Spirituality: The Bridge Between Engagement and Resistance in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical article explores the role spirituality plays in engagement and resistance in the workplace. These qualities exist at the opposite ends of the continuum in adult education in the workplace: engagement in learning and resistance to adult learning. By employing Mezirow’s learning framework, the researcher illustrates how spirituality in the workplace can provide the bridge between these two forces. Various texts have been consulted to examine the effects of various working conditions on employee productiveness and happiness which is assumed to increase employee efficiency. The conclusion is increasing employee engagement leads to less resistance to learning.

KEYWORDS

Communal, Engagement, Resistance, Spirituality, Transformational Learning

INTRODUCTION

As our culture becomes more diverse, interest in spirituality in the workplace is increasing (Khasawneh, 2001). Tisdell (2001) posits that spirituality plays a role in adult education as it is an important aspect of social transformation. While spirituality and religion differ in many ways, they are, however, interrelated (Tisdell, 2003). Lerner (2000) notes that religion is organized, has codes of behavior, and has a written doctrine, while spirituality, according to Tisdell (2003), focuses more on meaning-making and often relates to the ways people learn. In most instances, organized religion includes communities of faith (Tisdell, 2003), while spirituality is more an individual pursuit through which people “make meaning through experience with wholeness, a perceived higher power, or higher purpose” (Tisdell, 2003, p. 47). Furthermore, “the spirituality of most people connects to what they value and how they behave in the world” (Tisdell, 2003, p. 41). “Emancipatory spirituality” (Lerner, 2000, p. 165) leads people to share a sense of communal responsibility.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Two factors that influence success in adult learning are engagement and resistance. When adults are engaged in workplace learning, they have concluded that involvement in an activity will add value to their lives (Kahan, 1990). This engagement could also increase their persistence (Czarnowsky, 2008) and ultimately lead to greater retention of their learning experiences (Wlodkowski, 2008). Long (1994) describes resistance as “a force that opposes” (p. 14). When coupled with “fear of the unknown” (p. 14), resistance of adults to learning in the workplace can be viewed from the sociological experiences that have shaped their lives (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this theoretical article is to explore the role spirituality plays in adult learning in the workplace. The theoretical framework for the study is transformative learning, a framework developed by Mezirow (1997) that impels adults to understand the world in ways that take into account their unique experiences (Erickson, 2007). Mezirow (1997) purports that the change that results from transformative learning is a result of the frames of reference which define the world of adults. These frames of reference include “associations, concepts, values, feelings, [and] conditioned responses” (Mezirow, p. 5), which provide the structure that adults need to understand their experiences (Mezirow, 1997).

At opposite ends of the continuum in adult education in the workplace are engagement in adult learning and resistance to adult learning. This paper addresses the reasons adults are either engaged in learning in the workplace, or whether they find themselves resisting engagement in workplace learning. By employing Mezirow’s transformative learning framework, the researcher illustrates how spirituality in the workplace can provide the bridge between these forces.

ENGAGEMENT IN WORKPLACE LEARNING

It was not until the second half of the 20th century that Malcolm Knowles defined and developed the theory of andragogy, which focuses on adult learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Andragogy can be adapted to a variety of learning programs that include social work education, religious education, undergraduate and graduate education, and management training (Knowles et al., 1998). Knowles readily acknowledged that defining adult learning is a complicated undertaking (Knowles et al., 1998) which can include “change; filling a need; learning as product; learning as process; learning as function; natural growth; control; shaping; development of competencies; fulfillment of potential; personal involvement; self-initiated; learner-evaluated; independent learning; and learning domains” (Knowles et al., 1998, p. 17). Basically, then, adult learning is “the process of gaining knowledge and/or expertise” (Knowles et al., 1998, p. 17). This definition appropriately defines workplace learning because workplace learning (Fenwick, 2005) takes place within the context of work, and includes a change in either behavior (such as learning a new skill) or consciousness (such as a change in the worker’s outlook).

Adult learning takes place when the learner is engaged in the learning process cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally, and is focused on identified outcomes (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Engagement in the learning process demands that the learner develop an emotional connection to his or her pursuit of educational goals (Shuck & Wollard, 2008). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2007), more than 140 million people make up the United States workforce. When these workers are engaged in their jobs, they are both emotionally and cognitively connected to workplace learning because they will “find meaning and excitement in the jobs they perform” (Shuck & Wollard, 2008, p. 49). When employees are engaged in their work, they report positive perceptions of “employer involvement, growth and development, and health and safety practices,” according to Weiss-Randall (2017, p. 988).

Kersh (2015) explains that workplace learning, as well as experiences acquired beyond the workplace, can affect both skills development and personal development. Shuck and Wollard (2008) point out the importance of employees knowing what to expect in the workplace as well as having the necessary resources to complete their work. When these criteria are met, the employees not only feel that they have made a significant contribution to the workplace, but that they have also experienced personal growth and have gained some control over their work experience with the end result being job satisfaction and commitment to their work (Shuck & Wollard, 2008). Judge and Watanabe (1993) note that job satisfaction is not limited to the physical workplace but rather influences life satisfaction as well. According to Cartwright and Holmes (2006), many people derive a sense of identity and
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