

# PATAGONIA – FROM PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY TO SPIRITUAL ORGANISATION

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## Abstract

Spirituality has traditionally been understood and manifested in the religious context. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to the growing numbers of people who, especially in the Western part of the world, do not identify themselves with official church doctrines but feel the spiritual dimension of their life and want to express it, spirituality is understood as a more general term where religions spirituality represents just one way how to express one's spiritual dimension.

It turns out that via spirituality, people can feel and express their relation to what is understood as common with other people (visions, objectives, values, beliefs) and build bonds with their environment (human, natural, supernatural). As such, spirituality improves human well-being.

Research has shown that companies that enable their employees to connect their spiritual life with the workplace improve employee work satisfaction, loyalty and performance.

The objective of this paper is to briefly sum up some theoretical ideas on spirituality, workplace and organisational spirituality and then show how they are applied in a concrete organisation. Patagonia, the US retailer of outdoor clothing, serves as an example of a spiritual organisation.

Keywords: spirituality, workplace spirituality, spiritual organisation, Patagonia

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## Introduction

Spirituality has traditionally been understood and manifested in the religious context. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to the growing numbers of people who, especially in the Western part of the world, do not identify themselves with official church doctrines but feel the spiritual dimension of their life and want to express it, spirituality is understood as a more general term where religions spirituality represents just one way how to express one's spiritual dimension.

Literature provides different definitions of spirituality. Summing them up, it is possible to state that spirituality represents how the individual understands and relates to self, other people, and what is transcendent. Human spirituality is fully integrated into an individual's life, is holistic and dynamic, and is related to an individual's values and life experience. It turns out that via spirituality, people can feel and express their relation to what is understood as common with other people (visions, objectives, values, beliefs) and build bonds with their environment (human, natural, supernatural). As such, spirituality improves human well-being.

Research has shown that companies that enable their employees to connect their spiritual life with the workplace improve employee work satisfaction, loyalty and performance. Therefore spirituality becomes a factor widely discussed in the current managerial literature.

In managerial literature, spirituality is discussed from three main directions as individual spirituality, workplace spirituality and organisational spirituality. Individual spirituality is researched from the perspective of what it is and how it influences the behaviours of the individual in an organisation. Workplace and organisational spirituality are researched from the perspective of features and values that allow employees to relate their spiritual life with the workplace or organisation.

## **1 Methodology**

The objective of this paper is to briefly sum up some theoretical ideas on spirituality, workplace and organisational spirituality and then show how they are applied in a concrete organisation. Patagonia, the US retailer of outdoor clothing, is an example of a spiritual organisation.

The paper is based on secondary data collected from electronic resources. As the scope of the paper does not allow for presenting a proper literature review on spirituality, workplace spirituality, spiritual organisation and Patagonia, and our intention was not to develop a case study on Patagonia but to give an example of interesting spiritual organisation, only definitions and concepts of spirituality, workplace spirituality and spiritual organisation, and resources on Patagonia most relevant to the topic of the paper are included.

The theoretical background on spirituality is based on literature review done for our previous papers. This review was the keyword review. We searched keywords spirituality, spiritual organization, and workplace spirituality. After the keyword search, we read the relevant papers and went on searching for most relevant and interesting works cited in these papers.

The information about Patagonia was collected by a key word Google search. We searched for the following keywords: Patagonia organisation, Yves Chouinard, Yves Chouinard ideas, Patagonia culture, and Patagonia human resources. When reading and further processing this literature on Patagonia, we did not do a systematic qualitative analysis of the text (it was not our intention) but searched directly for text on the spirituality of both the company and its founder, Yvon Chouinard.

This text, when identified, was evaluated from the point of view of Buck's (2006) definition of spirituality and related, depending on its meaning, to one of its five elements. Buck's approach to spirituality was chosen as it breaks down spirituality into five elements that are applicable to both personal and corporate (group) spirituality and therefore allows us to demonstrate the link between Yvon Chouinard's and Patagonia's spirituality (Table 1).

## **2 Spirituality**

Spirituality is a term that is difficult to define. It is fuzzy, vague, and conceptually unclear and changes over time. Some authors even argue that spirituality cannot be researched because it cannot be examined by thinking and that tools currently provided by science do not allow us to capture it because it evolves in a non-logic and nonlinear way. Nevertheless, authors who research spirituality agree that it is a holistic and multidimensional concept, usually defined as "that most human of experiences that seek to transcend the self and find meaning and purpose through connection with others, nature, and/or a Supreme Being, which may or may not involve religious structures or traditions" (Buck, 2006, p. 290). Or, as van Ness (1996, p.5) writes, "facing outward, human existence is spiritual insofar as one engages reality as a maximally inclusive whole and makes the cosmos an intentional object of thought and feeling. Facing inward, life has a spiritual dimension to the extent that it is apprehended as a project of people's most enduring and vital selves. In other words, the spiritual dimension of life is the embodied task of realising one's truest self in the context of reality apprehended as a cosmic totality".

Spirituality has relation to one's values, experience and historical and cultural background. It is "a personal identity, a way of life that represents habits, the pursuit of meaning and purpose, search for transcendence, connection with the others, and the divine in all aspects and areas (personal and work)" and "a phenomenon that brings connection between individuals, enlightening the purpose of their lives, it also connects individuals with other communities and generations" (Rocha & Pinheiro, 2021, p. 248). "Spirituality can also be expressed within the context of individual belief systems, inner life experiences, and in a general sense of being. The

definition of “spirituality” often encapsulates concepts of meaning (or purpose), value (or beliefs), transcendence (beyond the self), connecting (with others), and becoming (the life journey)” (Buck, 2006, p. 289).

To sum it up, spirituality concerns the relationship of the individual to self, to others and the transcendence dimension (what is beyond).

### **3 Workplace spirituality, organisational spirituality and spiritual organisation**

“Changes in the nature of work lead to changes in the nature of organisations and an evolution from purely economic activities to places with spiritual development” (Rocha & Pinheiro, 2021, p. 241). Spirituality in organisations is currently a salient issue in both scientific and empirical inquiry (Garcia-Zamor, 2003, p. 576). Literature provides different terms that promise to capture spirituality on an organisational level, for example, organisational spirituality, workplace spirituality, spirituality at the workplace, spirit at work, spirituality in business (Garcia-Zamor, 2003, p. 577) or spiritual organisation. Some authors use them as synonyms, and some make a difference. For example, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003, p. 13) define workplace spirituality as “a framework of organisational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employee experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provided feelings of completeness and joy”. Workplace spirituality involves “feelings of wholeness and connectedness” (Driver, 2005, p. 1095) as well as “the integration of various parts of individual’s professional and personal lives in authentic ways congruent with personal values” (Driver, 2005, p. 1095).

“Organisational spirituality is then defined as “an organisation’s possession of certain features such as spiritual values and practices.” (Pawar 2017, p. 989) or “organisational culture guided by mission statement, leadership and business practices that are socially responsible and value-driven, that recognises the contributions employees make to the organisation, that promotes individual spiritual development and well being” (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006, p. 262).

Al-Qutop and Harrim, H. (2014, p. 173), based on different concepts and definitions, conclude that “workplace spirituality or organisation spirituality involves the following themes and notions:

- 1) Employees engage in meaningful work/job.

2) An employee feels having a meaningful job, serving a higher purpose in life with greater responsibility, involving contributing to the welfare of others and the common good.

3) A clear shared vision and mission, focusing on global well-being, common good, etc.

4) Integration/ alignment of personal development and long-term personality with job performance.

5) Admit that every individual has talents and creative capacities and potentials. She/he must be allowed and encouraged to unleash and nurture such potentials and capacities, towards reaching full potentials.

6) Help an employee develop a sense of call through one's work (vocationally) and experience a feeling of joy and bliss.

7) Emphasising a full awareness of the need and work for "Sustainable growth/ development" which requires a full recognition of the limited resources, sincere interest in protecting, saving and enhancing our planet and what lives on it".

#### **4 Patagonia – example of spiritual organisation**

Patagonia is a US outdoor equipment company. Its roots go to 1957 when Yvon Chouinard, a climber (diver, fisherman, surfer), started to produce climbing gear. Later, with his friend, he started a company that redesigned and improved climbing tools to make them more functional, stronger and lighter. By 1970 the company became the largest supplier of climbing hardware in the US and was widely criticised as the hardware damaged the rocks. They sought more environmental solutions and developed an alternative to classical pitons and aluminium chocks and taught climbers to use them. Their solution became a success and prepared way for other innovations in climbing gear and wear. Patagonia took inspiration from other sports and outdoor businesses (rugby, fishing, football), combined their knowledge and introduced new materials and solutions. New materials were explained carefully, and customers were instructed how to use them through essays in the company catalogue. The company was not afraid even of disruptive innovations. In 1991 the company was hit by the recession and had to dismiss 20% of people. It was clear that they became dependent on growth they could not sustain. It directed the company to a more responsible business, a community-centred culture, and expanded care about employees, customers, and the environment. The company tries to reduce the influence of its business on the environment, supports conservation projects, and educates customers and local communities (Brandminds, 2023; Eu.patagonia, n.d.).

The history of Patagonia, its development and its culture is highly influenced by Yvon Chouinard's strong spiritual focus based on his love of nature. He is a distinguished climber and surfer, experienced diver and fisherman. Whatever he is doing, he is doing with nature in his mind. Chouinard says, "Living a life close to nature has taught me to try and protect what I love by leading an examined life, bearing witness to the evils and injustices of the world, and acting with whatever resources I have to fight those evils. This is something that everyone needs to do in his or her own way" (Superfolk.com, n.d.). Chouinard believes that "A person is born with certain genetic traits and early childhood experiences will influence you, but the greatest changes come after you become deeply involved in a passionate activity... we are who we are because of what we do" (Superfolk.com, n.d.). He believes in Karma, and his life mission is to make the world a better and fairer place. He goes for quality and simplicity in all his activities: "The hardest thing in the world is to simplify your life. It's so easy to make it complex. What's important is leading an examined life. Mastery... is to work toward simplicity; replace complex technology with knowledge, hard work, and skill" (Excellence Reporter, 2020).

Patagonia is what Chouinard calls "the responsible business" (Eu.patagonia, n.d.). Patagonia's mission statement used to be "make the best product and cause no unnecessary harm", but it was transformed to "We're in business to save our home planet" in 2018 (Eu.patagonia, n.d.). The company express five core values; quality, integrity, environmentalism, justice, and not being bound by conventions. "Quality" means a strong orientation to the best products, services, and improvement. Products are required to be functional, versatile, long-lasting, repairable and recyclable. The company is trying to do regenerative products that return to Earth what they took. "Integrity" means that the actions of the company and employees match their words and bring synergy. "Environmentalism" focuses on planet protection, reducing the Patagonia business impact and regenerative practices, and partnership with communities and nature restoring organisations. "Justice" is an orientation to equitable and antiracist company and community. "Not bound by convention" is the belief that success (and fun) lies in developing new ways to do things.

Regardless of upper values, Patagonia does not strive for sustainability as many organisations do these days. They understand changes as a part of the natural processes and people as part of nature. Therefore they stress nature protection and regeneration, work with local communities and support smaller projects.

When founding the company, Chouinard located it near the ocean and left the door open to adventure. People have flexible working hours; performance is valued more than being present in the offices. This encourages people to do outdoor activities as much as possible (even

during working hours). To support this philosophy, Patagonia always employed people with a similar mindset and supported employee friendships. Work is collaborative; all changes start bottom-up, and employees are encouraged to come up with new ideas, work and environmental projects. The company pays extensive attention to its supply chain to be planet friendly. Connection with customers and local communities is supported by environmental projects and stories shared on the corporate web page. Chouinard believes that the company should not grow over a certain size as it would lose its operability.

Table 1 indicates how Chouinard’s spirituality orientation influenced the spirituality of Patagonia. To demonstrate this, we use Buck's (2006, p. 286) conclusion that “the definition of “spirituality” often encapsulates concepts of meaning (or purpose), value (or beliefs), transcendence (beyond the self), connecting (with others), and becoming (the life journey)”.

**Tab. 1: From personal spirituality to a spiritual organisation**

Elements of spirituality concept Buck (2006, p. 286)	Yvon Chouinard spirituality	Patagonia spirituality
Meaning (or purpose)	To make the world a better and fairer place	Old: make the best product and cause no unnecessary harm New: Save Our Home Planet
Value (or beliefs)	Slow down, quality, being creative, breaking the rules	Quality, integrity, environmentalism, justice, not bound by conventions
Transcendence (beyond the self)	Love for nature, he believes in Karma	Focus on nature, planet and regenerative practices; the Earth is company only shareholder
Connecting (with others)	He trusts people too much, is friendly, understandable, his role in the organisation – a corporate philosopher “Let my people go surfing” philosophy	Friendly, supportive corporate environment; flexible working hours; support to outdoor activities; nursery; close relationship to local communities; good relationship and cooperation with suppliers
Becoming (the life journey)	Life should be moving towards simplicity, the greatest changes come after you become deeply involved in a passionate activity, we are who we are because of what we do	Switch from not doing harm philosophy to the philosophy of nature and planet regeneration

Source: The author

In September 2022, Chouinard reorganised the company into two parts, Patagonia Purpose Trust (100% of voting stock) and Holdfast Collective (100% of the nonvoting stock), dedicated to fighting the environmental crisis and defending nature. Fundings now come from Patagonia that, after reinvesting in the business, redistributes the rest of the money as a dividend to help fight the crisis (Eu.patagonia, n.d.). As Chouinard writes, “ Instead of extracting value from nature and transforming it into wealth, we are using the wealth Patagonia creates to protect the source” (Eu.patagonia, n.d.).

How is Patagonia doing it? The first prerequisite of their success with an unusual business model is a strict focus on the mission. The mission is the organisation’s passion; it is visible in their projects, and employees live it as it is not only the vision of the company but also their personal vision. Second, is the relationship of the company with its customers via web pages and ambassadors. Customers are well-informed about Patagonia’s mission, objectives, and projects. They are advised on how to use products and how to look after them, and the company offers the possibility of repair and recycling. Customers and ambassadors are asked to share their experience with products, share ideas and come up with innovations. Together with other stakeholders (local communities, project teams of supported projects, and suppliers), they are understood as a part of the company. Patagonia is educating stakeholders via stories published on their web pages, books, videos, and outdoor activities (Allgoodtales.com, n.d.).

## **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to show how theoretical ideas on spirituality apply to concrete organisation. Patagonia is an example of a company that meets different ideas of what a spiritual organisation is. Patagonia is an organisation that developed on the founder’s strong personal beliefs and spiritual values. It is an organisation with certain spiritual features (Pawar, 2017), value-driven with distinct organisational culture (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006).

The company’s mission is focused on global well-being and is shared and supported by all company stakeholders. Employees, the majority of whom are devoted fans of outdoor sports, work in the company providing equipment for their hobbies, and based on their own experience, participate in its development and improvement. At the same time, they can participate in nature protection and regeneration projects that allow them to increase the common good. Employees are understood as individuals with different capacities and potentials. The company supports employees’ personal development from professional and personal (sports) levels. The corporate culture supports friendship, fun and community. As for

the last element, sustainable growth/development, Patagonia goes beyond this element and puts stress on nature protection and regeneration.

The paper discusses the concept of spirituality and the way how it is used in Patagonia in brief form, which leads to two significant limits of the paper. First, the paper does not provide the full case study of Patagonia as a spiritual organisation but focuses only on some of its aspects. Second, the paper does not give a complete literature review on spirituality and how spirituality works in Patagonia and influence it.

Patagonia is a specific and interesting company; therefore, these limits represent the research gap that will be researched properly in future. In future, we plan to do a systematic qualitative analysis of the text of materials Patagonia shares about their management model and spirituality (corporate materials, stories, interviews, etc.) to identify deeper levels of spirituality in the organisation (different dimensions and types of spirituality).

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