What does religion have to do with work?
Mohammed Faris

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"What does religion have to do with work?" These were the words of the head of HR at a large company in the Middle East after I pitched my productivity training program connecting spirituality to peak performance. I was taken back by his question, I stumbled in my response, and I lost the contract.

That was seven years ago. Today, my firm - The Productive Muslim Company - offers Islamic-inspired productivity training and coaching solutions to individuals as well as corporate clients across the Middle East and Asia, and to faith-based employee resource groups across Fortune 500 companies.

This all started when I was completing my master's degree at the University of Bristol in the UK and I felt overwhelmed; I was studying, worked part-time, and heavily involved with the University's Muslim Students Association. Around this time, I stumbled across the science of productivity and fell in love with the idea of hacking my time, energy, and focus to help me get so much done in so little time. I read the latest books and downloaded the latest software, all with the goal of "being more productive!". However, as a person of faith, there was a question that bothered me. I asked: "What does Islam have to say about productivity? Where in the Quran, Sunnah (sayings and lifestyle of Prophet Muhammad - peace be upon him) are there teachings about productivity and human performance?". I couldn't find a clear answer to these questions, which led me to start a blog, called ProductiveMuslim.com in November 2007. The blog today is one of largest faith-based productivity platforms globally with over a million followers online - a testimony that many people are interested in the link between spirituality and productivity.

After graduation, I moved to Saudi Arabia to work for an Islamic bank whilst running Productive Muslim on the side. I thought that working for a "faith-driven" institution in a Muslim-majority country would allow me to comfortably connect my spirituality to my day to day work. Unfortunately, the reality was not as rosy. Even though the Bank had the call to prayer on loudspeakers go off during the day, and even though there was a prayer area on every floor; I noticed that people were uncomfortable to integrate their faith in a work setting. Spirituality was seen as a "personal matter" that has no place in the work - especially a Bank. Whenever I brought up to management and HR the idea that they have a golden opportunity to harness faith values and mindsets to boost employee engagement, productivity, and performance - I was told that "religion has nothing to do with work". After six years working for the Bank, I decided to quit and pursue Productive Muslim full-time.

Over the last 13 years, contrary to critics, I've seen first-hand how engagement, productivity, and performance can significantly improve when individuals and teams can comfortably bring their faith to the workplace. The challenge for many people is they don't have the frameworks and practical approach to do so in a multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious setting.

Muhammad Simjee, the CEO of an IT company in South Africa (and an ex-Mckinsey consultant), struggled to connect spirituality to his day to day work. He felt these were two separate worlds that can never coexist in the same space. After attending a 3-day retreat with my company he described the experience as transformative at a personal and corporate level. He said, "it's as if these two gears (spirituality and work) finally clicked, and they are working together to unleash a whole new person in me." When I asked him why he thought this was the case, he said: "You managed to successfully bring the teachings of the Quran and Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and make it pragmatic to my everyday life."

Many organizations do an excellent job of "accommodating" faith in the workplace through providing space for prayers and offering flexible dress codes, but how many go a step further to harness the mindsets, values, and rituals of faith to unlock the full potential of their employees? Moreover, how much talent are they losing because the talent doesn't feel aligned spiritually with the company values?

AQ - an IT software engineer - struggled to maintain high motivation at work. He felt he was wasting his time, and he should quit his job and do something to serve God outside of work. In our coaching session, I asked him, "Which of the 99 names of Allah do you love the most?" he replied, "Al-Jameel (The Most Beautiful)." I said, "Great, is there a way to manifest God's name Al-Jameel in your work?". His eyes lit up and replied with a smile, "I can write beautiful code."

Through my work, I realized that managers and employees need permission to talk about religion/spirituality in the workplace for them to feel whole and connect their faith to their day-to-day work. It starts by company leaders appreciating that those who have deep religious views do look at the world from a unique angle.

Dr. Ali Gumusay, wrote a paper in the **Academy of Management Perspectives** titled Embracing religions in moral theories of leadership. He argued that people who a) believe in a Deity, b) believe in a hereafter, and c) believe in sacred scriptures, will have a unique mental model and worldview of the world that will inform their leadership decisions. I linked his concepts to the ice-berg model theory, where beliefs that hide below our professional masks drive our actions and behaviors.

For many companies, it may seem uncomfortable (and even unthinkable) to go deep into people's belief systems and discuss those personal values and how aligned they are to the workplace. However, one of my collaborators, Moosa Al-Khoory, a manager at the Dubai Islamic Bank in the UAE, did make that alignment with his employees. In January 2019, he interviewed all his employees about their purpose in life, especially from a spiritual perspective. He helped connect his employees' spiritual mission to the corporate projects they intended to complete in the year. The result? By October 2019, most of his employees achieved or surpassed their project deliverables, and engagement was at an all-time high.

Companies spend thousands of dollars on training programs that teach concepts such as ethics, resilience, emotional intelligence, and teamwork. Many of those programs will hardly tap into people's spirituality, given the taboo of speaking about religion at work. Imagine, however, after a day-long training on resilience or ethics, we can invite people of faith to share stories and sayings from their traditions that embody these principles. Saman Hussain, a certified executive coach, uses this exact technique when facilitating group coaching sessions. She shared how whenever companies share corporate values, they don't usually connect those values at a personal level. Only when people's stories (and often these stories are related to spirituality and upbringing) do the concepts stick long after the training is over.

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So far, I've covered the upside that I've seen first-hand when companies embrace and explore spirituality in the workplace. I've also seen the downside.

A director at a large fast-food company broke down in tears as she narrated to me how her company's toxic "hustle culture" was making her lose her soul. She said, "I've become so obsessed with work that I would wake up at 5 am to attend a conference call and miss my Fajr (pre-dawn) prayers". The stories of employees feeling spiritually choked in the workplace are too many to relate and are felt across the spectrum of religious beliefs.

At an organizational level, sometimes major inter-personal issues cannot be resolved through traditional HR means. The Ombudsman at a large Bank once confided in me, "The challenge with people in this organization is jealousy and envy - people are envious about each other, which leads to all sorts of unproductive behavior - but how do you train people on dealing with envy in the workplace?". At the back of my mind, I was thinking, "Isn't this where faith and spirituality can help?". Yes, not all people would be 'religious' enough to heed spiritual advice on dealing with envy. But allowing even a subset of the workforce to harness their faith to tackle underlying psychological, emotional, and interpersonal challenges can be helpful for the entire organization.

The road towards integrating faith in the workplace is long; however, I'm optimistic. We've seen how, during the COVID19 lockdowns, many companies turned to spirituality, faith, and meditation to help their employees stay positive and productive despite the uncertainties and fear. In a post-COVID world, we can only expect to see an increasing interest in spirituality in the workplace. However, we'll need three things:

1. Corporate leadership must give the signal that it's "ok and welcome" to talk about spirituality in the workplace. They can start by talking about their spiritual journey and well-being.
2. Faith-inspired employees and leaders should train themselves in speaking about their faith mindsets, values, stories, and rituals and making it relevant to a work setting.
3. Researchers, authors, trainers, and coaches need to take on the challenge of formulating research, frameworks, and programs that make a clear business case for the relevance of faith in the workplace.

With these three pillars in place - I believe the next time an HR head asks me, "What does religion have to do with work?", I can have a clear answer that starts with "How much time do you have?".