



## Today's Corporate Mystic

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### A Quirky 90s Notion

Years ago I read a book called *The Corporate Mystic: A Guidebook for Visionaries with Their Feet on the Ground* (Hendricks & Ludeman, 1996). Written at a time when narratives about hard-driving CEOs, like Ford's Lee Iacocca and GE's Jack Welch, were popular, this book was never destined to be a best seller. Still I was drawn to the countercultural idea of the corporate mystic.

Recently I pulled the book off my shelf and began to flip through the pages, now a bit yellowed by age. Why, I thought, does the corporate mystic seem so compelling in today's business world?

According to renowned educator Richard Rohr (2009), a mystic is “one who has moved from mere belief systems or belonging systems to actual inner experience” (pp. 29-30). By this he means one who has attained a level of freedom from the self-limiting beliefs, assumptions, and concerns that get in the way of “reading reality truthfully, humbly, and helpfully” (p. 10). Curious and creative, the mystic uses both reasoning and intuition to see and hear all perspectives. Having achieved this level of awareness, the mystic welcomes paradox, suspending the need to judge, control, or rush to solutions, trusting that insight will emerge “inside of a different frame or seen with a different eye” (p. 146).

The mystic's journey, Rohr argues, is a natural process, a process that can be undertaken by anyone at any time. The mystic is not a specific person or a fixed state of being, but an aspiration, an archetype of the self-aware and liberated human being.

If this description makes you think of Yoda, the diminutive Star Wars sage, hang in there! As you'll see, there's actually much that's relevant to our workplaces and our time.

### The Self-Authoring Mind and the Evolving Nature of Work

To begin with, there's a striking similarity between the skills of the mystic and the findings on adult development by Harvard scholars Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey.

Kegan and Lahey's (2009) central claim is that the increasing complexity of the world around us demands a corresponding increase in mental complexity. The problem, they write, is that most

adults are stuck at a level of thinking called “the socialized mind,” shaped by the taken-for-granted beliefs and expectations of their social groups (p. 16). Modern life, however, requires a “quantum shift” in how we think and make meaning of the world around us (p. 27). We need to develop our “internal *authority*” to make choices and judgments, to reflect deeply, to think independently, to explore other perspectives, and to take responsibility for our feelings and actions (p. 53). Echoing Rohr’s description of the mystic, they call this higher level of development the “self-authoring mind” (p. 16).

In addition, the corporate mystic brings a set of capabilities well suited to the evolving nature of work. Not long ago, industrial-era organizations built stable hierarchies and standardized processes to ensure predictable and reliable results. In that world, managers set direction and workers followed. Nowadays, in our high-speed hypercompetitive work environments, we are asking for a greater level of commitment from workers. We are asking them to proactively and creatively embrace a world of constant change. We are asking, in today’s business lexicon, for their *engagement* in every sense of the word: behaviorally, mentally, and emotionally (Shuck & Reio, 2014).

Commitment. Creativity. Engagement. These are not behaviors that can be mandated by the boss. These are more complex ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that can only be attained by self-aware – and *self-authoring* – individuals exercising their free will. And as this new worker mindset evolves, it’s driving a shift away from paternalistic, authoritarian workplaces to workplaces that enable, even encourage, democratic adult-to-adult relationships (Palmer, 2000).

## Discord and Descartes

But hold on a minute. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Some of you may have noticed that most workplaces aren’t exactly idyllic.

In my experience almost all teams have to deal with conflict, and most organizations foster some level of toxic behavior. Of course it’s also true in our private lives: We fight with our siblings, infuriate our friends, and get mad at our spouses. My point is that discord is one of our defining characteristics; and whether we’re successful or not, we spend much of our lives dealing with this inescapable fact. Why, then, in the world of business, which prides itself on clear-eyed, fact-based problem solving, do we tiptoe around the reality of conflict, relegating it to the mysterious world of “soft skills”? Why are we so bad at this?

I blame it on Descartes.

René Descartes is the 17th-century French philosopher who famously wrote “I think, therefore I am.” Interestingly, Descartes was writing during the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), a time of profound conflict and turmoil, a time not unlike our own. According to historian Stephen Toulmin (1992), Descartes’ answer to a public yearning “for certainty” was to argue for the superiority of human rationality over baser human instincts – thereby opening up for people a “hope of *reasoning* their way out of . . . chaos at a time when no one else saw anything to do but continue fighting” (p. 71).

Over the past four centuries, this unwavering faith in reason has helped shape the Western world, from the scientific revolution to the formation of nation-states and their institutions. And nowhere is this heritage more evident than in business. In fact, business is the principal home of rationality, a paean to scientific management and a refuge from pesky human traits.

But like any idea taken to extreme, reason has its shortcomings. A human being, it turns out, is not a one-trick pony.

Think of it this way: Our human birthright is like a beautiful house filled with rooms, containing all the different parts of ourselves, all the many ways we learn to know and understand the world. However, thanks to Descartes, we sit at the dining room table, Reason our only companion. All the rest – Intuition, Emotion, Body, Spirituality – are locked in their rooms. Some days our meal progresses smoothly. But all too often an uninvited inhabitant, like Anger, comes charging out of its room, storms into the dining room, and breaks all the china.

And Reason hasn't a clue what to do.

## It's About Range, not Rage

In contrast, the corporate mystic is an equal-opportunity landlord. In the corporate mystic's house, everyone is invited to the feast, all voices are heard. In addition to the logic of reason, the corporate mystic embraces the flash of intuition, the wisdom of spirit, the knowing body's sensation, even the mystery of her shadow. Unafraid, the mystic speaks the rich language of emotions, calling each by name without falling captive to any. With humility she observes all parts of herself from a distance, both utterly engaged and absolutely free to think on her own.

This is what it means to have a rich interior life.

What's useful about this? Donna Hicks (2011), a leading expert in international conflict resolution, suggests that *dignity* is an effective tool for exploring this question. According to Hicks, the longing for dignity, for a feeling of value and worth, is one of the most powerful human instincts. Drawing on neuroscience, Hicks describes how the dignity "mechanism" works. The ancient reptilian part of the human brain, she explains, is wired for survival in two distinctly different ways: On the one hand, we are wired to connect with other human beings and thrive in relationships that provide care and safety. When we feel valued, we feel content, connected, and safe.

On the other hand, when we feel that our sense of worth has been violated, "we are flooded with dread and shame," feelings so intolerable that we react with "rage and self-righteous revenge" (Hicks, 2011, p. 7). Over time, the neocortex evolved as the center of higher-order functions, among them cognition and reason. It helps manage our instinctive reactions. But when we're in the grip of strong emotions, the reptilian brain hijacks the neocortex and we lose our ability to think rationally and feel empathy for others.

What's more, Hicks claims, this wiring is so sensitive that we can detect other people's emotions and, in very subtle ways, alter their internal states – an effect that “cannot be overstated” (2011, p. 124). Imagine for a moment the impact this sensitivity has on work teams on a daily basis. Because they are trained as specialists, most team members deal with discord, even minor disagreements, by arguing over technical content. What they don't recognize is the subtle finger-pointing and blame they're transmitting, or how finger-pointing and blame destroy the trust and connection that are essential for team functioning.

Of course the corporate mystic is subject to the same forces. But because she has the ability to observe her own operating system, she doesn't get “hooked.” And because her brain isn't occupied with resentments from the past, she is better able to look forward and think creatively about what's possible. The corporate mystic, then, is practical instead of polarizing, creative instead of reactive.

## Business as a Dignity Experiment

Looking more broadly at the world around us, it's hard to deny the feeling that we're living in a time of chaotic, radical change and that no one can really predict what's going to happen.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2011) says, “All over the world, people are struggling for lives that are worthy of their human dignity” (p. 1). Like Hicks, Nussbaum came to this conclusion through her international work, after seeing first-hand how humiliation breeds despair, and how dignity engenders connection and possibility. For me, the opportunity to enhance human dignity is a noble and unifying goal, well worth pursuing.

This is no less true in the workplace. In fact you could argue that unless we foster dignity in our businesses, we shouldn't expect to succeed in more contentious arenas. So as businesses attend to the bottom line, asking more from their workers, they must also recognize that they are participating in a vast and important experiment to collectively grow our selves up, to develop and empower communities of mature, self-authoring adults with the capacity to lead us into a more promising future.

MIT's Otto Scharmer (2013) often quotes the late Bill O'Brien, a CEO of Hanover Insurance. O'Brien would say, “The success of an intervention depends on the *interior condition* of the intervener” (cited in Scharmer & Kaufer, p. 18). This is exactly why the corporate mystic, with her rich inner life, holds such promise for our time.

In the end, who is this mysterious corporate mystic? It's you, of course. You're the corporate mystic. Yes, you, because you were born fully equipped, with everything you need to access this wisdom. And trust me, this wisdom is worth pursuing. We've arrived at a time when the workplace needs mature, self-authoring adults and when workers need opportunities to use their unique gifts to good purpose. We've arrived at a time, to paraphrase Frederick Buechner, when our “deep gladness meets the workplace's deep need.”

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*Martha Miser is founder and president of Aduro Consulting, LLC. Aduro Consulting, named for the Latin word meaning to “light” or “kindle,” specializes in leadership and change for purpose-driven companies, organizations that want to have an impact beyond the bottom line.*

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