Book The Stirring of Soul in the Workplace

Alan Briskin
Berrett-Koehler, 1998

Recommendation

People need creativity, fantasy, passion and caring, argues Alan Briskin, and when they're deprived of those things at work, there's trouble ahead. Briskin's book works well as a study in modern-day alienation. Tracing the loss of soul at work to scientific engineering, he summarizes various research findings that will seem like old college friends to those with business degrees. But the book sags when it sets forth into the land of the soul, where Briskin gets fuzzy, unfocused, repetitious and just plain hard to understand. In addition, he never actually gets around to telling us how to get soul back at work. Nevertheless, *BooksInShort.com* recommends this book to managers, employees and students with a desire to look deeper into the balance of hard work and personal satisfaction, and the patience to wade through the sometimes trite.

Take-Aways

- Strive to incorporate the qualities associated with soul into the workplace.
- These qualities include meaning, memory, beauty, fragility, divinity and union.
- Try to synthesize the outer organization of work processes and managerial structures with the inner needs of people.
- These inner needs include feelings, attitudes and a desire to connect.
- Reconnect with your inner soul, which represents a multiplicity of selves.
- When you explore your soul, recognize the dark side as well as the light.
- The dark side of the soul consists of personal weaknesses and negative qualities.
- Recognizing these unacknowledged dark-side qualities can be liberating for the individual and the organization.
- The loss of soul in the workplace dates back to the industrial revolution and the scientific engineering principles developed by Frederick Taylor.
- People need meaning even more today, because workplaces are more stressful and demanding.

Summary

The Need for Soul in the Workplace

There is a basic contradiction built into the modern workplace. The outer organization of work processes, which includes corporate objectives and managerial structures, works in opposition to the inner organization of people, which includes their emotions, attitudes, thoughts, and even the cooperative spirit the outer organization wants to foster.

> "The demands of the workplace can be absolutely ruthless and crushing, while the dreams of the people in the same workplaces can be inspiring."

To move into the future, organizations must straddle these two worlds and discover something new. This does not require using a particular program or technique, or embracing some strange, mystical belief system. Rather, it means that everyone should be more self-aware and more attentive to the voices of the inner soul, which are concerned with qualities like meaning, memory, beauty, fragility, divinity, wildness and union.

> "To explore the challenge to the human soul in organizations is to build a bridge between the world of the personal, subjective, and even unconscious elements of individual experience and the world of organizations that demand rationality, efficiency, and personal sacrifice."

To reconcile the human soul and the organization, build a bridge. On one side are the personal, subjective, and unconscious elements that make up the individual experience. On the other side are the organization's demands for rationality, efficiency, and personal sacrifice. When the two sides fit together, you will feel a sense of harmony and balance. However, if no fit occurs, you will feel torn and alone. You will feel a conflict between your personal goals and needs, and those of the organization.

> "When we are cut off from the deeper regions of soul, we lose the energies that give rise to the imagination and passions necessary for creativity and adaptation to a changing world."

The reason for this split is that an underworld of the soul grows inside someone whose human needs aren't satisfied. This underworld includes feelings of abandonment, rage, guilt, despair and shame. Anyone under great pressure and stress may feel these emotions, particularly those who sense a lack of balance in their lives. People who are cut off from the deeper regions of soul feel a loss of the strong internal energy that nourishes the imagination and passions necessary for creativity and adaptation to a changing world.

The Nature of Soul

You need to reconnect with your soul, which represents the multiplicity of selves that everyone has. Your soul is the mysterious, inner, multifaceted part of your personality. You can never know this part of yourself fully, but it is a vital, internal influence. To feel fulfilled, you should nurture and express it.

> "The challenge of finding soul in organizations, as in life, is to embrace not only what we see, hear and understand, but also to attend to what we don't know, what we cannot see at first glance or hear on first listening."

For example, one top executive experienced a personal crisis when his company gave him a new assignment. During his review, the CEO told him that there were reports he wasn't managing the transition very well and was losing control. As a result, he went through a deep period of soul-searching, in which he became more aware of himself and of personal weaknesses he had always concealed. He realized that he tended to be reactive to events and insecure about ambiguity. This personal journey and self-assessment was very liberating. He recognized darker features within himself that contradicted his conscious self, and he grew as a result.

> "The soul represents the mysterious, multifaceted dimension of our personality, never fully known, yet a source of vital influence."

You also can achieve greater personal growth and fulfillment by looking within yourself. This inner search will help you recognize your multifaceted soul beyond what you know consciously. You will find that seeing through and beyond your outer self helps you really know yourself and gives you insight about your workplace. Look at the full extent of your humanity, vitality, and understanding. Don't look only at what you can see, hear, or understand initially, but examine what you discover when you observe and listen more deeply.

> "The thread that is woven through the ancient ideas of the soul is that there are many selves whose interactions and struggles shape our thought and our consciousness in general."

Now, you are going below the surface of reason to explore the unconscious wilderness of your feelings and emotions. This self-examination offers new possibilities for renewing and increasing your human potential.

The History of the Soul

Ideas about the soul rest on ancient wisdom. In early Greek writings, the soul is associated with the underworld. Ancient Greek and Hebrew stories associate the soul with vitality, animation, renewal and the essence of the human being. In both Taoist and Hebrew philosophy, the soul is associated with the union of opposites, where spirit and matter and the light and dark aspects of the human personality are combined. In Gnostic mythology, the soul is thought to include a spark of the divine and a bridge to the cosmic aspects of consciousness. In all of these traditions, the path to the soul is thought of as a journey of self-discovery.

> "If we are to create organizational settings that are driven by values which recognize the dignity of employees and that are also socially responsible, then recognition of the shadow is a necessary reality check at both [the] personal and organizational levels."

You can draw on this wisdom to recognize that many internal selves interact to influence your thoughts and consciousness. By being more aware of these many selves, you can become more comfortable with who you are and you can more effectively find meaning in your existence, including your work. An organization does better, too, when it comes to terms with its inner essence. Just as each person wrestles with essential questions of meaning and purpose, power and assertiveness, competence and inclusion, so does each organization, group, and society.

Learning from the Dark Side

As part of this self-analysis, recognize the dark side of your soul as well as the light. This dark side consists of personal weaknesses and negative qualities, such as the tendency to act with timidity, distorted perception and malice, in contrast to the light side qualities, such as the capacity to show courage, personal insight, and compassion.

> "In each of us there is an allegiance to a light and a dark potential: the capacity for courage, personal insight, and compassion as well as the ability to act with timidity, distorted perception, and malice."

You will find it liberating to acknowledge the dark-side qualities that might be holding you back. For example, one executive thought of himself as a collaborative leader. However, in reality, he was uncomfortable with negative emotional expressions and was strongly attached to his own beliefs. Thus, he wasn't open to true collaboration, and couldn't be, until he was ready to acknowledge these unrecognized emotions and take steps to change. Recognizing this dark side benefits the organization, too, since revealing these hidden dynamics helps create a greater sense of mutual connectedness.

How Organizations Started Suppressing the Soul

The loss of soul in the workplace dates back to the industrial revolution and the rise of scientific engineering developed by Frederick Taylor. Four key processes led to dramatic changes in the way individuals worked and lived: 1) the move from farm to factory; 2) the increase in wage labor; 3) the growth of cities; and 4) the great increase in immigration While these influences existed in the first half of the 1800s, they expanded rapidly from the 1850s through the first part of the twentieth century. These developments created a new dynamic between working and working for someone else. Before, people primarily had worked for themselves on farms and in villages.

> "To include soul in our view of organizational behavior necessitates a recognition of its shadows. It also suggests being alert to the mythic patterns that repeat themselves time and again in the drama of organizational life."

The development of clock time marked a significant change. Measured work time evolved in the early 1880s, because railroads needed a system of organized time. Time was standardized in 1883, which also marks the beginning of time zones. In 1910, Frederick Taylor pioneered the study of work processes and became the first proponent of "scientific management." He tried to show

how the human body could work to increase efficiency. He emphasized breaking work down into tasks that could be done with precision, logic, and order. Taylor's ideas spread rapidly, as managers tried to use his standards as a baseline for measuring efficiency. These concepts became the standard measurement of business performance.

The Difficulty of Finding Meaning at Work

These ideas on rationality and efficiency still influence business. They provided a rationale for work redesign and for exercising control over employees. They maintain their impact by separating work from the soul's search for meaning and its desire for wholeness. Broken down into quantifiable increments, work has lost its internal coherence, the very element necessary to fulfill the soul's desire to see things as part of a whole. Many modern catch phrases - "service excellence," "managing by walking around," and "continuous improvement" - ignore the individual's essential need to find meaning in the task at hand.

> "When in the grip of a collective shadow, we can tolerate only an idealized image of ourselves; we scapegoat someone or some group to reflect the parts that have been disowned."

Unfortunately, when work becomes just a job, its intrinsic value disappears. You lose your feeling of purpose and connectedness. However, because the times are so turbulent, people need purpose and connectedness more than ever. You can't get meaning from corporate mission statements. Achieving meaning requires dialogue and reflection, and the courage to ask difficult questions and face the consequences.

This effort to gain meaning is critical today, because organizations are asking for ever-higher levels of performance. People are asked to work near their melting points. Modern technology has quickened the pace, because it enables continuous work, from the phone in your car to the fax in your briefcase. Yet when you work too hard, your soul can experience great distress. This emerges in symptoms that are hard to repair, such as illness, social disorders, and personal suffering. Penalties for pushing yourself beyond your limits include feelings of exhaustion and a sense of falling from the heights of achievement, much as Icarus fell from the sky when he flew too close to the sun.

Beyond Human Relations

Current corporate human relations efforts seldom provide the meaning and connectedness the soul needs. Instead, most of these programs seem to manipulate individuals in the spirit of better scientific management. The roots of the human relations approach go back to Elton Mayor, who conducted experiments at Western Electric's Hawthorne plant in Chicago. His results - which showed that human performance increased when managers paid attention to people and made them feel better about what they were doing - led to the human relations approach to managing feelings in the workplace in the 1950s.

However, this approach separated the worker's feelings about work, supervision, and wages from the actual conditions of the work. It led to a split between human relations experts who managed feelings and technical experts who managed the conditions of the workplace. At the same time that the human relations people advocated personal development and democratic principles, the workplace became increasingly bureaucratic and mechanized.

The basic human relations model of motivation was based on the idea that an improved work environment would boost morale, resulting in higher productivity and more sustained performance. But this model left out soul, resulting in the feelings of tension and upset that many employees have today. A dangerous tension is growing between working for a salary and finding one's passion, between working for others and fulfilling personal needs.

The ideal is a workplace that fuses personal meaning and corporate purpose. Employees need meaning and purpose. Help your employees balance their organizational roles with their personal lives, so they don't have to split apart the outer and inner worlds of experience. People can accomplish this unity by taking a role that organizes behavior in relation to tasks and other people. This process of finding our voice is one way to synthesize the modern workplace's competing demands. This internal synthesis of the roles you - and your employees - fulfill is essential for personal survival in a stressful workplace.

About the Author

Alan Briskin founded and owns Alan Briskin & Associates, an Oakland, California, organizational development consulting firm. He developed some of his ideas about organizational life when he worked with prison inmates and disturbed adolescents. His clients have included firms involved in many industries. He also consults with other management consultants about change, leadership and learning. He received his M.A. and Ph.D., in organizational psychology from the Wright Institute in Berkeley, California in 1984.