

Creating an environment that fosters the development of spiritual intelligences is a key leadership strategy for encouraging individuals not to choose to become zombies.



Is the Workplace a Zombie Breeding Ground?



Stephen Hacker

When the article, "Zombies in the Workplace," was published in *The Journal for Quality and Participation* (January 2010), I was surprised by the strong reader response, and I assumed that there was an insatiable appetite for all things related to zombies. That original article described the worst case of workplace zombies where people were without energy or inspiration, existing in a fog of blame and frustration, and endlessly searching for signs of life in others to crush.



At best, these individuals just bumped around listlessly waiting for time to pass.

At the request of several readers, this article presents additional thoughts on the living dead roaming the halls and lurking in cubicles at work. In particular, this article addresses the accusation that the workplace itself is responsible for the spread of zombieism, which I have heard more than once. At the heart of this charge is the belief in the causal nature of the environment, not the causal nature of the individual. Does the workplace really create zombies? The short answer is no. Although the workplace environment may be harsh on the spirit, individuals are ultimately responsible for being enlivened or spiritually dead.

Changing Workplace

It is true that people's orientations remain heavily on their organizations. Once workplaces had a predominant need for strong backs and arms and, as a result, they set up systems to depress thinking and indirectly dampen spirit, creating "do as I say" environments. Evolving to the age of the knowledge worker, however, required mental strength to spring forth. Mental capacity, problem-solving skills, and collaborative teaming were encouraged. Then as society further sped up, becoming more complex, and as product/service innovation cycles shortened, the call for creativity within the workforce was heard.

Because creativity is related to the human spirit in a way that is similar to the relationship between thinking and the mind, spirit in the workplace has emerged as an important topic. This progression can be seen in the progressive acceptance from Intelligence Quotient (IQ), which is a measure of human intelligence, then to Emotional Quotient (EQ), a measure of emotional intelligence, and now to Spiritual Quotient (SQ), a measure of spiritual intelligence. Becoming smarter and more relational are requirements of the current workplace, but these areas of growth appear to be in short supply.

Choosing Spiritual Development

Danah Zohar introduced SQ in the 1997 book, *ReWiring the Corporate Brain*.¹ SQ was a clever approach with the aspect of spiritual development considered alongside IQ and EQ. Inquiry into SQ has grown as has its measurement. Spiritual intelligence speaks not to a religious doctrine (the practice of a spiritual belief) but to spiritual aptitude. The concept of spiritual development includes developing a keen self-awareness, living into purpose and vision, aligning a vocation with purpose, and seeing greater patterns and connections at work. It addresses the drive and purpose in undertaking work. This ability goes beyond IQ and EQ.

Workplaces have many challenges with a growing number of difficulties brought by the speed of change and complexity. Competing priorities,



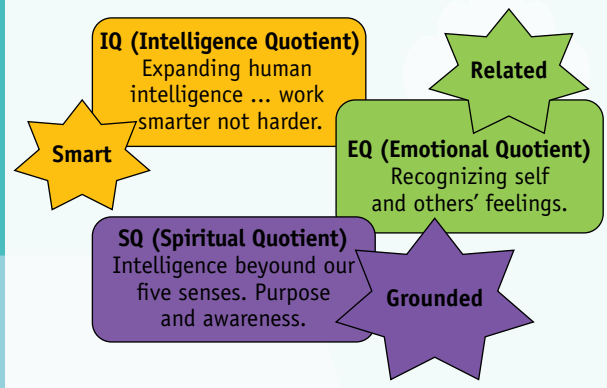
befuddled leadership, increased demands, and performance pressures have created stressful workplaces. Responses to this environment have varied greatly. Some workers have become numb, almost zombie-like, as they withdraw and begin compartmentalizing. Others see these environmental challenges and adversities within the context of spiritual growth. They develop a deeper sense of self and alertness to larger patterns and connections. Given that the foundation of SQ involves developing a deeper self-awareness and realization of life's purpose, increasing SQ capacity offers not only a coping strategy but also a way to thrive in the midst of adversity. It is a choice, but zombies lack the SQ necessary to face these challenges successfully.

As the *Zombie Survival Guide* points out, there are two origins of zombieism.² Today, the most popular is infection through the blood, primarily transmitted when one receives a zombie bite. The other less frequently used method is through voodoo. Having deep New Orleans roots, voodoo zombieism is my preferred metaphor. Voodoo zombieism is where evil magic is cast upon an individual, and the zombie becomes an instrument of casting the magic onto others. For voodoo to work, the spirit must already be dead or close to it.

When a person chooses to develop the spirit within and gain SQ capacity, the chances of becoming zombie-like in the workplace diminish. Knowing self, having a life purpose, focusing on being generative, and connecting at a deep level with

others provide both a defense against zombieism while fostering creativity, perseverance, and

Figure 1: Multi-Dimension Development



meaningfulness. What immediate steps can be taken to build a zombie defense or antidote? Many start to build a foundation of SQ by answering the questions listed in the sidebar, *Key Questions in Building Spiritual Intelligence*.

The willingness to dive into a deep conversation about self is at the heart of spiritual intelligence. Again, it involves making the choice to discover a new level of grounding in times of storms. Many people choose to remain in a zombie-like state, blaming the workplace or other circumstances. This does not mean it is easy to grow in SQ, however—particularly with so much nonsense in the workplace and so few organizational environments that nurture its development. Figure 1 illustrates how developing SQ is another dimension of growth, combining with IQ and EQ.

Building Nurturing Workplaces

It is true that the workplace is an influencing factor. In his award winning book *Drive*, Daniel Pink calls out the three human factors inherent in the workplace—mastery, purpose, and autonomy.³ Wise employers design work systems that encourage these intrinsic motivational drives. Unfortunately, many workplace designs lean toward manipulation instead—a mindset of extrinsic motivation that is couched in an adult-to-adult relationship at best or a parent-child relationship framework at worse. If the workplace is viewed as a place where like spirits come together to create (spirit-to-spirit relationships), then the focus of leadership is to build systems that allow people to live on purpose and create with others. Giving autonomy based on trusting the internal motivation of people and their desire to exhibit mastery becomes part of the design.

Key Questions in Building Spiritual Intelligence

- Where does my drive, my passion come from? Why am I here on earth ... for what purpose?
- What is my life's vision and how does this current work fit?
- What are my one to three key values? How can I operationalize them in the current setting?
- What enlivens me? What am I excited about creating?
- When do I move to fear in my actions and thinking versus embracing challenges?
- Why does the work I'm engaged with matter ... really matter?
- When it is all over, what will really count?



It is important to realize that even as the workplace begins to incorporate the importance of spirit in its design—primarily in advancing creativity—individuals' spirits often are considered as a force to leverage. This is the nature of a collective—to move the collective agenda forward. Shifting that organizational paradigm is essential. Instead of leading zombies, viewing the basis of the organization as willing participants open to growing in IQ, EQ, and SQ provides space for coaching and nurturing. The primary belief should be the coming together of conscious individuals in an effective co-creation process. The building of alignment begins with purposeful, self-aware individuals.

When zombies make up the workforce, coercion is required for them to subscribe to the corporate purpose. When this happens, resentment is cultivated, which eventually turns into victimhood. When individuals simply acquiesce to the purpose and direction of the organization, zombies reign.

John Stuart Mill observed the negative power of this approach, and more than two centuries ago, he wrote in his essay, *On Liberty*, "A state which dwarfs its people, so that they may be more docile instruments in its hand, even for the most beneficial reasons, will find that with small men no great things can be accomplished."⁴

Just as it is true for democracies, the individual is the base of the power of an organization—the source of creativity and innovation. Although it is not uncommon for organizations to pay lip service to this concept, there are few organizations that actually live out the principle of investing in people at an SQ level. It could be said that Mill was an early identifier of zombieism. As previously mentioned, it is the ultimate choice of the individual to adopt an enlivened spirit or to become more zombie-like. How then might the workplace encourage spiritual intelligence? Here are some recommendations that can aid in nurturing SQ development.

- See the whole person, the spirit engaged in co-creating with others. See individual journeys intersecting and offer opportunities for synergy to flourish.
- Encourage all to develop a life purpose and vision. From this starting point, alignment to the organization's mission and vision can be discussed. Start the alignment assessment during the attracting and engagement process (hiring)—from the beginning of the person's time with

the organization. Inquire beyond skill sets and include exploration of mindsets and purposes.

- Promote participation in projects based upon individual interests. Diversity of the workforce in terms of interests and proficiencies can provide breakthrough performance. Move to inquiry with regard to individual interests before making assignments.
- Build in reflection time for the collective and individuals. Make this aspect of high-performance teams a foundation of renewal.
- View individual work planning and career planning as aspects of a whole individual. Seek to understand and raise consciousness about their fit within the context of the complete individual.

On the other hand, the following approaches will defeat growth and foster an increasing number of zombies in the workplace:

- Focus the immense human spirit on the narrow mission of the organization.



- Keep separating life away from work with work life. Entertain a small amount of whole life interests, but avoid integration of concepts. Keep separating life into at least two parts and then preach about balancing life.
- Neglect the human story of an individual. Reduce the individual to a unit of work or “one of the organization’s most valued assets.”
- Suck out the individual spirit (breath of life) to pursue organizational performance along with narrow and short-term measures.
- Mix with other walking dead under the heading of orientation. Put the lifeless in charge of training the life-inspired.

In the extreme, there are people who believe that a zombie workforce should be preferred. The systems they build reflect this belief. Although lacking sustainability in today’s complex environment, nonetheless, there are pockets of these workplaces. M. Scott Peck captured the essence of human-initiated evil—to diminish or even kill another spirit in his book, *People of the Lie*.⁵ It may be unintentional at times, but caustic workplaces are far from being a neutral force on individual spirits. Leaving such environments may be the best course of action for individuals who find themselves forced into zombieism. As much as we decry the zombie world apocalypse, running away is sometimes the best strategy for survival of the human spirit.

Summary

Although the workplace certainly is an environmental factor, it does not dictate the adoption of a zombie state. Ultimately, it is an individual’s choice whether to become a zombie or an enlivened individual. The proof of this assertion is that in every caustic, spirit-deadening environment, there are people who have not succumbed to zombieism.

Some workplaces, professions, and jobs seem to encourage zombieism more than others. To build an environment that encourages enlivened spirits,

leadership can begin by better developing its spiritual intelligence. To promote individual initiative and creativity in others, engaging with the whole person at a deeper level offers the opportunity to transform the workplace.

More Online

To read the original article, “Zombies in the Workplace,” go to www.asq.org/pub/jqp.

References

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