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# Can You Bring Your Spirituality to Work?



By Claire Harbour , Culture Pearl; Antoine Tirard , NexTalent; and Nadav Klein , INSEAD

## **Lessons from executives who integrated their spiritual beliefs into their leadership style.**

A key ingredient of leadership is the ability to build trust. But according to DDI, a global HR consulting firm, only 46 percent of employees trust their direct manager to do what's right. Even worse, only 32 percent say they trust their organisation's senior leaders.

Building trust and doing what's right is linked to questions of morals and ethics, and whether leaders have a moral compass guiding their decisions and actions. Until recently, the business world has discouraged individuals from showcasing their personal values in general, and their religious beliefs in particular.

In this context, we are interested in the role of spiritual values, alignment and authenticity in the realm of business. By delving into the experiences of three leaders who have successfully integrated these elements into their unique leadership style, we seek to uncover insights that could empower

others to do the same.

## **Subhanu: Bridging worlds**

Born in India to a family of musicians and dancers, **Subhanu** moved to the UK at the age of three but remained connected to his cultural traditions. His early immersion in Sufi poetry and philosophy deepened his spiritual connection.

While Subhanu's spiritual and artistic practices made him feel like an outsider at first, he ultimately embraced his uniqueness. Pressured into engineering, he pursued his love of languages alongside.

When friends at Oxford questioned him about Hinduism, he'd answer glibly: "One God, don't hurt anybody". As he became more involved with the Hare Krishna movement, he felt compelled to learn more about Sanskrit. His graduation gift was a year of Sanskrit studies.

Subhanu's career at Citibank initially seemed incongruent with his desire to teach Sanskrit and study the Vedas. However, a fortuitous encounter with a Vedic scholar opened doors for him. Despite a busy schedule, he dedicated evenings to intensive study.

Even as he undertook an MBA in France, Subhanu simultaneously pursued his spiritual studies. During a trip to India, he was formally initiated into his cultural heritage. Given the tradition's tenet of passing on knowledge and serving others, he found it challenging to integrate ancient teachings into his busy modern life.

As Subhanu navigated diverse roles in PepsiCo, the strategy consulting field and Big Pharma, he maintained a commitment to serving and sharing knowledge. Engaging with mindfulness practitioners and purpose seekers, he wrote and conducted ceremonies with a holistic approach.

At first, Subhanu compartmentalised his spiritual and intellectual sides. It took a leadership coach's challenge to inspire him to live a more authentic life. Now leading a private equity firm, he emphasises leading "with purpose", drawing inspiration from Gandhi's philosophy of service to others.

This ethos is a constant in shaping his approach to building organisations.

Since that moment of liberation with his coach, Subhanu felt much freer to bring his spiritual practices to work. While at the Gates Foundation, he ran mindfulness sessions and yoga classes. He also encouraged people to collect great experiences as opposed to seeking out stepping stones.

What's next for Subhanu? "At some point, you will see more of me in robes... it will always be in me," he said. While his commitment surprised some, he emphasised that inner qualities supersede outer appearances.

Both in family and business, Subhanu fosters an environment where everyone can contribute in their own unique way. Considering this enduring commitment to meaningful connections and positive outcomes, the idea of retirement lacks appeal.

### **Derek: Balancing belief and business**

**Derek**, raised in Scotland, had a 24-year career at Standard Life, starting as an "office junior" at age 17. Influenced by his Christian upbringing and experiences in the Boys' Brigade, he valued service and mentorship.

He eventually rose to hold a number of senior and executive leadership roles. However, he started to feel a divergence in values, prompting him to leave after the company went public in 2006. His faith enabled him to move with confidence, trusting that new opportunities would appear.

Encouraged by a former colleague, Derek became an independent coach and facilitator, drawing on skills acquired from his tenure at Standard Life. After praying and seeking advice from family, church leaders and trusted friends, he spent several years in leadership advisory roles, where he served prestigious clients.

Despite achieving success and becoming a Partner at Pivot Leadership, he began questioning if he was fulfilling the plans he believed God had for him. Then, in late 2014, two significant events shaped Derek's path: his brother-

in-law's brain tumour worsened and he had a candid conversation with his daughters about how he spent his time.

Seeing the need to be more present at home, Derek experienced a series of serendipitous events, which he called "god-incidences". A job opportunity emerged at his church, and after much prayer, he accepted the role of executive director, overseeing a team of 20 and 700 volunteers.

Despite the material sacrifices that came with the role, Derek and his wife believed it was part of God's plan. Over six years, the position expanded to include preaching, which allowed him to use former skills and offered a deep sense of alignment.

As the senior pastor retired, Derek saw that his own role was also coming to an end. He used his leadership development expertise to assist the church in selecting and preparing a new senior pastor. Encouraged by a former colleague, Derek returned to leadership advisory. He now balances consulting and mentoring for the church and intentionally spending time with faith, family and friends – everything that truly matters to him.

Derek has the following recommendations: Stay true to your personal beliefs, have the courage to uphold your values, and serve with purpose and an open mind. "Never push your faith on others, but never ignore it in any setting", he says.

Derek also suggests finding like-minded colleagues. He relies on "kindness", which he distinguishes from mere niceness, as a core value allowing him to nurture and challenge individuals in any context.

### **Roxy: Bridging the gap between heart and mind**

A Polish immigrant to the United States at 10, **Roxy** was raised a Catholic, but her spiritual journey wasn't fuelled by religion. A globetrotter, curious about people, she initially pursued interior design but switched to hospitality management and event planning. Despite her success, she felt unfulfilled and, after a few years, took time off to travel and free her "caged soul".

Upon returning, Roxy joined The Wharton School, coordinating global executive education programmes for top-level clients. While this role fitted her interest in assisting people's growth, she pursued a master's degree in organisational dynamics to further her own learning.

Roxy began sensing the connection between heart and mind. Feeling constrained in her career growth at Wharton and seeing her soul dimming, she underwent a radical change to better use her gifts. She explored deeper healing and found happiness through extensive travel and various personal growth methods beyond her basic yoga, meditation and affirmation practices.

Several years ago, Roxy engaged in deep shadow work. She learned to stop relying on what didn't serve her anymore, such as degrees and accolades. She shifted her focus to helping individuals tap into their own gifts and discover what they want in life.

Constantly travelling to spiritually charged locales, Roxy continues to learn new approaches. She now helps clients connect with their spirituality, free from conditioned beliefs or an unbalanced ego.

Roxy's approach transcends typical health and wellness initiatives. She envisions a world where human connection takes precedence over profits, based on a holistic perspective integrating people, planet, passion and purpose.

From Roxy, we can see that inner work is crucial for healing and depth. She believes that self-awareness and connection should be taught in early education programmes. "If we are not guided towards ourselves, how do we become more deeply aware of who we truly are?" She works towards a world where people care about "why" they do what they do, beyond the usual concerns over "what" and "how much".

## **Integrating spirituality and embracing higher leadership purpose in the workplace**

These stories show that tuning in to a higher purpose can lead to extraordinary achievements and increased fulfilment. Research by the academic community, such as work by Nadav, suggests that serving others fosters [happiness](#) and a [greater sense of meaning in life](#). Regardless of your religious beliefs, understanding how spirituality influences leadership and organisational values can offer [valuable insights](#).

In many organisations, bringing spirituality to work remains uncommon. However, leaders like Subhanu, Derek and Roxy show it's possible. Encouraging people to bring their authentic selves to work fosters integrity and builds inclusive environments that bring out the best in everyone.

*Read an extended version of this article [here](#).*

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