out where the money is going to come from next year" (p. 156).

### ***A New Model of Spiritual Business***

Nine of the sixteen individuals studied expressed ideas and visions about changing the concept of business by transforming corporations into more spiritual places. They described it in a variety of ways that could be grouped into two clusters: spirituality in the workplace at the individual level and spirituality in the workplace at the corporate level.

**Spirituality in the Workplace at the Individual Level.** At the individual level, spirituality at work manifests in the inclusion of spiritual practices or dialogues about spiritual themes in the workplace through activities fostering personal reflection and growth. In this study, Malcolm and Raul talked about developing a workforce that grows spiritually, thus expanding its consciousness. For Howard, it was about "ending

workplaces that demotivate and drain the energy of the employees, leaving them stressed and burned out.” For Diego, it was about ownership and self development; for Jack, asking the deeper questions and then building a corporation “that helps individuals meet their needs for meaningfulness.” For Shani and Diego, it was a key factor for exerting leadership: knowing yourself, and identifying your own values in each decision. Neal (2008b) indicates that “know thyself” is the first guideline for leading from a spiritual perspective—all spiritual growth processes include self-awareness. This statement is consistent with Vaill’s (1998) concern that organizations should pay attention to the “spiritual condition” of their leaders, meaning “the feeling individuals have about the fundamental meaning of who they are, what they are doing, the contributions they are making” (p. 218).

This is an interesting shift from the traditionally instrumental approach where employee satisfaction is sought as a means to an end, which is to increase productivity, avoid turnover, or reduce absenteeism. Only one person—Janine—initially thought of engaging employees in community work as a means to an end, to energize people at a time when morale was low because of restructuring and job instability. Later in the interview, however, she shared her surprise at seeing how employees “jumped on it,” reflecting that there is a need for purpose which is not being attended to. When this need is not honored, we live divided lives (Palmer, 2004), checking our soul at the door.

A global movement in that direction has begun, and it has been observed in several business schools in the United States and around the world that have launched centers for spirituality in the workplace in the last decade, and also in the success of poets like David Whyte. His 1994 book, *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*, is a best-seller, as are other books connecting work and soul: Moore’s (1992) *Care of the Soul*; Bolman and Deal’s (1995) *Leading With Soul*; or *Conscious Capitalism*, by Whole Foods Market co-founder and CEO John Mackey and Babson College professor Raj Sisodia; *The Purpose Economy* (Hurst, 2014); or Arianna Huffington’s eloquent book *Thrive* (2014). Work is slowly but increasingly being seen as a source of spiritual growth and connection to others (Mirvis, 1997: 193). After recognizing a spiritual element in employees, the expression of spirituality at work requires accepting that employees want to be involved in work that gives meaning to their lives (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000).

The timing for this shift may be appropriate. There is a new distinction between utilitarian work, which is framed as mundane, and “the work,” which implies work symbolically valuable to the individual and



to society, and thus meaningful for the individual (Shershow, 2005). Babson Professor Raj Sisodia calls this the Age of Transcendence (Sisodia, Wolfe, & Sheth, 2007).

**Spirituality in the Workplace at the Corporate Level.** Spirituality at the corporate level refers to the higher purpose of the business. For Stanley, it was “purpose meeting profit,” his dream of entrepreneurs like “Warren Buffet meets Mother Theresa,” a place where employees love to work because they satisfy their higher values since the corporation contributes to the betterment of society or the restoration of the environment in a profitable way. Malcolm holds a position that was especially created to address spirituality at the corporate level—he is director of higher consciousness. Anthony was able to convert his dream of creating a restorative corporation into reality by disseminating his vision and engaging all the employees. Diego describes himself as an activist who became a businessman in order to build the type of purposeful corporation he was dreaming of.

Neal (2008b) describes a new paradigm emerging among corporate leaders who define the purpose of business as a solution to world problems using the creative energy of their employees. In fact, as early as 1990, Harman and Hormann had indicated that corporations were best placed to solve global social problems. They suggested that the role of corporations needs to change from that of economic production and consumption to being places for learning and human development. Leadership’s role would be to apply spiritual principles in order to help bring about this societal transformation. Channon (1992) cites corporations such as Chase Manhattan Bank, DuPont, AT&T, Apple Computer, and others that have tackled the subject of contribution by including a new question in their search for vision: “What is our higher purpose?” (p. 58). Sisodia, Wolfe, and Sheth (2007) studied corporations that met the criteria of “firms of endearment”—giving the same attention to all the stakeholders—and found that they outperformed their traditionally managed competitors over a period of 15 years while being driven by purpose. Rinaldo Brutoco, founder of the World Business Academy, stated in the preface of Liebig (1994) that “many leaders will soon come to see the primary role of business settings as incubators of the human spirit, rather than factories for the production of mere material goods and services” (p. xii). More recently, Case Western Reserve’s Weatherhead School of Management has created a center of excellence called the Fowler Center for Sustainable Value, which sponsors research into the ways business is making a positive difference in the world. Aburdene (2007) talks about the rise of a conscious capitalism, and has listed spirituality in the workplace as one of the most important emerging trends of the twenty-first century.



The findings of this author's study indicate the steps some corporations are taking to combine profit with purpose. This is definitely something adult educators have to begin paying attention to in order to support students in developing a new perspective of business's purpose, something that will foster more social entrepreneurs but also impact their corporate jobs (Bornstein, 2007).

### ***Being Orientation***

This concept is adapted from Adams (2008: 63) who refers to self-realization, valuing intangibles, the greater good, searching qualitative growth, and having enough. On the other end of the continuum, he refers to materialism, consumption, greed, cost-effectiveness, quantitative growth, and financial performance. This author expanded the construct to include the search for purpose, the scrutiny of values, introspective practices, and the sense of connectedness with all that is.

Being as opposed to having was well described in the discourse of ten participants. They talked about traumatic experiences, trips, and encounters—self-reflection, reading, journaling, and contemplative practices that led them to focus on their being. Four talked about how they saw themselves and the world: Raul described that material things never mattered very much to him, while Barry talked about understanding that there was a greater good in what his organization was doing. Diego gave an explanation of his perspective:

And some people say, "Well you could help more people." And I say, "Well, that's really interesting." That's one of those quantitative things that's come out of this mindset in the last twenty years. Everything's quantitative. If it's not scalable, it's not valuable. That's the newest mantra in business these days.

Daisy talked about her transformation in terms of being versus having in these words: "There is more to life than the next gadget, I now see the world. I feel I lived in a cave."

Nature was an interesting theme that emerged in seven of the sixteen interviews as an important element of their mindset, and one that is connected to manifesting the being orientation. The closeness to nature—the experience of it—taught them to pay attention and to observe the wisdom of nature and what can be learned from it. Many had transformational experiences connected to their encounters with nature in different forms, and found this a key shaper of the mindset that

helped those championing such initiatives. Raul presented his perspective on how his understanding of nature shaped his actions:

... sanctify where Nature was still in balance and we were in balance with her. I was raised on a farm, and so I think it's a complex issue. I just don't think you go cut down big old trees just because you want to put in a condominium complex. ... that's a serious act that's in some ways as powerful an act as killing someone, to just simply decide that trees that were hundreds of years old were in the way of progress, and my idea is that hundred-year-old trees and progress aren't necessarily mutually exclusive. There's the economy, and embedded inside the economy is society, and embedded in there is Nature. Well, it's just the other way around ... somehow we're harmonized with the natural rhythms of the environment that really sustains and nourishes us, and I think that we're withdrawing capital from the Nature bank so fast that we will, you know, you'll set back Nature a little bit, but Nature's gonna recover. We'll definitely run the risk of taking ourselves out.

While staying in a solitary retreat for several days, Daisy had a transformative experience with nature. On the other hand, Stephen had his own perspective on how nature impacted his thinking:

But just kind of being that close to the earth, the dirt ... it's in our being. Importance of Nature ... to the sustainability of mankind. In many of the religious traditions that I believe most deeply, there is that sense, that connection, you know, man in Nature and our impact on Nature and Nature's impact on us.

Both Anthony and Jack implemented a program to bring the perspective of nature to leaders. In Jack's case, they took 450 people into nature for a "lifetime experience ... the Earth is the mother, the mother you have to listen to." Harry, who grew up as a farmer, talked about a "gut level commitment to soil, water, Nature."

## **NOW WHAT?**

This study confirmed the observations of previous research which pointed to the connection between spiritual leadership and corporate social responsibility (Fry & Wigglesworth, 2010), and which connects with more recent considerations about the role spiritual intelligence plays for surviving in the sustainability-infused 21<sup>st</sup> century (Stead & Stead, 2010). In addition, the data gathered allow for making recommendations to academic educators, corporate leadership development

professionals, and coaches (who are all included in the category of “adult learning facilitators”).

### ***Personal Mission***

The findings of this study suggested the power that thinking of a personal mission can have for motivating and reinforcing initiatives for the common good. Thinking of initiatives in such terms provides an intentionality that helps to overcome the multiple obstacles of implementation, and which provides a source of persistence since the initiative becomes part of a personal purpose or cause.

**Recommendation for adult learning facilitators:** Pondering the idea of a personal mission is a powerful motivator, and educators can play a significant role in fostering reflection on this topic. The participants reacted in different ways to the words used to address this issue, e.g., meaning, life dream, spirituality, legacy, personal contribution, purpose, and role, thus indicating the personal and emotional load of such terms. This author suggests avoiding religious terms, maintaining secularity, and exploring which terms are most inspiring for a particular audience.

Questions such as *Why am I? What am I meant to do? What is my role?* can be used.

### ***Know Thyself***

Several participants regretted that they did not have an opportunity to ponder the deeper questions about self until later in life. They thought that if they were exposed to challenging self-awareness provoking questions during their college years, they would have experienced earlier personal development and growth.

**Recommendation for adult learning facilitators:** Self-awareness can be explored by addressing personal values; inconsistencies between one’s espoused and enacted values; one’s ambiguities, cultural beliefs, and taken-for-granted principles—for example, one’s relationship with consumption and with the material world; the focus on having or on being; and the quantitative or qualitative ways to approach one’s life. Questions about the purpose of one’s own life, the meaning of what we do, and identity—such as “Who am I?”—can also be used.

### ***Self and the World***

Several participants in this study made a significant step in their personal spiritual development when they asked themselves how they were contributing to the problems they saw in the world. This question triggered an emotional reaction, which in turn fueled the decision to act, thus creating an urge to do something about it.

**Recommendation for adult learning facilitators:** To introduce this perspective, any dramatic event from the news, or hated situations, can be used to trigger these powerful questions: *How am I contributing to this? How does this connect to my world?*

### ***Self and Nature***

Direct experiences of closeness to nature were some of the most powerful teaching moments. For some, it was about remembering and going back to what was learned during childhood and then later forgotten. For others, it was a specific experience that set up cause for reflection and an impact, such as a visit to a beautiful or devastated natural site, or a retreat.

**Recommendation for adult learning facilitators:** To work with the impact of nature, adult educators can focus on learning to observe, and on observing to learn. The experience with nature, first of all, is multi-sensorial, meaning we get it through our senses as we immerse in it. We can then do a cognitive processing of what we experienced. Questions that intellectually explore the relationship between people and nature can also be tackled in order to challenge the economy-centric perspective; it is nature as a resource to be dominated and used versus human-kind as one more part of nature.

### ***The Whole Person***

One participant expressed it in a powerful way—we all have a hole in the heart. Several participants mentioned the emptiness, an experience of something missing in their otherwise “satisfying, happy” lives. Later, as they found what filled that “vacuum,” some named it as their spiritual dimension.

**Recommendation for adult learning facilitators:** We are a combination of body, mind, feelings, and soul. Teaching and working environments pay little attention to the physical body dimension, and even

less to feelings and soul. Some professions, especially those that are connected to art, engage the feelings and the soul, the mind and the body. Adult educators and coaches can invite all these dimensions into the room through breathing or stretching exercises, or through activities that allow for creative expression, such as painting, collage, poetry, music, dance, drumming, guided visioning exercises, etc. Creative activities express feelings and connect with the soul.

### ***Meditative Practices***

Several individuals in this author's study indicated that some kind of meditative practice played a key role in their personal balance and the development of their consciousness. They picked up these practices at different moments of their life, and wished that these had been part of their college education.

**Recommendation for adult learning facilitators:** There is a broad spectrum of meditative practices, and people who are not familiar with meditation tend to feel shy and respectful of a "difficult" practice. Educators and coaches can help "demystify" this concept by providing resources or simple indications for meditative practices, such as walking, sitting in silence, focusing on one's breathing, closing one's eyes, listening to one's heart beat, making a small pause, observing the thoughts passing through one's mind, etc.

### ***Reflective Practices***

The very active business people who formed part of this study did not live in a corporate setting that was less demanding than other corporations. The pace was as accelerated as elsewhere, and the to-do lists were as overwhelming as in any organization. Yet they shared a common aspect: they took time to pause and reflect. In different ways, they learned and developed a habit of respect for the power of a moment of quiet reflection.

**Recommendation for adult learning facilitators:** Reflection is not part of our culture and it requires to be specifically developed through exercises and repetition. Writing one's thoughts, using personal journals, and creating a minute of silence for all to reflect and write are some of the techniques that can be used.

### ***The Spiritual Organization***

In one way or another, the individuals participating in this study were making an impact using their organization as an instrument. Some

realized that it went beyond initiatives and actions—what had been developed was a sense of purpose, a revision of the values that in many cases were written in an old mission statement which they brought back to life.

**Recommendation for adult learning facilitators:** Corporations can play a leading role and have a big impact, and this happens with individuals as well. Jason Clay with the WWF makes a good presentation at TED about the difference large organizations can and are beginning to make. Paul Hawken talks about how simple people create grassroots organizations that end up shaping a world movement. Educators can expand thinking and provide inspiration, developing awareness of the global citizenship responsibilities towards our planet and the restorative obligation we all share. As Jason Clay puts it, “We have to start healing this planet as if our life depended on it.”

### ***Yes, it is Possible***

If the recommendations seem difficult to implement in a university setting, let it be shared with the reader that a program using these recommendations to develop the “sustainability mindset” has been taught for post graduate students at Fairleigh Dickinson and at Fordham’s MBA. The program was piloted in 2010 and is in its fifth generation at the time of this writing. Furthermore, a cohort of 34 academics from twenty eight business schools in sixteen countries has begun promoting the sustainability mindset with their students. The design and the learning methodology are different from traditional teaching, and were adapted to the contents and purpose, making the experience similar to an extended personal development/coaching process, albeit in an institutional setting. Students discover some new dimensions about themselves and the potential impact that they can have. In the words of one of the participants:

I often times find myself justifying my work ... to myself! I am overwhelmed by the issues, and I feel too small to make an impact .... I’ve always struggled between my passion for [my work] and the often times devastating trail [my industry] causes in the world both environmentally and socially. [This class] started something stirring in me ... and I think I’m on the verge of discovering my life’s mission.

Just one statement like that may make it worth a try.

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## APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

Gaining access to exemplary leaders was not easy, mainly because for-profit organizations that are involved with these types of initiatives are mostly large and multinational, and access to their top leaders is restricted and limited by PR and legal considerations. Potential candidates for the study began to be identified through data gathered from various media sources, namely trade books, magazines, TV, radio, newspapers, and Internet searches. The next strategy used was participation in conferences and CSR events, with this author introducing herself and asking for referrals and electronic introductions using her network of connections. This was successful for getting the first six candidates, and then it continued from there with a snowball technique, with this author asking the individuals interviewed for referrals to other potential candidates (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 28).

Data gathering occurred in three phases. In the first phase, four pilot interviews were conducted (Light, Singer, & Willet, 1990; Maxwell, 2005) and debriefed with doctoral colleagues and this author's advisor. This resulted in the final screening process and interview questions which followed a semi-structured format.

The second phase involved conducting sixteen in-depth interviews. These were organized around broad primary questions which invited the participant to tell his or her story. Probing and follow-up questions were asked according to what was anticipated in the interview protocol, along with direct questions to collect missing information.

Transcripts were sent to the participants and an executive summary was also submitted in three cases where the participants did not read the transcript. The participants were asked to review the material and make any corrections, adjustments, or additions, after which they sent the same back to this author.

The interview content was coded using Maxwell's categories (2005: 97) of theoretical, organizational, and descriptive codes. Theoretical codes, based on the literature review and this author's own understanding of the topic, provided the abstract framework of the study. Organizational codes are categories that can store data-labels for anticipated clusters, and the descriptive codes were built using, or were inspired by, the syntax of the interviewees. The initial coding scheme was developed based on the literature review, this author's own knowledge, and the pilot interviews. In between interviews, the coding scheme was revisited and expanded in an iterative process of open and in-vivo codes to include the newly emerging themes (Strauss, 1987: 33). As a result, a new coding scheme of 314 codes was developed, which was then used for data analysis.

This author used biographical and phenomenological techniques in semi-structured interviews, framing the study within the constructivist paradigm (Guba, 1990) and applying a comparative cross-case analysis (Creswell, 1998: 63; Yin, 2003: 46) that searched for convergent and divergent aspects among the different leaders interviewed. The complexity of the phenomenon explored opened the analysis into numerous themes, which made it important to find out how they could be grouped and clustered into broader categories or "families" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998: 196). The final coding scheme was organized into eleven areas: one that addressed demographic data and ten that were informed by the researcher's understanding combined with the literature review and emergent themes.

The three research questions were:

1. What do business leaders need in order to begin or champion initiatives that contribute to the common good of communities or the environment?

2. How and what do business leaders learn about implementing these initiatives?
3. How could educators or coaches support the process?

Since this author's questions pointed at an unexplored phenomenon, they presented the complexity of uncharted territories. Each question was explored from a variety of angles. The numerous findings were grouped into thirty-five "families" or categories that covered a) what created the readiness to act (personal mission and social sensitivity), b) aspects related to engaging in action, such as learning strategies utilized, contents learned, helpful attitudes, and mindset, and c) advice for adult educators provided by the participants of the study.

The process of developing the categories had three steps. The first step was to cluster similar codes. For example, the codes under "Feelings" were pain, sadness, depression, fear, despair, debt, guilt, shock, concern, anger, "drives me crazy," joy, and satisfaction. This author grouped debt with guilt, joy with satisfaction, anger with "drives me crazy," shock with concern, and pain with sadness, depression, fear, and despair. This step helped in creating a table to organize the data.

The second step was the creation of this new table, with each code family in one column, each participant's name in one row, and a mark indicating who had a comment related to each family. This step helped to gain a better overview of commonalities by allowing for comparing and contrasting, the seeking of cross-case patterns, and new insights to emerge.

The third step was a revision of the code families to see if they could be grouped into further clusters. This was a particularly valuable step for the categories that had a large number of families. For example, there were twelve families within Timing and Triggers. A careful analysis helped to identify those that were closely related, and this revision was made across all the categories and all the families; in some cases, a family was re-grouped under another umbrella concept. During the iterative analysis of the codes, this author kept in mind (and asked her peer reviewers to do the same) the three research questions as well as the purpose of the study. With adult educators in mind, this author focused on aspects that could be valuable for them if they decided to develop "sustainability minded" leaders.

As a guide to the complexity of this study, the Findings Map is portrayed in Figure 1.