

Awakening Corporate Soul - Chapter 1

The Commitment Crisis & Corporate Soul

The spiritual dimension can never be amputated from work. It can be ignored but never removed. The words Carl Jung carved over the door of his country retreat, "Called or not called, God is present", remind us that even when we are most oblivious, the spiritual dimension is closer than our breath. In a sense, these words are invisibly carved over the entrance to every company, over every desk and work station. It is time to pay attention to the most neglected ? and the most essential ? aspect of our work life.

There is, at this time, both a crisis and a longing that permeates organizations across North America. We call one the commitment crisis, the struggle of organizations and their leaders to discover ways to ignite commitment and performance in a rapidly changing insecure climate. The other is an awakening that is slowly occurring within traditional businesses ? the awakening of the Corporate Soul. It is a nascent movement that seeks to reclaim the spiritual impulse that is at the heart of work. It is about people wanting work to have meaning and even more, to engage more of them at the deepest levels of their capacity and desire.

This book reflects our experiences as participants in both the crisis of commitment and the soulful awakening that is opening into a new world of work.

Taking a Trip To Nowhere

When we first heard this true story in an airport lounge, we thought it was just a funny anecdote. But truth and wisdom can come in unexpected packages. Over time, we saw that what we have come to call the "train story" captures a powerful truth about the challenge leaders and organizations are facing.

The story was told to us by a man who grew up in a small farming town in the Midwest. Trains passed through the town every day on their run to the city some 40 miles north. It was the habit of the older, more daring boys to occasionally hitch a ride on a passing car and spend the day in the city. The storyteller's cousin Jack was one of those intrepid travelers. One day, craving cookies from a certain bakery in the city, he jumped a train. Covering himself in some discarded burlap, he fell asleep. Unfortunately for him, he slept too long. Our later he awakened in a cold darkened car. The door was locked ? from the outside.

And he was in a refrigeration car accompanying several dozen sides of beef, rattling toward an unknown destination. He spent several days in the chilly company of his silent bovine companions only to be rescued by an alert yard man who thought he heard muffled cries of "Help, let me out!" coming from one of the meat cars. Cousin Jack emerged from his ordeal into the light of a bright Oregon afternoon, cold, shaken and several thousand miles from his intended destination. He wondered if the cookies were worth it.

The story is a metaphor for the crisis and longing gripping businesses today. It is about how to unlock the potential in their people. It is about whether someone who feels "locked up" inside our organization for forty hours each week can perform at the level they must for us to stay competitive.

Many people began their working lives like cousin Jack. They just wanted to go for a short ride into town. They began with little more than a "craving for cookies" in the form of a salary capable of feeding their families. Many of them wake up years later to discover themselves riding in the dark, rattling toward some uncertain destination. It is easy to live someone else's life at work and to feel that our "souls" and much of our potential at work are locked away.

We know there is something engaging about this story because whenever we tell it in a corporate seminar, the heads of leaders and workers nod in agreement. Leaders know they can't compete with a company full of people whose passions are not ignited and who lie half asleep crying to get out. All of us know, that we give too much of our lives to work not to listen to the cries from within.

Leaders and workers today have begun to hear the cries for help that are coming from inside themselves. These cries are the voice of the soul, muffled and shivering, but still alive, wanting to be let out. Called or not, the soul is there. Who will take responsibility for letting it out? Consider what level of commitment or innovation is possible in an organization where the soul is virtually locked in a cold storage container.

One needn't go anywhere to find Corporate Soul. It doesn't exist in a secret text or a hidden monastery. Soul is where you are. And for most of the day that means at work. As Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel has said, "God is hiding in the world and our task is to let the divine emerge from our deeds". Leadership, in this context, begins by acknowledging the presence of soul. When it comes to awakening the Corporate Soul, leadership is based on understanding that the soul wants to shine through us and illuminate our work and workplaces.

Time for a Wake-Up Call

"We are asleep until something wakes us up", according to Bill Marriott of hotel fame. This was as true for us as for any beginning seeker. We have both been successful management consultants for over a decade. In retrospect, it is clear that the race for success became an alternative to deeper searching. We became adept at ignoring the sound of our own wake-up calls for a number of years. If the soul was calling us between nine and five, we were too busy to answer. It was easy to be distracted by the demands, deadlines, and excitement of building our business. But one evening as we sat in hotel rooms on opposite sides of the country, we each became acutely aware of a deeper longing within our souls that could no longer be ignored. As we talked, we recognized the need to find greater alignment between our highest and most precious values and the work we were involved in with managers on a day-to-day basis. That evening became a turning point in our journey.

Before that, our routine was simple. After spending the day with leaders, managers, and assorted corporate warriors searching for ways to improve quality and squeeze out more profits, we would return to our hotel rooms and pursue our own spirituality. We were doing good work, helping people and organizations, yet there was something missing. We talked about it and for a long time were unable to name the longing. It was a slow process that brought us to the realization that our weariness had a spiritual origin and that the same stirrings were being felt by our clients.

Many of the leaders we worked with wanted something deeper as much as we did. Yet in the meeting rooms where we spent our days, no one put the longing into words. Was it because it was too vague or because it was really all too clear what bringing this inner longing to consciousness would mean? As Richard, the vice president of a regional bank told us, "I knew the work was suffocating my soul but to admit it would be too devastating; it would mean that I had to do something about it!"

The Commitment Crisis

The month after that soul-turning evening, we attended a conference featuring many of the fastest-growing technology companies in North America. The conference closed with a panel of chief executive officers who were asked, "What will be the greatest challenge facing your organization five years from now?" More than half of the ten CEOs said something like, "We will be struggling with how to re-ignite commitment and help people find meaning in their work." The commitment crisis is an insidious and powerful disease that is affecting those who work in corporations.

From the corporate perspective the struggle is for basic survival fueled by a never-ending search for lower costs, increased productivity, innovation, and superlative performance. Companies that can no longer offer security or pay raises grapple with how to foster loyalty and commitment. With security gone as a carrot, with a new generation of workers looking for more from work than money, with personal balance becoming a major issue for both men and women, and with growing burnout at all levels, the modern organization is struggling with how to attract and keep top people let alone motivate them.

But from the human perspective the crisis is highly personal and threatens the inner sense of purpose, caring, and vitality that makes work meaningful. Millions of workers feel burned out, overworked and

What Is Corporate Soul?

If the phrase Corporate Soul conjures up images of workers praying in the corridors or of Gregorian chants filling the lunch room (or worse, motivational slogans while you are on hold when calling your local department store), think again. Corporate Soul is not a theological concept. It is a term we use to describe the experience of coming fully alive at work. Corporate Soul is foremost and experience of touching a deeper level of vitality, inspiration, meaning, and creativity ? more than just "doing my job" implies.

Awakening Corporate Soul is about bringing the deepest and most dynamic energies into work, not institutionalizing a particular belief system. Soul, as we use the term, signifies the basic vital life energy that underlies and animates all human activity. The inspiration of an artist, the passion of an entrepreneur, the commitment of a parent, and the curiosity of a scientist ? all these qualities and more arise from the matrix of the soul. Corporate Soul is the expression of this primary life-giving energy in work and the workplace. When Corporate Soul is awake, work flourishes, overflows, and manifests as productivity, creativity, innovation and inspiration.

We use the words Corporate Soul attentive to the many reactions this term can trigger. The word soul has been burdened with an overabundance of connotations. It has been used in so many ways by so many groups that for many modern people "soul" has become an appealing but ambiguous mystery. We do not want to become mired in theological wordsmithing and cannot follow the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's counsel, "Concerning that which cannot be talked about, we should not say anything." Rather we want to define terms in a way that supports our intention of renewing and transforming work life and work places.

Can a Corporation Have a Soul?

The awakening of Corporate Soul begins with the individual. They open to the wealth of resources that is the soul. But when an awakening person arrives Monday morning at an environment that is inimical to soul, they withdraw. The blossoming matrix closes up. The resources go untapped. That is why individual soul awakening is not enough. In Judaism, the term Tikkun Olan, or healing of the world, makes it clear that no one can be healed alone. Isolated fulfillment is a contradiction in terms. We are healed through and for one another. The native American author Jamake Highwater uses the word orenda to refer to the tribal soul or the tribal fire. There are times that the orenda burns brightly ? when the people are united in a common purpose, a shared ritual, or a communal celebration. And there are times when the orenda is dim ? in times of unresolved discord, confusion regarding direction, and fear.

In the same way, the state of the Corporate Soul of one organization is not the same as that of another. For some organizations, it is clear the Corporate Soul is drowsy in others it appears passed out. The degree of Corporate Soul "wakefulness" will be reflected in the quality of commitment and excitement (or lack of it) that is present in the workforce, and ultimately in the competitiveness of the business. Albert Camus wrote, "Without work all life goes rotten ? but when work is soulless, life stifles and dies." When an organization's soul sleeps, the people in that organization lose the sense of their purpose and place in the market. They become fundamentally impaired, going through the motions of their work without the breath of life.

We understand Corporate Soul best by simply walking into any office. Immediately there is a palpable sense of the soul of that place, the inner nature of the enterprise. One is aware of certain defining qualities reflected in the physical space, the organizational structure, the language, and behaviors of the people you meet. But behind these outer expressions there is a basic energy ? the Corporate Soul of that workplace. If we are honest we can feel the "soul" in a place from the moment we enter it. Though a final definition of soul may be impossible to reach, recognizing the power of its presence for ourselves and our organizations is essential. As Albert Schweitzer wrote, "I have never seen a good definition of soul, but I know it when I feel it". So too, we know when we have it in our own work.

Reclaim the Soul

Many organizations today have been shocked by the diagnosis of "change or die." Workers have been thrown into an unfamiliar world where security is an illusion and leaders struggle with how to inspire commitment amidst so much chaos. As the familiar economic and social forms disintegrate, there is, more than ever, a need for grounding organizational life in the enduring values that are the soul's natural province. Perhaps organizations can learn from the experiences seriously ill people report of the incredible stability and direction that awareness of their own deeper purpose provides as they struggle with the shock of life-threatening illness. Through recognizing and reclaiming the deeper meaning of their live, these patients are able to embrace reality, take action, and live in ways that are more authentic and enriching.

Certainly organizations do not have to wait for a life-threatening condition to begin reorienting toward a more soulful direction. Just seeing the inevitability of change and gratefully choosing to live vitally in the face of impermanence is a powerful leadership stance available at any moment. More than ever, in the marketplace, it is clear that there are no promises. Change is the status quo. For leaders the challenge is to see such instability as the ideal conditions for engaging the soul of the organization. By anchoring their business

solutions in that deeper source, by reclaiming the spiritual impulse at the heart of work, the human commitment and energy required to carry out truly sustainable strategy in the midst of relentless change is released.

Naming the Yearning

Such a yearning is emerging in the workplace today. Behind the anger and cynicism, there is a longing to integrate soul life and work life, to create a unified fabric that weaves together the inner and outer worlds. On the surface we accept a "Dilbert" view of the world of work replete with tremendous wit and soul-numbing cynicism that nothing better is possible. At a more profound level, the level of our soul, we all know that it must be possible to find our best at work.

Meister Eckhart, a great mystic who understood the daily experience of his parishioners, said, "To be right a person must do one of two things. Either he must learn to have God in his work and hold fast to Him there, or he must give up his work altogether. Since, however, we cannot live without work, we must learn to keep God in everything we do whatever job or place." We would add that just as one cannot live without work, one cannot truly work without soul.

There may be a certain amount of fear associated with the expression of our soul yearnings. After all, these are tight times and the company may not want someone around who has soft and fuzzy ideas about soul. With stress high and fuses short, people may have little patience for this stuff. One may have this fear as the CEO facing the board and shareholders or a front-line worker facing a hard-driving middle manager.

For us the fear was about credibility. Would anyone take us seriously once we introduced the notion of Corporate Soul as fundamental to organizational renewal? Before our working with organizations, we had both begun our careers in highly spiritual endeavors, John a Presbyterian minister and Eric a s a yoga and meditation teacher. Years later while the spiritual dimension of our lives were still active personally, the focus of our professional activities had shifted to the corporate arena. Our discovery of Corporate Soul brought two parallel aspects of our live together into a balanced whole.

In practical terms, this meant opening ourselves up to asking questions and pursuing actions that were not in the mainstream of organizational change. Overcoming our own hesitancy to bring up deeper questions in the workplace required vulnerability an courage. It meant we would have to strip away the shield of our so-called professional image and speak from a place that was unprotected. t.s. eliot, recalling the teachings of Saint John of the Cross, wrote, "If you wish to arrive at a place you do not know, you must take the path you do not know". Such was our

dilemma and the dilemma of many of our clients.

As we began our journey in earnest we wondered, How do leaders break through to discover the soul of their own work? How does an organization begin to nourish and feed its own deepest possibilities? How does the workplace move from cynicism to fresh vitality that skillfully rides the waves of change?

Not Another Management Fad, Please

What became clear was that traditional organizational change efforts do not address the deeper soul levels. There are great techniques and procedures for measuring, assessing, and changing organizational behavior, structure, and policies. And although we had seen positive changes occur using these methods, they did not touch the soul directly.

When we first started discussing Corporate Soul with people in organizations we got one of two basic reactions. Some people dismissed it as new age nonsense. This did not disturb us much. But what did get us thinking were those who said corporate soul was just a new word for empowerment, quality improvement, team-building, visioning, and so on. This was critical for us to understand.

Is this just a new term for familiar change techniques? The best answer is that what we are talking about is a deeper level of change. Teams, empowerment, family-friendly policies, and such are all valid ways to create organizations capable of both engaging commitment and maintaining competitive advantage. Yet such techniques can only take an organization so far. There can be teams but not community; clearly defined outcomes but no real sense that the work contributes to anything significant. One can institute flexible work hours but still have a workplace where people cannot be themselves or speak the truth without fear. Awakening Corporate Soul deals with a level of change that is more profound and that touches the deepest aspects of our being.

We can illustrate the nature of this shift in terms of a marital relationship. A couple may learn communication skills that change the way they argue, make decisions, and requests of each other. They may in addition establish a special "date night" and reorganize their schedules to have more time together. But communication skills and schedule changes, as important as they are, do not make a lasting or fulfilling marriage. There is another level of awareness and development that must be in place for a marriage to sustain and flourish. This level goes beyond techniques and includes mutual respect, self-responsibility, shared values, and the willingness to be fully seen. Profound communication arises naturally when these deeper changes are in place.

Work is Sacred

A sound starting place for the discovery of soul at work is the recognition that work is sacred for most people, however hidden this fact may be from most workers and leaders. In the Zen Buddhist tradition a period of time is set aside each day for physical work such as gardening, carpentry, and other tasks required to maintain a monastery in good working order. It is written that the Master Hyakujo joined his students each day during this period of work. As the Master aged his students felt it was inappropriate for him to subject himself to such labors. They spoke with him but their suggestion was brushed aside. One monk took the matter into his own hands and hid the Master's tools. The Master spent the next day in his room, sitting quietly. When the attendant brought him his meals, Hyakujo nodded politely but took not food. He simply sat. After three days of delivering uneaten food, the attendant pleaded, "Master, why do you not eat?"

Hyakujo replied, "A day of no work is a day of no food." As this story suggests, work itself is spiritual food. To work is to eat that food. The soul requires a sense of being in the world, of having a place and making a contribution. To a great degree this comes through work. It is not possible to speak of soul at work or soulful workplaces until we recognize that for most people work is about spirit as much salary. To see work as just a way to earn a paycheck is to starve the soul. Leaders who see those who work for them as primarily on a quest for a salary miss out on the actions that can ignite sustainable commitment.

A 1996 Fortune magazine survey indicated that eight out of ten people would continue working even if they became rich enough that they did not need the money. Why? The three most frequent responses were: to have a sense of service, to help themselves and others grow, and to perfect their skills. Of course, many said they would modify the nature of their work to conform more with their spiritual, social, or artistic values. When freed from the monetary requirements, most choose to continue feeding their soul via working.

At one of our seminars, Lisa stood up and shared, "You know, no one ever said on their death bed, 'I wish I'd spent more time at the office'." Although we granted her the odds, having not been at enough bedside to know, we probed more deeply by suggesting her joke spoke more to the fact that work, as currently designed, does not nourish the soul than to the fact that work is and of itself is not central to spiritual life.

An ancient hymn from the Rig Veda, the oldest scripture of India, says, "Let not the thread of my song be cut while I still sing. Let not my work end before its completion." There is a fire within the soul that wants to burn to the end. We want to invest our time in work that calls forth the greatness we sense within the soul. Certainly Hyakujo's story

