



# SPIRIT IN BUSINESS: AN OXYMORON?



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By Nancy Patton

Somewhere in the world, on any given day, business-people inevitably gather at a 'conference.' So what was different about one called 'Spirit in Business' held in New York in April?

Spirit in Business confidently set out to explore the spiritual and organizational practices, which define a business' success. The premise is that our daily work is no longer separate from our inner life; that the ethics of society are integral to its economics; and businesses will flourish in the 21st century only by adopting new guidelines concerning human, natural and spiritual environments.

Without 'spirit' we have the Enrons of the business world. With spirit we have the likes of the Calvert Group (page 16) and thousands of other companies who know that the bottom line alone can no longer define success.

Despite the difficult nature of the current economic times – or perhaps because of – Spirit in Business attracted 500

people, from Fortune 50 and 500 companies, presidents and CEOs of middle sized and rapidly growing companies, professionals who work with those companies, entrepreneurs, and academics from business schools. At least one-third came from outside the US. The test will be how long the euphoric effects last now that everyone is back in their workplaces. We present the words of just a few of the excellent speakers at Spirit in Business who took the spiritual temperature of today's business world and gave their diagnosis.

**Peter Senge**, senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and author of the bestseller *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organizations*, asked if spirit in business was an oxymoron – and answered his own question by saying that "there's always spirit in business; there can't not be. The oldest Swedish word for business translates as nourishment for life. The oldest symbols in Chinese for business mean life's meaning or life's work. The very word 'company' comes from same root as companion.



"We are here [at the conference] because something has gone very much awry. There is no more pernicious idea in modern Western culture than the notion that has come to dominate in the last 50 years as a formal article of theory in business school, which is: To maximize the return of investor capital. It is a hideous idea, which so distorts the older notions of company or business. I'm not saying that making money isn't important. It's like oxygen, but if you think life is just about breathing, you've missed the point.



Peter Senge

Photo Larry Lawler

"Think of spirituality as a persuasive force in human affairs, as the core of who we are individually and collectively. It's quite clear indigenous people had a different way of putting spirituality into their world and it was probably inseparable [until] the industrial revolution. I have a strong feeling that what is happening in the world today is a very different type of spirituality that can coexist with religions and religious communities, but is not inseparable from them.

"While business is arguably the most influential institution today, that doesn't mean it is more important than all the other institutions that shape the world that people grow up in – school, community organizations, family. While it is important for those of us who spend a lot of time in business to recognize that we do have an influence and a huge responsibility, we should not get too caught up in thinking the world will be a different place if we just transform businesses. I doubt that. Nor I suspect can we just transform businesses as isolated institutions set apart from lives of people of all ages and communities of all sorts."

**Dena Merriam**, vice chair, executive council, Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, is a partner and vice chair of Ruder Finn, Inc, a global communications company. Her current work is with foundations, religious organizations and in the area of corporate responsibility. She is optimistic about the progress already made.



Dena Merriam

"Ruder Finn is continually seeking new ways to enlighten executives as to what their role should be. If you get a certain percentage of corporations making a shift away from self-interest to community interest, the others will look pretty bad if they don't come on board.

"There is a lot of movement in the direction of social responsibility, a leap to sustainability. Companies are beginning to understand that without sustainability they'll go out of business in a matter of time, because the planet cannot sustain the growth we are engaged in. If we were to bring the undeveloped world up to the level of the developed world, we would need

four planet earths to sustain it all. Nations are still focused on their national interests, but business is now global so we have to be concerned with the wellbeing of world markets."

Accessibility of information since the Internet explosion means that it is harder for companies to hide the way they do business, according to Ruder Finn's **Anne F. Glauber**, senior vice president and director of Global Issues Communication.

"Reputation is capital: business schools are researching the impact that corporate reputation has on the bottom line and a company that is admired can hire better, have long-term relationships with vendors, and shareholders will be happy. Go to any website about any major company and they'll be talking about their social accountability programs, their sustainability programs, it's all out there."

She related the story of a client, Ford Credit, a major provider of credit for the automotive industry, whose former CEO, Don Winkler, is a truly remarkable man who was running a corporation with 10 million customers and \$165 billion in receivables. Don has a particular disability: he is dyslexic and has trouble concentrating. Yet he has a startlingly effective management strategy and style that got him to the top. And what does this mean for his employees as well as his customers?

"Ruder Finn developed and created [for Ford Credit] significant outreach to hundreds of families faced with learning differences and disabilities among their children. Don has a website where he can share his personal story, and we concentrated our media relations on how Don utilized his different perspective to develop a unique and successful management strategy. This got Ford Credit mentioned in places it never would have before, including major features in mainstream magazines. It also helped to differentiate Ford Credit as a caring company.

"But we still have tremendous challenges in convincing some of our clients that it's in their own self interest to change their company culture and the way they communicate. It's up to us to demonstrate how they can generate a return for this."

**Michael Banks**, director of KRW International, related his own spiritual journey in business.

It was the dream of Banks and others in London in the 1980s to apply spiritual practices to the business world. In 1981, Banks helped to found the Programmes Group of companies in London, where the working day began at 8.00 A.M. with the sounding of a Tibetan gong. This signified the beginning of cleaning.

"We never had to hire cleaners," Michael said. "For six minutes night



Anne Glauber

Photo Ron Brodsky



Michael Banks





## SIB WORLD INSTITUTE

The Spirit in Business Conference in New York was organized by the **Spirit in Business World Institute (SiB)**. SiB was founded to establish a dialog between leaders from spiritual traditions and business and economics. It was inspired by the *Compassion or Competition Forum* with His Holiness the Dalai Lama held in Amsterdam in 1999.

SiB holds conferences and meetings around the globe to examine the changing responsibility of decision makers to themselves, their businesses and society. The premise of SiB is that:

- Our daily work is not separate from our inner life;
- The ethics of society are integral to its economics;
- Businesses will flourish in the 21st century only by pursuing new guidelines concerning human, natural and spiritual environments; and
- Business should be operating as an agent of world benefit, locally, regionally and globally.

SiB will serve, unite and provide leadership with individuals, organizations and businesses working across the faiths and spiritual traditions to recognize and further explore the spiritual dimension in business and the lives of business leaders at all levels throughout the world. Its core activities include:

- Local, regional, continental and international conferences, retreats and other educational/networking/community building activities;
- World communications hub: publishing books, a magazine, web-site and other learning tools on SiB; and
- Joint projects, such as socially responsible investments and sustainable development.

The following conferences are planned:

- December 2002: Zurich
- March 2003: San Francisco
- June 2003: Brussels

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On the website you can also order the book *Compassion or Competition; A Discussion on Human Values in Business and Economics* (ISBN 90-5670-089-8, published by Spirit in Business). This book contains a rare exchange with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and leaders from business and economics. It is based on the *Compassion or Competition Forum* held in Amsterdam in 1999. ☸

and morning, everyone, even the heads of the company, would clean around their desks so we always had a beautiful space to work in."

To begin with, publicity by the BBC and national papers had people believing they were either a cult, or an amazing pioneering firm.

"We would conduct workshops for men and women, then come together to talk about what we learned from each other. It was very exciting.

"Our first company was a telephone marketing firm. We had customers like IBM, Hewlett Packard and Lufthansa. I remember attending a workshop on the Lord's Prayer to look at how that might inform our business activities. Twenty years ago that was very strange, not so much today. Basically we were looking at how to apply certain spiritual principles in commerce/business, what kinds of results you could achieve by harnessing the collective energy. We became the European lead firm in telephone marketing, and we gained respectability after being pariahs and weirdos. We became part of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and we ended up having a lot of copycats.

"In 1986 I became very ill and was told I would have to be out of the workplace for up to a year. What about my career? I was very scared, but I was also very ill. I did recuperate after six months, but the fear had transmuted itself through the illness so I was able to receive and give love in a way I never had been able to before. Later when I got back to my career I was a much better educator even though I hadn't been doing the work *per se*.

"My company, KRW [which designs and leads individuals and team coaching programs for senior executives at Fortune 500 companies,] is founded on really firm and strong values of community, compassion, integrity, honesty and so on. We are not perfect but we do a very good job of putting those into practice.

"We have a purpose to work with leaders to leave the world a better place. One of the challenges is, how do you do that without proselytizing? I admit that, although I would like to be in balance, I am stressed out a lot of the time. I've been dreaming for years of putting a meditation room in my house. The good news is that recently I took up a breathing practice that has really helped me deal with stress much better. If you say you are working with people, and are going to advise them in some ways, you have to have congruency in your life, your inner life has to support your outer business life and that's a challenge. In our own company, my challenge is fear of money scarcity and in going in a direction, which might not be the right choice for us, and our employees. So I have my own lessons in actually trusting that things will work out, and coming out the other end with wonderful resolution and growth.

"As Winston Churchill said, the quality we need most is courage; if we have that, everything else becomes possible." ☸