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For Workplace News

A young and socially aware poet named Robert Zimmerman once wrote a song with a line that became a mantra for many of us in the 1960's: "with God on my side". We were certain that he meant God was with us in the cause of so many of the social issues of those days. We should have known better. The song was "The Times They Are A-Changin'" and Robert Zimmerman, better known as Bob Dylan, had a deeper message. Everyone, throughout history, has evoked the idea that God is on their side to justify their actions and ideas.

You have to feel sorry for God. He/She is with the Taliban and George Bush, the Leafs and the Bruins, the Yankees and the Red Sox and every student taking a test. Spread thin, covering all countries, businesses and sports teams, it must be tough to be that flexible and that committed at the same time.

Is God Part of Your Competitive Advantage?

Of course, I'm being facetious. But God, spirituality and religion are a resurgent force in today's society, and increasingly in today's workplace. More and more companies are relying on God (spirituality) as part of their competitive advantage. What worries me is that those people who don't fit within a narrow belief structure of those leading the spirituality movement within a firm will find themselves increasingly outcast.

In the mid-1990s, a Gallup Poll suggested that 95 percent of American workers believed in God or some universal spirit, while almost 50 percent spoke about God in the workplace. In my observations, the extent of spirituality in the workplace has only grown in the last few years, just as it has in the political dialogue. This shouldn't be too surprising. We live in uncertain times. When people are confused, anxious and looking for answers, it's easy to turn to religion, spirituality and God. On top of that, the socially responsible movement is

making leaders think more about the ramifications of their actions. According to an article in last fall's Christian Science Monitor, "Patricia Aburdene, co-author of the Megatrends books, sees the rise of spirituality in the workplace as a trend that is about to become a megatrend." So what does God really provide a company? Calmness. A solid foundation. A higher sense of purpose. All the things that leadership is supposed to supply but too often doesn't. According to McKinsey & Co., "when companies engage in programs that use spiritual techniques for their employees, productivity improves and turnover is greatly reduced." In 1999 my own publisher, Jossey-Bass (now owned by Wiley & Sons) published A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America. It found that employees who work for organizations they consider to be spiritual are less fearful, less likely to compromise their values and more able to throw themselves into their jobs. The book's co-author Ian

Mirroff said: "Spirituality could be the ultimate competitive advantage." It's hard to argue with such statements, especially when that means questioning religion, but let me try anyway. The idea that putting God into the mix makes people better at their jobs is missing a larger point. People do better at their jobs when their leaders pay attention to them and provide them with a sense of larger meaning. It doesn't matter what format that comes in. I am reminded of a story I once heard about an artist in upstate New York who wanted to paint words on a pasture full of cows and then observe how the cows clustered together and what poetic phrasings emerged as a result. The farmers were okay with the idea, but were a little worried that the cows would be disturbed by the activity. In fact, cow milk production actually soared. How to explain this phenomenon? It's not that cows were poetically inclined - their workplace performance simply improved because people were paying them extra attention. More love, more productivity. I have no problem with workplaces supporting spirituality, so long as God doesn't become part of the bully pulpit. People reading this might assume that I am not a religious man - but in fact I am. The reason why liberal societies have historically shied away from invoking God is because of

the potential danger. First of all, if patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel, then God is the first refuge - justifying and rationalizing any action in advance, whether the outcome is good or bad. Second, I am greatly concerned about the possibility of workplace alienation because of overt spirituality. In 1999, the U.S. "Equal Employment Opportunity Commission" reported a 29 percent spike since 1992 in the number of religious-based discrimination charges, making those the third fastest growing claim after sexual harassment and disability.

Let observant Jews and Seventh Day Adventists take Friday afternoon and Saturday off, so long as they make up that time. Give Moslems a private place to pray in the afternoons. Let Christians understand it's okay to observe the holy days and talk to a company chaplain. It's good for the heart and the soul. But be very careful not to encroach on the values of others. Diversity is critical for any firm to be successful. In fact, I think diversity, generosity and openness are much more critical to our distinct competitive advantage than any corporate brand of spirituality.

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