

Chinese Viewpoints of Workplace Spirituality

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Abstract

This research aimed to investigate the causal relationship of workplace spirituality with the viewpoints of the Chinese. It conducted focus group meetings with 51 workers and analyzed the most influential classics to Chinese, including Confucian Analects of Confucianism, the Tao Te Ching of Taoism, and the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism. Results suggested that with Chinese viewpoints the causal relationship of workplace spirituality is a continuous circulation. Starting from the interpretation of environment, an individual would introspect and make practices of workplace spirituality and then his/her self-feelings, interpersonal relationships and furthermore the external environments would be influenced. After all, the change of surroundings would influence reversibly the way people interpret environments.

Keyword: workplace spirituality, spirituality, Chinese viewpoints

Introduction

Workplace spirituality has begun to be valued in academia and among practitioners since 1990s. Although there are different viewpoints in the study of workplace spirituality, it can be indicated that the influences of religions and cultures are usually mentioned (Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Wilber, 2000; Claude & Zamor, 2003; Hicks, 2003; Sheng & Chen, 2007; Stephen, 2007; Sheng, 2008; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2008; Zafar, 2010).

Since the concept of workplace spirituality mainly originates in the U.S. (e.g. Conger, 1994) and people hope to realize their faith and spiritual values at their workplaces, most of researches regarding workplace spirituality come out in Western countries and are embedded in Western cultures, economics and religions (e.g. Christianity). Very few are discussed from Oriental viewpoints. But Carole & Robert (2004) suggest workplace spirituality have an outcropping of growing interest in Eastern philosophies that promote integration between self and environment. Sheep (2006) emphasize that it is a major theoretical shortcoming to omit the cosmopolitan locus of analysis because it takes into accounts the expectations and norms of the larger society in which the organization is embedded.

Most of the thoughts and behaviors of Oriental Chinese, even people in Korea and Japan, are much influenced by the thoughts of Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism, which include the way to treat people, the way to live, and the way to interact with people at workplaces. Therefore, important references in Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism were analyzed in this study. Besides, this study held several focus group meetings. The subjects participating in meetings are workers with average working years of more than six years. Through the meetings, the Chinese's opinions regarding the content, cause and effect of workplace spirituality were investigated under the influences of Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism.

Spirituality and Workplace Spirituality

In the application form for 2008 International Spirit at Work Awards, spirituality is defined as the innate human attribute with vertical and horizontal components (ICSW, 2008). The vertical component is "a desire to transcend the individual ego or personality self...is experienced as a conscious sense of profound connection to the Universe/God/Spirit."

On the other hand, the horizontal component is “a desire to be of service to other humans and the planet.” A person with strong spirituality including vertical connection and the ability to serve others (horizontal component) will have a clear grasp on his/her mission, ethics, and values.

As to workplace spirituality, some scholars indicated that it is a unique thinking way of ego, work, and working organizations through which employees may have opportunities to realize or feel again their inner life, meanings of their works, and the relationship between an individual and society (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Hicks, 2003). Basically, such a kind of definition thinks that workplace spirituality is a thinking way with spiritual insights, which is related to workplace.

There are other kinds of definitions about workplace spirituality. For example, some argued that workplace spirituality should include a process in which individuals at workplace will discover or nourish their deep and original feelings and concerns about their inner life, work, interpersonal relationship; their connections with society, morality and the world; and their desires to transcend ego and service others (Claude & Zamor, 2003; ICSW, 2008). Such a kind of definition about workplace spirituality emphasizes the process, which can cultivate a worker's spirituality, which is not only restricted in workplace scope but also expanding to the concerns about the world and morality, etc.

To summarize the two kinds of definitions above, it can be inferred that workplace spirituality is not only a static result or a feeling but also including a dynamic workplace process of acting and thinking, through which individuals can discover and nourish their spirituality. This kind of spirituality tends to relate with work but can also be applied to other more comprehensive aspects, such as concerns with family, society, environment, and even the world or universe (ICSW, 2008; Sheng, 2008).

The Influences of Culture and Religion

The early researches about workplace spirituality are closely related to religion. In the late 1990s, the Academy of Management formed a special interest group called the Management, Spirituality and Religion Interest Group. With the expansion of this group and discussions of more diversified participants, the relationships between workplace spirituality and religion are not as obvious as before (Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Kale & Shrivastava, 2003; Sheep, 2006; Sheng & Chen, 2007). Zafar (2010) finds out that both sectors experience spirituality and religiosity more or less to a certain extent but at the same time fail to identify any organization where workplace spirituality is being followed in letter and spirit.

In spite of this, Howard (2002) and Sheng (2008) still think that religion is a good catalytic approach to workplace spirituality. As for the influences of cultures on workplace spirituality, some researches indicated that individuals with different cultures tend to nourish their workplace spirituality in different approaches. For example, in Western cultures, it is believed that workplace spirituality of employees could be established by organizational mechanisms; while in Oriental cultures, people believe that self-cultivation in morality is the key factor for individual's introspection and spirituality, including the workplace spirituality (Zohar, 1997; Wilber, 2000). Daniel (2010) proposed that workplace spirituality is an element of the organizational culture and that it has an important effect on team effectiveness.

In addition, Kent (2006) found that many researchers tend to separate the variables of personal spirituality and workplace that they usually treat personal spirituality as a kind of personal values. For example, Kolodinsky, Giacalone & Jurkiewicz (2008) divided organizational spirituality into two different concepts, which are personal spirituality and organizational climate, a concept about workplace described by Kolodinsky et al. as “an individual's perception of the spiritual values within an organizational setting.” Nevertheless, to most of the Orientals, especially the Chinese, the boundary between life and work is not clear and people tend to fuse religion and spiritual thinking into their life and work (Sheng, 2008). Meanwhile, to some Chinese workplaces are just like cloisters in the city and to work is to learn how to get along with people, to take lessons in dealing with problems, and to practice moral teachings. Thus, the spiritual values that Chinese felt in an organization in fact are parts of (or will become) personal spirituality and vice versa. That is to say, to Chinese the relationship between variables about personal spirituality and workplace might be a bi-directional cause and effect relationship instead of the unidirectional framework provided by Kolodinsky et al.

Research Design

Driscoll & Wiebe (2007) suggested that in order to prevent that viewing workplace spirituality only as a technique to reach financial or material ends, it is better to investigate workplace spirituality with qualitative methods, such as narrative analysis or hermeneutics. Thus, this study first analyzed the classical writings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism, which include Confucian Analects, the Tao Te Ching, and the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch. Then several focus group meetings were held. After content analysis and narrative analysis of Chinese ancient books and focus group meetings, this study explored the content and causal relationship of workplace spirituality from the Chinese viewpoints. The research procedures used are as below:

1. Selecting sentences of classical writings
 - a. Three Chinese literature professors and one general director of a library picked out the most qualified classical sentences in the writings, which still match the thoughts of modern Chinese.
 - b. Two professionals familiar with workplace spirituality screened these sentences and selected ones that are most related to the topic of this study.
2. Initiate focus group meetings
 - a. Seven focus group meetings with 51 participants were held and the topic of the meetings was workplace spirituality.
 - b. Important sentences regarding workplace spirituality were selected from the meeting records.
3. Carry out content analysis
 - a. Three experienced professionals screened the sentences selected during the two procedures above.
 - b. Sentences of consensus were left and divided into three parts: the content, the cause, and the effect of workplace spirituality.
4. Carry out narrative analysis: researcher chose the most representative sentences and return they to the original texts to conduct the narrative analysis.

Results

Cause of Workplace Spirituality

Based on content analysis, this research concluded five factors of the cause of workplace spirituality as shown in Table 1. Among which, the stimuli of frustrations and challenges are both mentioned in the focus group meetings and in ancient books. Therefore, this study focus on this factor here to demonstrate narrative analysis of this aspect, namely cause of workplace spirituality.

In the chapter Tsze Han of Confucian Analects, the Confucius said, "When the year becomes cold, then we know how the pine and the cypress are the last to lose their leaves." Confucius described "leaves" as the moral integrity and described "the pine and the cypress" as the superior person and described "the year becomes cold" as the adversity and frustration in life, which meant that the superior person would insist on his moral integrity till the end of the world even face frustrations in life. The originality of this sentence was that Confucius was once besieged in Chu and his student, Tsze Lu, was aggrieved for what he suffered for that Confucius was a superior person of great moral integrity. At this time, Confucius said to Tzse Lu, "Although orchids grow in the deep forest, they would not stop perfuming; the superior person does not give up his moral integrity for he faces obstacles." This sentence indicated that Confucius thought that whether a person's worth would be recognized or not depends on timing; however, the superior person was much like orchids in the deep forest, would not be frustrated by the obstacles to stop his self-disciplines. Confucius said, "When the year becomes cold, then we know how the pine and the cypress are the last to lose their leaves" when he escaped from Chu and recalled the memories at that time.

Table 1 Cause of Workplace Spirituality

Causes of WPS	Representative Sentences
The Stimuli of Frustrations and Challenges	1. When the year becomes cold, then we know how the pine and the cypress are the last to lose their leaves. ^a 2. Some people can even discover the new possibilities when facing low tides and can start over again. ^b
The Diversified Opportunities	Once a person tries something different...there will be different consequence... ^b
Influences from Others	When a person finds that the group is so introspective, he will [try to be introspective]... ^b
Encouraging Environment for people to Experience on Their Own	Only when a person tries to find the answers on his own can he [progress]... ^b
Positive Demonstrations	1. I will manifest no ambition, and the people will of themselves attain to the primitive simplicity. ^c 2. The good of superior person should be like water [to be kindly and influential]. ^c

^a From Confucian Analects

^b From focus group meetings

^c From Tao Te Ching

The relationship between frustration and developing moral integrity was not only mentioned in the Confucius Analects but was also mentioned in focus group meetings. In focus group meetings, some people mentioned that frustrations were inevitable at workplaces; however, people could view frustrations in more positive ways and more meaningful practices could be generated and people could start over again.

There must be high tides and low tides in everyone's work. The question is: How does one deal with the low tides when he/she faces low tides? **Some people can even discover the new possibilities when facing low tides and can start over again.** (FG01)

According to the statements above, it can be indicated that an environment of obstacles and frustrations might encourage people who desire to make improvement for that they will adapt themselves to the environment with more positive angles and they will not only insist on their moral self-discipline but also ask themselves to make adjustments.

Content of Workplace Spirituality

Based on content analysis, this research also concluded five factors of the content of workplace spirituality as shown in Table 2. Among which, Stabilization of One's Own Nature and Introspection, Repentance, and Reform are the introspective process to help increase spirituality at workplaces. On the other hand, To Practice Morality, To Convey Positive Attitudes, and To Help Others Actively are the kinds of behavioral practices to help increase spirituality at workplaces. The following is the narrative analysis aimed the factor of Stabilization of One's Own Nature.

First is the sentence "The real stabilization is to keep your own nature stable," which is picked out from the following paragraph of the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch. The Knowledgeable [a respectful title for the Buddhism dharma listeners], if you practice your stability, do not judge a person by he/she is right or wrong, by he/she is kind or evil, or by the mistakes he/she has made and you will see that **the real stabilization is to keep your own nature stable**. The Knowledgeable, if you are attracted by your stability of physical body but talk about other's right or wrong, merits or defects, or good or evil, it would stand against the way of Buddhism dharma.

The paragraph above shows that Zen Master focus stabilization on one's own nature, not on the physical body, and the stabilization will help people keep themselves, not to mind others overly, than to increase their spirituality through an introspective process. Such a point of view can be found as well in many places in the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, for example the sentence of "If one can realize his/her own nature, everyone in his/her eyes is Buddha," which means the one who realized his/her nature will treat others respectfully and equally and than others will not make the one in great agitation.

Table 2: Content of Workplace Spirituality: Introspection and Behavior

Content of WPS	Representative Sentences
Stabilization of One's Own Nature	1. The real stabilization is to keep your own nature stable. ^d 2. If one can realize his/her own nature, everyone in his/her eyes is Buddha. ^d 3. Calm down yourself. ^b
Introspection, Repentance and Reform	I daily examine myself three times. ^a
To Practice Morality	1. The superior man will keep honest and open. ^a 2. The one who exercises government by means of virtue is like the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it [if a leader shows virtue, others will follow him/her]. ^a 3. Treating small matters without forbearance confounds great plans [forbearance is the morality for a great achievement]. ^a 4. A person must care [and do]...the mortality in daily lives... ^b
To Convey Positive Attitudes	To convey your [positive] motives to people around. ^b
To Help Others Actively	To try one's best to help others actively. ^b

^a From Confucian Analects

^b From focus group meetings

^d From Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch

In addition to the sentences mentioned in the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch that a person may view him/herself inward instead of being interfered by outward environments, there were also people mentioned in the focus group meetings that people could calm down when they faced the obstacles at their workplaces. After calming down, people may find proper solutions to complicated questions or situations with stabilized natures.

At that time, I **had** to prepare a lot of documents... the process of the entire experiment...there are many things [to deal with]... [One thing that] I could not understand...than I ...put myself there... (After that) I solved this problem... To solve... you must calm down first... **calm down yourself**... (FG03)

Effect of Workplace Spirituality

What is the impact on an individual when he/she increased workplace spirituality through an introspective process or through behavioral practices? The result is shown in Table 3. Among which, some sentences indicate both the content and effect of workplace spirituality, so we put them in both Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 3: Effects of Workplace Spirituality

Effects of WPS	Representative Sentences
To Win Others' Approval Naturally	1. The one who exercises government by means of virtue is like the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it. ^a 2. The one who holds in hands the Right Way, the whole world will follow him/her. ^c
To Treat Others Equally and Respectfully	If one can realize his/her own nature, everyone in his/her eyes is Buddha. ^d
To Resist Compression	1. To become more and more resistant to compression. ^b 2. Treating small matters without forbearance confounds great plans. ^a
To Accept and Approve Oneself	1. To approve oneself...have a sense of achievement. ^b 2. To become more mature and reliable. ^b 3. ...I feel that I can make some kind of progress in... ^b
To Acquire a Sense of Belonging	To find a sense of belonging. b

^a From Confucian Analects

^b From focus group meetings

^c From Tao Te Ching

^d From Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch

In Table 3, this research concluded five factors of the effect of workplace spirituality, which included that to make individuals able (or perceive to be able) to win others' approval naturally, to treat others equally and respectfully, to resist compression, to accept and approve oneself, and to acquire a sense of belonging. The following is the narrative analysis aimed the factor of To Win Others' Approval Naturally.

In the chapter Wei Chang of Confucian Analects, the Confucius said, "The one who exercises government by means of virtue is like the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it." In this sentence, Confucius used north polar star as description. Although the north polar star does not change its place, other stars still turn towards it. It was indicated by Confucius that a political leader should rule his country with morality and he would win people's approval and allegiance, which would be like all the stars turn towards the north polar star.

What Confucius said above is much like the sentence "The one who holds in hands the Right Way, the whole world will follow him/her" in Tao Te Ching. Before the time that Tao Te Ching was written, there was a small country intruded by its neighbor country. The ruler of the small country always ruled his country with morality. He abandoned his throne and left his country for that he did not want his people endangered by wars. His people were grateful for his virtue and followed him voluntarily to another place. Even people from other countries were moved by his virtue and came to submit to him. Eventually, the ruler constructed another small country. After he passed down his throne for several generations, this country overthrew the tyrant in Shang Dynasty and developed the Zhou Dynasty.

Therefore, when Lao-tze wrote Tao Te Ching with five thousand words before he left the Central Plains of China because of his disappointment about the government, he felt the chaos of current situation and wrote down the sentence "The one who holds in hands the Right Way, the whole world will follow him/her," which is indicated that if a political leader insists on The Tao (Right Way), he will win everyone's approval and allegiance.

As shown above, the Chinese believe that once a person behaves well or is equipped with moral standard, such as integrity, forbearance, openness and honesty, he will naturally win people's approval.

Discussion

The Inseparability of the Chinese's Work, Life, and Moral practice

Driscoll & Wiebe (2007) suggested that authentic spirituality is much more important than technique spirituality, which can be inferred that "spirituality" is more important than "workplace" in the phrase of "spirituality at workplace." When people at workplace practice their authentic spirituality that could be cultivated during their daily introspection and behaviors, such spirituality is a kind of workplace spirituality (Sheng, 2008). Long & Mills (2010) advocates workplace spirituality as necessary for organizations and the individuals who work in them to prosper. Carole & Robert (2004) express that workplace spirituality-related factors with performance can be shown to triangulate three areas: motivation, commitment, and adaptability.

We can see that few contents of Chinese classical books adopted in this study are directly involved with "How should people work?" while most contents are involved with "How should people live and practice morality?" However, to most of the Chinese, the relationship of work, family, life, and moral practice is inseparable. Sheng (2008) indicated that the Chinese tend to fuse their religious or spiritual habits into their life or work. For example, the Chinese usually say that "to get married and start a career," which reflects that the relationship of family and work is complementary and indispensable. Meanwhile, the famous motto of Zen Master, Bai Tsang Huai Hai, "If one does not work a day, he/she must not eat anything a day," which is not only an attitude of work but also an attitude of life and moral practice. Thus, it is different from Western culture. As Maclagan (2003) and Sheep (2006) noted that moral dilemmas involve two or more conflicting values.

For that to most of the Chinese, work, life, and moral practice is similar conducts. These conducts are mutual inclusive that work is a part of life and a part of moral practice, and the life is also a part of work, and so on. Therefore, to nourish spirituality at workplaces is also just a way to practice morality in life, and vice versa.

The Influences of Workplace Spirituality on External Environments

Moore & Casper (2006) notes, one of the more agreed upon dimensions of workplace spirituality is the notion of interconnectedness. Interconnectedness can simply be defined as the feeling of being part of something bigger than the self. Jurkiewicz & Giacalone (2004), describe interconnectedness as a relationship to others that provides positive feelings.

There is a sentence in Tao Te Ching “Everything has its origin,” which means that everything in the world has its own origin and the ultimate of origin is “Tao.” Tao is similar to a rule of nature, which exists both in simple things and complicated environments. Therefore, a person, a particle of sand, or a drop of water, they all originate from the same origin of the Universe. That is much like a Buddhist maxim, “A particle of sand is the Universe and a flower is the Paradise.” Everything can mirror and influence its larger external world. As for the thoughts of the Confucianism, it was also mentioned by Yuan-Kang in the Yue-Jiue Book in Han Dynasty that “One can find the meaning of a thing through observing subtle things,” which implies that the truth, origin, or developing trend could be told through observing subtle traces.

According to the viewpoints of the Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism above, it can be indicated that in the Chinese concepts, everything originates from the same origin and an individual or any tiny thing will be connected to the external environments and to one another. Therefore the influences on individual caused by workplace spirituality will further change the external environments.

The Circulation of Workplace Spirituality

The most of researches regarding workplace spirituality come out in Western countries and are embedded in Western cultures, economics and religions, results indicated that perceptions of organizational-level spirituality appear to matter most attitudinal and attachment-related outcomes (Kolodinsky, Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2008). But in Buddhism, the circulation of karma is an important concept. For example, the sentence of “A cause brings an effect and the effect is also the cause” in the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch indicates the mutual dependence of causes and effects. In such a condition, people have to know that the causes before will result in the effects at present and the effects at present will be also the causes in the future. The most important is that the past, the present, and the future is on the same path experienced by a being. Moreover, the space-time concept is very flexible in Buddhism; therefore, the evident relationship of causes and effects may be seen in a minute or may take a long time, even after many generations. Meanwhile, a person may influence others first and eventually be influenced by others. So, Zen Master told us not to distinguish causes and effects in an opposing position but to fuse them to acquire the equilibrium, which is a kind of enlightenment. This is different from other research based on Western cultures. As Zaidman, Goldstein-Gidoni & Nehemya (2009) use domestication, as a key analytical concept. In spite all the familiarization and disguising techniques, spiritual consultants do bring new ideas into the organizational context.

Although the concept of cause and effect is seldom mentioned in Confucianism, the concept of learning is strongly emphasized. For example, the sentences “To learn with practice is very delighted” and “Reviewing old lesions will acquire new knowledge” both demonstrate that even a person has achieved something or has reached to certain level he/she still has to review or practice what he/she has learnt and new comprehensions or results will be generated. This kind of concept to keep learning influences many Chinese viewpoints of workplace spirituality, and the Chinese think that the relationship among work, learning, and moral practice is a process of circulation including learning, achieving, reviewing or further learning, and achieving again, and so forth.

Conclusions

The integration of Table 1 to Table 3 and the above discussion is shown as Figure 1. The factors of cause of workplace spirituality were arranged from Table 1 and indicated in the left box. Most of the factors are of environment, for example the diversified opportunities, and one should notice that these environmental factors include not only favorable circumstances but also unfavorable circumstances such as frustrations. That is to say that no matter under unfavorable circumstances or favorable circumstances, there are always people encouraged and their behavioral practices and introspections may be deepened.

This phenomenon is like what Confucius said, “When I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers,” which indicates that people should be equipped with the attitude of learning, and that is when we see men of worth, we should think of equaling them; when we see men of a contrary character, we should turn inwards and examine ourselves to avoid the character. Under such a viewpoint, the objectivity of environment is not so important. What is more important is that whether a person’s interpretation and response to an environment could help him to adjust himself under unfavorable circumstances or to learn positive factors from other people under favorable circumstances or not.

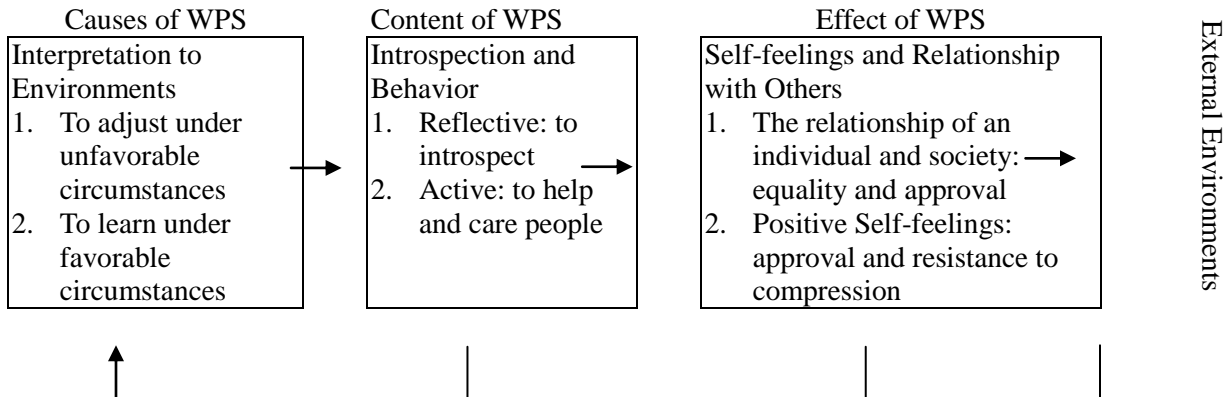


Figure 1: The Relationship of Workplace Spirituality

As to the content of workplace spirituality, the behavioral practices and introspections were concluded in Table 2 and presented as the central box of Figure 1. As shown in Table 2, there are two factors of introspections including Stabilization of One’s Own Nature and Introspection, Repentance, and Reform. In addition, there are three factors of behavioral practices including Practice Morality, To Convey Positive Attitudes, and To Help Others Actively. Such a result is similar to the findings of Lips-Wiersma & Venkataraman (2007) focused on corporate spiritual foundation. They divided spirituality into two parts: reflective and active. This study continues using their terms to classify the content of workplace spirituality in Figure 1.

After all, the right box in Figure 1 is the effect of workplace spirituality on an individual based on the five factors shown as Table 3. We classify the five factors into two parts. The first one is named the relationship of an individual and society, which includes two factors of To Win Others’ Approval Naturally and To Treat Others Equally and Respectfully. On the other hand, there are another three factors related to positive self-feelings, the second part of effect of workplace spirituality, such as To Resist Compression, To Accept and Approve Oneself, and To Acquire a Sense of Belonging.

In addition to the investigations of the cause, content, and effect of workplace spirituality, according to the discussions above and the viewpoint of Seaward (1995), workplace spirituality does not only influence an individual but also influence the external environments. Therefore, this study lists external environments as a variable in the most right box in Figure 1. The influences on external environments were discussed in many researches. For example, Thompson (2000) suggested that a corporation with more spirituality would benefit more in investments and the stockholders’ equity than other corporations. Moreover, Duchon & Plowman (2005) found that the working unit in an organization with more workplace spirituality tends to have better working efficiency.

In conclusion, according to the previous discussions of the circulation of cause and effect, the concept of circulation is added in Figure 1. It can be inferred that whether the influences from external environments or any of the two boxes on the right side of Figure 1, they will have impact on an individual to arouse his/her interpretation to environment and reform the cause of workplace spirituality. Then, the cause will arouse another circulation again, from the introspections, behaviors, self-feelings, relationship with others, and external environments, over and over again.

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