

## **Coaching and Spiritual Values in the Workplace: exploring the perspective of coaches.**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores coaching and Spiritual Values (SV) in the workplace through the coach's perspective, using a qualitative research method based on an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). Data was collected from seven coaches through semi-structured interviews and from previous research using meta-ethnography. Data from the study suggests; the importance of the coach's own spiritual journey when working in this context; that the characteristics associated with SV are desirable within a multi-cultural, global company, as well as being possible contributory factors to the longevity and resilience of an organisation; and that the authentic alignment of passions and values is a vital component within the coaching approach, especially when explored as 'ambitions of a higher order'. Finally, a 'Spiritual Helix Coaching Model' is put forward as a possible guide for coaches working within the context of SV development.

**Key Words:** Spiritual values in workplace; spirituality; servant and transformational leadership; Social Responsible Enterprises.

### **Introduction**

Over a decade ago Hutchinson (1997) suggested the need for a more value laden attitude to business. Since then the call for a spiritual approach to life and work has increased and as a result this topic has received growing attention in the literature (Bowell, 2005; George, 2006; Whitmore, 2009; Wilber, 2006; and Zohar and Marshall, 2000). With ease of access to company information and practices on the worldwide web, stakeholders are more aware and are subsequently demanding more socially responsible behaviours. Organisations are now expected to safeguard the environment, adopt moral and ethical practices, embrace diversity, and practice their business with openness and transparency (Burke, 2005).

According to Whitmore (2009) old styles of thinking and leadership approaches are no longer capable of solving the perplexing issues currently facing society. Posing the question, "*when hierarchy, autocracy, and leadership fail, what will replace them?*" (p. 03), he asserts that it is time for us to take responsibility for our own lives, as well as for the good of the whole. Believing that the human race is entering a new stage of 'psycho-social

evolution' - a stage for which we are ill prepared - Whitmore calls for a new breed of coaches that can develop leaders to the levels of performance necessary for our global survival. He suggests that to do this, coaches will "*need to develop the higher skills of transpersonal coaching, to be able to address deeper issues of meaning and purpose*" (2009, p.3). Whilst some use the term transpersonal, others may use spiritual. Either way, what is being referred to is a coaching approach that is concerned with humanity's highest potential.

With the complexities and ensuing chaos now being realised on a global scale it seems that our current institutions and processes are becoming overwhelmed. As such, I am personally left in no doubt that the time has come to implement values in the workplace that secure more ethically compatible business practices that address these growing concerns. With this in mind I decided to base my research on coaching and SV in the workplace. However, following a comprehensive review of associated literature nothing was found on this topic from the coaching perspective. It was this gap in the research that led me to explore the subject from the perspective of the coach. In so doing the study was underpinned by the following four research questions:

- What definition of SV are coaches working to?
- What are the observed manifestations of SV – both in the individual and within organisations?
- What are the possible advantages and disadvantages of applying SV in the workplace?
- What coaching approaches are used to develop SV for the workplace?

## **Methodology**

Basing the study on the perspective of coaches, a field hitherto un-chartered, called for a qualitative research framework (Creswell, 1994). The study was designed in line with the ontological position of interpretivism in recognition that those involved were attempting to interpret experiences and actions through their own understanding (Bryman, 2008; and Von Wright, 1971). Furthermore, a phenomenological approach utilising Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as it is concerned with examining the meaning and interpretations people give to their actions (Husserl, 1999), whilst acknowledging the researcher's own awareness and interpretation of the data (Smith, 2008; and Willig, 2008).

A purposive sampling procedure was used to gain richness of information (Patton, 1990). As such, seven UK-based coaches, who identified themselves as working within the context of the study, were interviewed. All were self employed (or had their own companies) and all but one had worked with organisations that pertained to have a given set of moral or ethical values that underpinned working practices. Using semi-structured interviews the study's four research questions were used, underpinned by a small number of associated sub-questions. This allowed for both structure and flexibility (Bell, 2005). All but one interview

was recorded (at the request of the respondent) as recommended by Dick (1990) and Lincoln and Guba (1985).

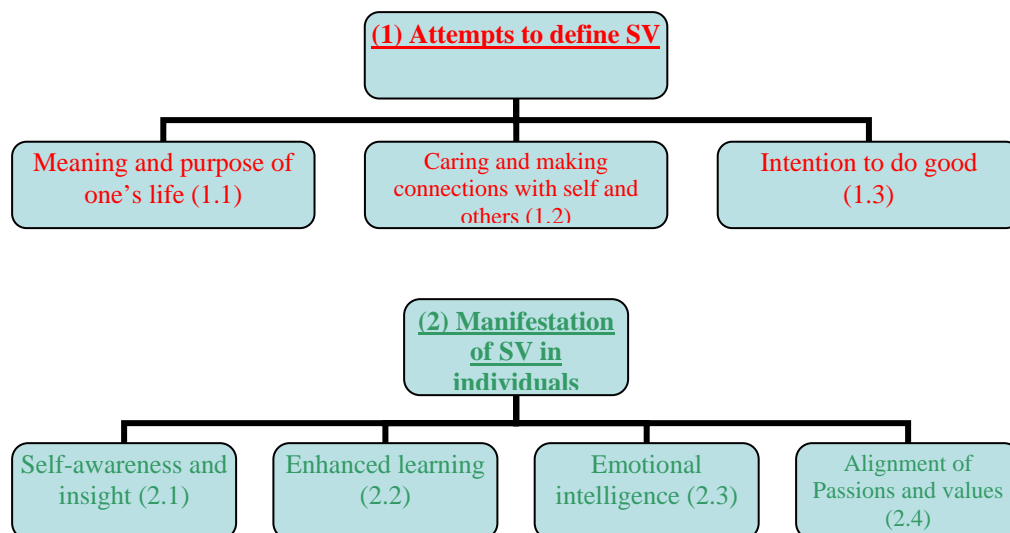
The study combined interview data with that from the literature review using meta-ethnography, where literature pertaining to other related qualitative studies is analysed and interpreted (Bryman, 2008; and Noblit and Hare, 1988). Due to the reliance on the researcher's interpretation of interview data a 'reverse' pilot study was undertaken and as a result a number of sub-questions were refined (Bryman, 2008; and Seidman, 2006). Using IPA, a four-stage analysis of individual interviews was undertaken, with a fifth-stage to identify master themes and sub-themes (Willig, 2008). Additionally, respondent validation tests were performed in order to reduce the risk of bias and distortion in the analysis of data (Bryman, 2008; Perry, 1998; and Robson, 2002).

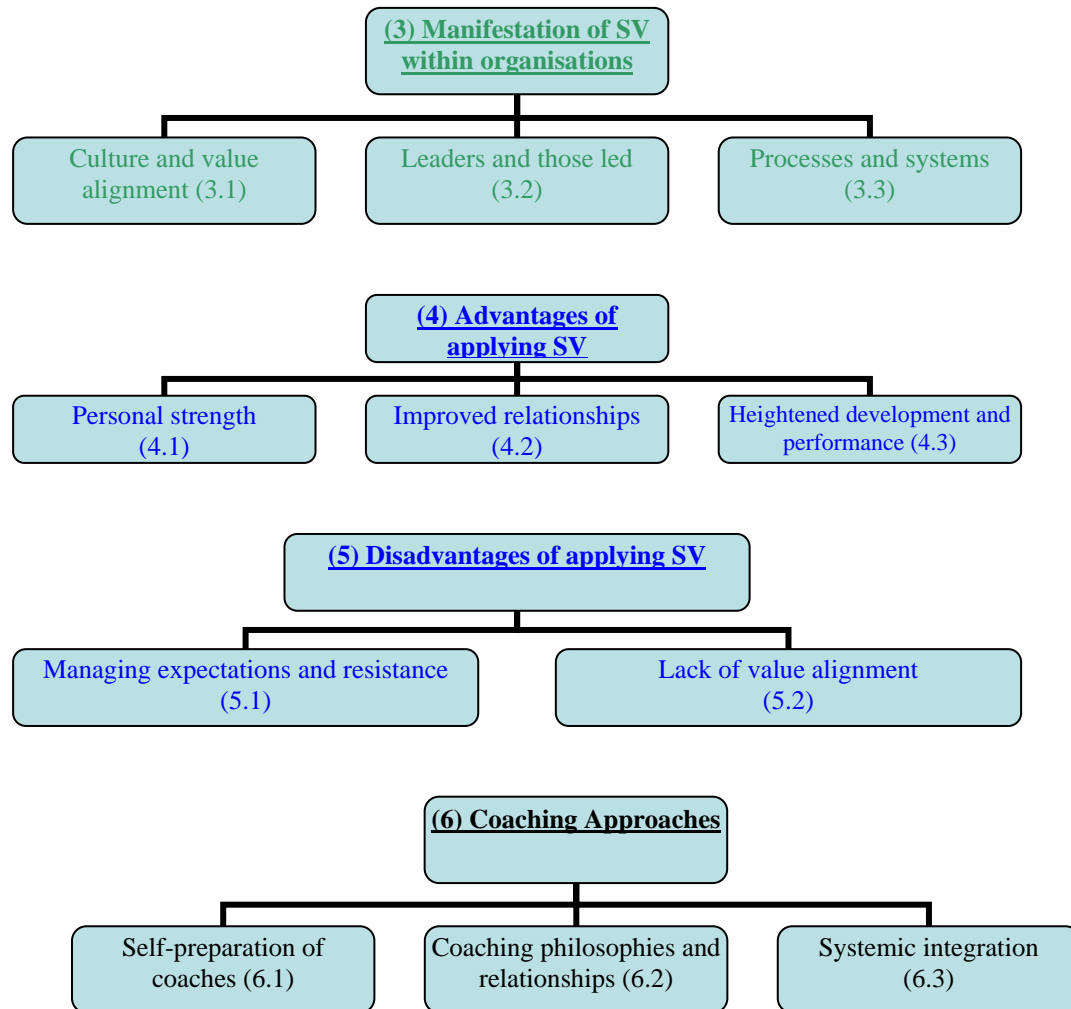
Respondents were asked to sign a consent form after first receiving information on the study, and being informed of their rights. The form and information given was in accordance with good research practice as suggested by Bell (2005), Bryman (2008), Creswell (1994), Mason (2002), Robson (2002) and Seidman (2006). Additionally, all respondent data was anonymised (Robson, 2002).

## Findings

Through the IPA process over 150 elements were identified. These were then clustered into six major themes, which aligned to the study's four research questions, with 18 sub-themes (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 - Major Themes and Sub-themes**





Findings are presented from both the meta-ethnography and semi-structured interviews, as it relates to the four research questions. Personal commentary is also offered and based around selected anonymised quotes from respondents.

### **Meta-Ethnography: Definition of Spiritual Values**

The concept of spirituality, outside of the religious context, has seen much debate and explanation over the last ten to fifteen years. This has led to many examples and descriptions of the phenomena (Chakraborty, 2004; George, 2006; Heaton et al., 2004; Jurkiewicz and Giacalone, 2004; Klenke, 2005; Leonard and Biberman, 2007; Logan and King, 2001; Marques, 2006; McCormack, 1994; Milliman et al., 1999; Mussig, 2003; Russell, 2001; Stone et al., 2004; Tischler et al., 2002; West and Milan, 2001; and Winston, 2004) making it difficult to present a definitive definition. Whilst some of these had imaginatively expanded the concept, and some were applied to leadership and organisations, a number of key words

emerged throughout, for example; guiding principles/beliefs, trust, purpose, meaning, connection, honesty, morality, ethics, heightened awareness/consciousness, humility and lack of ego.

### **Interviews: What definition of SV are coaches working to?**

Whilst many respondents had difficulty articulating a definition for SV they did identify three elements that could contribute to a definition (meaning and purpose of one's life; caring and making connections with self and others; and the intention to do good).

- **Meaning and purpose of one's life**

Respondent 6's quote suggests that living a life with meaning and purpose is also about living to one's potential; *"I think we're here to fulfil our roles and be the people that we know we can be."*

- **Caring and making connections with self and others**

Respondent 3 highlights the importance of caring and making connections within the coaching relationship and knowing, as the coach, what you bring to this; *"to be able to bring myself into that working relationship and to make meaningful connections with people that I work with."*

- **Intention to do good**

Respondent 5's quote is supported by Marques (2006) who incorporates the dimension of 'goodwill' into his definition of SV; *"trusting that you are working in the best interest for everyone – doing no harm."*

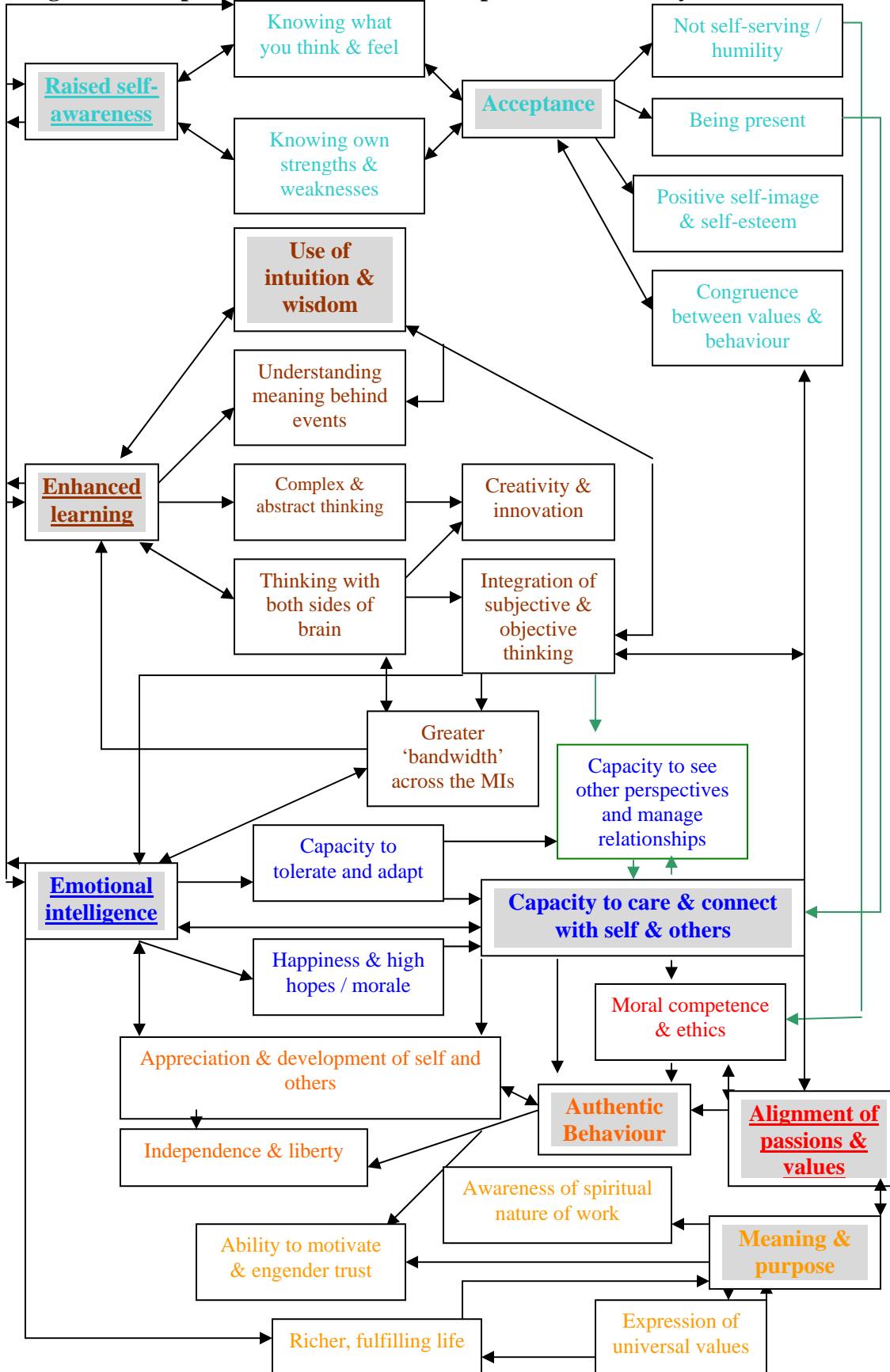
Further analysis highlighted sub-elements such as; motivation; higher order thinking; moral development; and seeing oneself in relation to the whole. This would suggest the evolution of an 'integrated self', and supports the notion of 'second tier thinkers', as described within the concept of Spiral Dynamics (Beck and Cowen, 1996).

### **Meta-Ethnography: Manifestations of SV (in the individual)**

The aforementioned literature describes a range of asserted personal characteristics associated with spirituality. These are represented in Figure 2, and show four main categories which I identified by grouping characteristics that appeared to have a natural association: Raised self-awareness; Enhanced learning; Emotional intelligence; Alignment of passions and values.

Sub-categories of 'acceptance', 'capacity to care', 'use of intuition and wisdom', 'meaning & purpose' and 'authentic behaviour' were then identified, along with a number of associated characteristics. Each category has been colour coded for ease of reference. The arrowed lines show the flow of the characteristics and natural links between the categories, as perceived by me.

**Figure 2 – Proposed Characteristics of a Spiritual Personality**



### **Interviews: What are the observed manifestations of SV (in the individual)?**

The sub-themes identified from the interview data corresponded with those identified from the meta-ethnography shown in Figure 2.

- **Self awareness and insight**

Respondent 5 seems to support Chakraborty (2004) who talks of a ‘conscious awareness of self’, and Heaton et al. (2004) who refers to a ‘pure self-awareness’; *“it’s about knowing that your roots are firmly in knowing who you are and what you believe to be true.”*

- **Enhanced learning and development**

Whilst some respondents mentioned developing our various lines of intelligence Respondent 6 claimed that; *“as human beings we are amazingly, multiply integrated that to be able to slide a razor blade between one sort of intelligence and another is nonsense.”*

It is interesting to note that Harding (2006) suggests educators using multiple intelligence theory have reported an increase in self-awareness and that it has helped them develop their teaching practice to enhance the learning experience of their students.

- **Emotional intelligence**

Respondent 4 suggested that *“emotional intelligence is the first step on the ladder to wisdom. Our emotional intelligence is twice as important as our academic capacity for success in this life”*

Whilst asserting the importance of emotional intelligence over IQ in work success, Tischler et al. (2002) concludes that the two in combination are likely to be more important than either intelligence alone.

- **Alignment of passions and values**

Respondent 1 suggests a potential for resistance if an individual’s values become compromised; *“values make you very authentic as a person, and knowing that you can’t sit comfortably with yourself if you go against those values.”*

Findings suggest that working across the domains of the mind, body, and spirit, by engaging our various lines of intelligence (with particular emphasis on emotional intelligence) enhances learning and development, as well as self-awareness. The exploration of passion and values, in order to achieve value behaviour alignment, is also suggested.

### **Meta-Ethnography: Manifestations of SV (within an organisation)**

Within organisations, characteristics such as; a ‘vital culture’ (Logan and King, 2001); meaning, purpose, and a *sense* of order (Marques, 2006); reciprocal relationships, and

continuous action learning experiences (Mussig, 2003); value congruence (Klenke, 2005); and a spiritual values-based management model (Milliman et al., 1999) are all identified.

Manifestations described include terms such as; trust, appreciation, and empowerment (Russell, 2001); bringing meaning to jobs, compassion, right livelihood, and selfless service (McCormick, 1994); enthusiasm, emotional expression, personal relationships, hard working, fun, and commitment (Milliman et al., 1999). Furthermore, SV based leadership is described by Klenke (2005) ‘as ethical and effective’, and by Leonard and Biberman (2007) ‘as service to others with humility’. Marques (2006) contributes to the debate with talk of interconnectiveness, trust and goodwill.

### **Interviews: What are the observed manifestations of SV (within organisations)?**

Fifty one quotes are identified under this major theme. Nearly half of which are attributed to the sub-theme ‘culture and value alignment’, with the remaining quotes making up the sub-themes ‘leaders and those led’ and ‘processes and systems’.

- **Culture and value alignment**

Respondent 1’s quote alludes to diversity – an important characteristic, particularly for global companies with multi-cultural stakeholders; *“the reality is that everyone has different values..... [a characteristics of an organisation with SV] allows for that difference, embracing the difference.”*

- **Leaders and those lead**

Whilst Respondent 4 believes that leadership should come from the top; *“organisations will only get there if there are enlightened people at the top...”*, Respondent 7 believes it should be the role of everyone; *“leaders change..... so there’s a risk, the organisation is taking a risk unless they make it bottom-up.”*

The literature also suggest a similar division on this viewpoint with the former being supported by Klenke (2005), Mussig (2003), and Stone et al. (2004); and the latter by Marques (2006) and Kouzes and Posner (2007).

- **Processes and systems**

Respondent 3 explained *“they have formal measures that are not just about what people get done – the tasks and objectives – but also how did they go about doing that in line with the organisation’s values?”*

The measurement of organisational targets that not only focus on ‘what’ is achieved, but also on the ‘how’ and the ‘why’, is supported by Howell (2005) and Mussig (2003).



Findings would suggest that the characteristics of a SV-based organisation are particularly beneficial for global companies with culturally diverse stakeholders. Flexible processes that enable and empower are further seen as essential in order to develop individuality and enable alignment of employee values with those of the organisation. The use of targets that include the 'why' and the 'how' of that which is achieved (showing congruence and authenticity between the organisation's culture and purported values) is also highlighted. Reciprocity between leaders and those led, and leadership by all, is further suggested as desirable manifestations.

### **Meta-Ethnography: Possible advantages and disadvantages of applying SV in the workplace.**

Whilst some research asserts the benefits of applying SV in the workplace (de Geus, 1997; Heaton et al., 2004; Leonard and Biberman, 2007; Milliman et al., 1999; and Winston, 2004), there is also a body of research that purports little to no positive impact from their application (Hopkins, 1999). This may be due, in part, to the fact that different studies evaluated different measures of success. Nonetheless, what is being consistently reported is that employees feel happier and more motivated when their core values are incorporated into their working lives, and not compromised by it.

Conversely, no disadvantages of applying SV in the workplace came to light in the literature, except to say that such an approach only seems to work when the right organisational processes and systems are in place (Milliman et al., 1999).

### **Interview: What are the possible advantages of applying SV in the workplace?**

The three key advantages that emerged from respondent interviews were; 'personal strength', 'improved relationships', and 'heightened development and performance'.

- **Personal strength**

Respondent 1 said "*for me spirituality is about the values that make you personally feel good and strong as a human being.*"

Other quotes under this sub-theme suggest that feelings such as self-worth, acceptance, and safety appear to be contributory factors to this 'inner power'. This is in line with the proposed 'characteristics of a spiritual personality' in Figure 2. A number of respondents also affiliate personal strength to the capacity to deal with paradox and ambiguity by being resilient, flexible and adaptable.

- **Improved relationships**

Respondent 1 made this quote in relation to a successful coaching intervention;

*“it’s about the smile on the people’s faces and the fact that they want to come to work every day, and they’re getting on with their colleagues even though they’re totally different.”*

- **Heightened development and performance**

Respondent 7 maintained *“I believe if organisations could help their people to be like that [live with ambiguity] then they’d be much more resilient organisations, they’d be much more flexible, accepting of change, much less resistance to change, and therefore effect change quicker. Not only that but there’s real business benefit, and there’s real employee benefit because they would be able to keep people longer, but also to be able to encourage people to leave in a much more healthy way when an organisation no longer satisfies their goals”*

This would suggest that organisations embracing SV may find it more fitting to view potential benefits as long-term, particularly in relation to managing change, which de Geus (1997) asserts results in a more sustainable organisation.

Also emphasised was the ability to deal with paradox and chaos; the importance of relationships in order to effectively lead and make ‘informed’ intuitive judgments; and the ability to innovate and be creative.

### **Interviews: What are the possible disadvantages of applying SV in the workplace?**

Two sub-themes were identified under this major theme, ‘managing expectations and resistance’, and ‘lack of value alignment’.

- **Managing expectations and resistance**

Respondent 2’s quote highlights the need for balance in relation to equity, flexibility, and fairness to all; *“[conflict] can certainly arise for managers when trying to balance doing the best for individual staff while being fair and consistent to the team as a whole”[...]**“If initiatives are not consistently applied [then] some staff can feel undervalued..”*

- **Lack of value alignment**

Respondent 3 explained how where the values are published *“it’s very clear and obvious that the leadership team don’t particularly buy into them. So then you get, I think, a worse situation than you started off with where you get a discrediting of leadership and a discrediting of these values. Employees don’t see leaders walking the talk and that has a negative effect on commitment, motivation and even behaviour”*.

It is this lack of value alignment that respondents highlighted as a significant contributory factor to employee resistance.

Findings suggest that failure to achieve true value alignment could result in negative behaviours and resistance by employees. It is noted that practices which inspire and recognise the individuality of people are more likely to promote co-operation and achievement, but may prove difficult to implement with regard to equity and fairness when dealing with idiosyncratic behaviours.

### **Meta-Ethnography: What coaching approaches are used to develop SV for the workplace?**

Whilst no research was found specifically relating to coaching for SV, what follows are examples of good practice regarding their potential 'fit' for coaching within the context of SV development. Coaching approaches have been identified by linking outcome aims to the four main categories of a spiritual personality proposed in Figure 2.

The approaches identified were: an emphasis on value driven, rather than goal driven models (Mussig, 2003); space to reflect and challenge - using the virtuous performance cycle (West and Milan, 2001); improved self-awareness and emotional intelligence through reflective practice; approaches that aim to create greater 'bandwidth' (thinking and acting with greater versatility) across the various lines of intelligence (Parsloe and Wray, 2000); the use of a multiple intelligence coaching toolkit (Harding, 2006); and meditative practice, which Tischler et al. (2002) asserts helps to accelerate an individual through the stages of development.

### **Interviews: What coaching approaches are used to develop SV for the workplace?**

Three sub-themes ('self-preparation of coaches', 'coaching philosophies and relationships', and 'systemic integration') were identified from the 62 quotes attributed to 'coaching approaches'. Two thirds of which supported sub-theme 'coaching philosophies and relationships'.

- **Self-preparation of coaches**

Respondent 6; *"I think being comfortable with yourself and being comfortable with your own values and [those values] being thought out is very important to me."*

Respondent 3; *"some reflection after a coaching session to try and reflect on 'how did that go? Did I hold that coaching session in line with what I'm aiming for?"*

For me, the most poignant message from these quotes is the importance of the coach's own capacity for self-awareness, and the need to understand oneself. For, as Rogers (2004) asserts *"the best and most valuable insight to have is into yourself"* (p. 225).

- **Coaching philosophies and relationships**

Respondent 1's quote would suggest the need to engage the various lines of intelligence, working through the mind, body and spiritual domains of the person;

*"for me [coaching's] about using everything at your fingertips, the body, the mind, spiritual values, intellectual ability, whatever it is you've got to use all of them to get to that person, to really allow them to make great decisions for themselves."*

Respondent 4 purports the importance of emotional intelligence to achieve spiritual development; *"I would use the transpersonal coaching to further the person's evolution or their personal and spiritual development, to help them find their purpose in life and ultimately to approach finding who they really are"....."With the transpersonal stuff, we have to get beyond the rational mind so it's not just thinking about it, it's feeling it."*

In support of this is George (2006) who asserts that part of being spiritually informed is being able to understand the 'true cause' behind one's emotions/feelings. Tischler et al. (2002) and Mussig (2003) also make the link between emotional intelligence and spirituality, with the latter claiming that both share a significant number of characteristics.

- **Systemic integration**

Respondent 5's quote suggests value behaviour alignment, as recommended by Logan and King (2001) *"if you had open workshops to say 'do these values work for you? Do you agree with these values and what's connecting you to this organisation? How can we make it work for you and how can we incorporate some of these values that drive you into the every day needs of the business?"*

Respondent 4 believes that coaching is the right process to use for SV development in the workplace; *"I see coaching as a big catalyst for the changes we need.....because coaches do not impose a solution.....they're saying it's all inside you...."*

Findings would suggest that self-awareness and reflection by the coach are significant practices within this field of coaching. Furthermore, a transpersonal approach, which includes; the understanding of emotions; the identification of values and higher order purpose; and thinking and acting with greater versatility across the various line of intelligence, are all suggested. It is further advocated that coaching may be an effective process to achieve a systemic integration of organisational values with those of the employee in order to achieve value behaviour alignment.

## **Conclusions**

Whilst the study's methodological approach was selected as the best fit for the research problem, a limitation of the study is acknowledged in so far that a comparative study with coachees and leaders/managers would have added to the depth and breadth of the research. Nevertheless, it is my hope that by combining data from the meta-ethnography with that

obtained from coaches a more comprehensive description of the subject area will be available, upon which, further research can be based.

Tischler et al. (2002) and Butts (1999) identify the lack of a clear universal definition for spirituality, with the latter arguing for clarity and theoretical understanding. It therefore came as no surprise that many of my respondents had difficulty articulating a definition for SV. Lund Dean (2001) asserts that some in this field of inquiry view the process as a continual pursuit for a richer definition and thus see no need for an early consensus. Nonetheless, having explored a number of descriptions I offer my own definition of SV:

*“The ever heightening awareness of the meaning and purpose of one’s life, where the sum total of human knowledge is embraced. Where actions are driven by a set of beliefs which ultimately lead to a positive connection with others, where the good of the whole overrides the desires of the self, and where being able to live and work by those beliefs in an authentic and real way brings yet more meaning and purpose”.*

Data from both the meta-ethnography and interviews highlighted four major characteristics of a spiritual personality (Figure 2). Coaches working in the field of SV may find these suggested manifestations helpful when considering, not only their approach, but also their own spiritual journey in order to thoughtfully and effectively guide the coachee through theirs.

Although previous research has neither conclusively proved nor disproved the benefits of applying SV in the workplace, what has emerged is the importance of aligning the values of employees with those of the organisation. It is this alignment that appears to fulfil a need for belonging and meaning, which in turn is purported to result in a happier more productive workforce. That said interview data suggests the main advantages to be related to the development of particular personal attributes, both within leaders and those led. These qualities and their associated traits may be viewed as contributory factors to the longevity and resilience of organisations, particularly during times of uncertainty and turmoil. As such, outcomes should be considered from the perspective of a ‘long-term sustainable investment’, rather than a ‘short-term return on investment’ as suggested by Hutchinson (1997). Additionally, when considering a global company with culturally diverse stakeholders the advantages of applying SV in the workplace may be significant as findings would suggest that it promotes inclusiveness, acceptance, and diversity.

Whilst the study advocates that the alignment of passions and values is necessary for the successful implementation of SV within the workplace, it further suggests that the coaching process can be most helpful with regard to this, as it does not impose a solution - it focuses on the individual in order to ‘unravel’ what has meaning and purpose for them. To achieve this ‘higher order alignment’ coaches may wish to review the use of traditional goal setting coaching models with a view to incorporating ‘ambitions of a higher order’. The aim of this would be to achieve ‘true’ authenticity by focusing on more encompassing longer-term

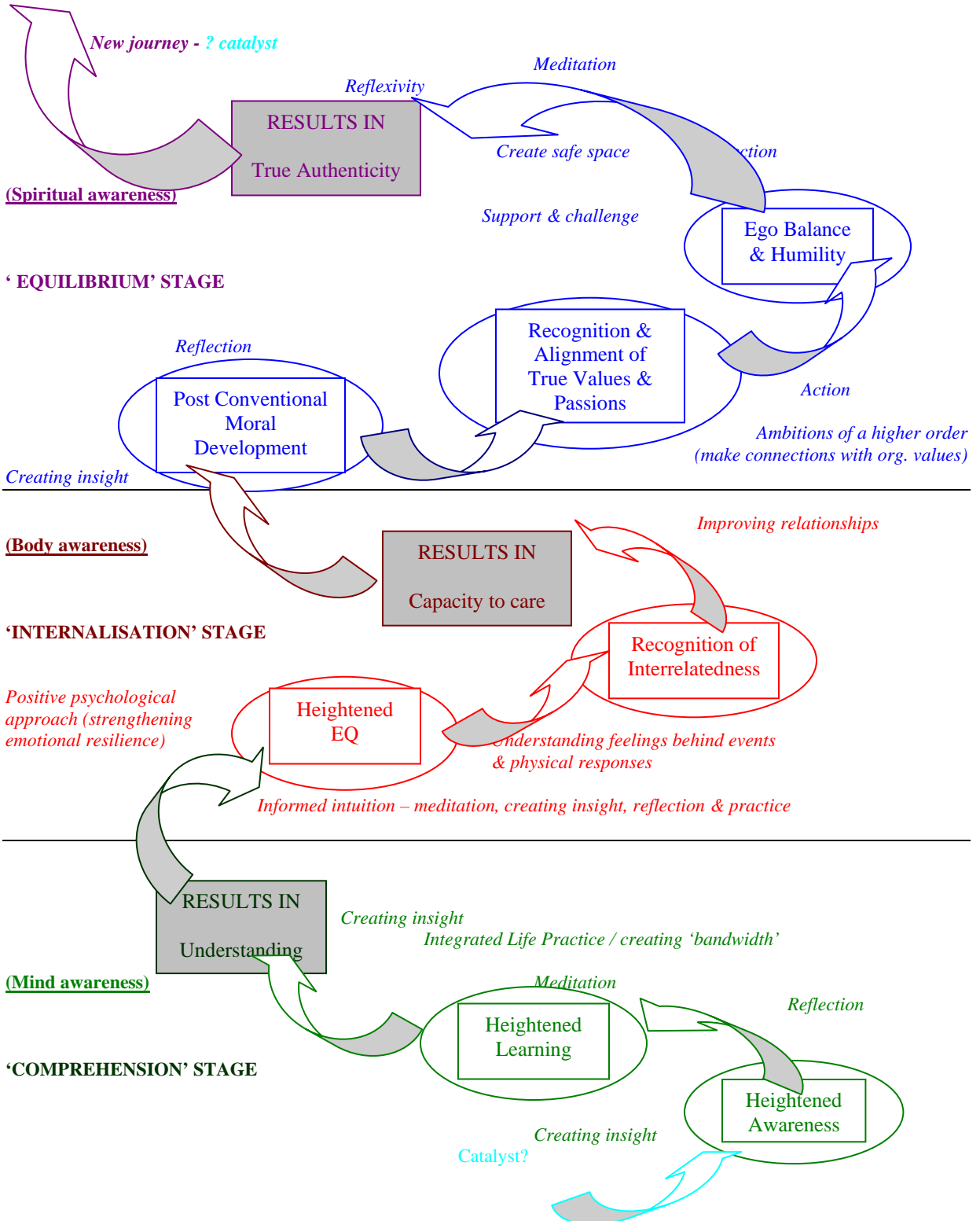
ambitions, and to explore the values that motivate the individual and reflect their interrelatedness.

Transpersonal coaching, informed intuition, post conventional moral judgement, and the role of the ego, are highlighted as important philosophical considerations - requiring the coach to be fully au fait with these concepts. Moreover, a coaching approach that aims to improve thinking and acting with greater versatility across the various lines of intelligence is suggested. This approach looks to progress a person through the developmental stages required for the 'higher order reasoning' thought to underpin spiritual thinking. Data from the meta-ethnography also suggests that the accompanying use of meditative practices may further help to accelerate one's growth through these stages.

To summarise these suggested approaches I have developed a 'Spiritual Helix Coaching Model' (Figure 3). The model depicts three stages, which attempt to cover the mind, body, and spiritual domains, and illustrates the associated outcomes (understanding; capacity to care; and true authenticity) of each domain. Each asserted outcome is underpinned by various levels of self-awareness.

From my personal perspective as a coach, I am now seeing more people who are searching for answers to the deeper questions in life. They are looking for meaning and purpose, and for clarity and understanding in order to live more fully in all aspects of their lives. It is my experience that when coaching works on this level it is deeply profound and sincere, resulting in enlightenment, joy, and achievement – worthwhile outcomes, I would suggest, for any workplace.

**Figure 3 - Spiritual Helix Coaching Model**



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