

Spirituality in organizational leaders – Ways to Inner, Ways to Wisdom

Leadership and
spirituality

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Abstract

Purpose – Work is central to human life. It requires high mental and emotional involvement from organizational leaders, whose decisions have far-reaching impacts. Currently, industrial and technological societies struggle with growing problems of trust in leadership, mental health, feelings of emptiness and the search for relevant meaning, which highlights the importance of attending to spirituality at work. This study aims to fill two main gaps: the need for empirical research on spirituality in organizational leaders, and access to the meanings and experiences of leaders themselves.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative data from 25 Portuguese organizational leaders were collected through in-depth interviews. We followed a phenomenological approach to reveal participants' own meanings and experiences of spirituality. Content analysis was performed to identify emergent categories and a framework of spirituality development.

Findings – The results suggest the participant's plural views and spirituality practices, which generate common achievements – Ways to Inner. Relations of leaders' spirituality with their development and integration at work are also evidenced – Ways to Wisdom. A spirituality development framework is presented with aspects revealed in leaders' ways, from deepening individual issues to the orientation for existential impacts.

Originality/value – This study proposes a framework of spirituality development based on empirical data, with the potential for adaptation to various professional contexts. Spirituality is approached as a human dimension in leaders, as whole beings and a decisive dimension of present organizational change towards a holistic work paradigm.

Keywords Spirituality, Organizational leaders, Leader development, Spirituality at work, Workplace spirituality, Qualitative study

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Previous research demonstrated that work is central to human life. In the last decades, excessive materialism and competitiveness in organizations has triggered people's feelings of

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emptiness and the search for relevant meaning at work. This raised social interest and scientific research on spirituality at work (Riasudeen and Singh, 2021), observing the importance of considering people's inner life (Rego *et al.*, 2007) and meaning needs (Frankl, 2012; Wong, 2016), also at work (Harpaz and Fu, 2002). Simultaneously, problems of trust in organizational leadership (Parameshwar, 2005) derived from inadequate decisions, abuse of power and corruption point to the decisiveness of multidimensional development of leaders, and organizations. Within global contexts of uncertainty, work requires high mental and emotional involvement from organizational leaders, whose decisions have far-reaching impacts. In current industrial and technological societies, with increasing mental health issues and the need for a better work/life balance, spirituality may reveal contributions to resilience and well-being (Shelton *et al.*, 2020; Gomez and Fisher, 2003). It is suggested that meeting human spiritual needs, such as the will to meaning and self-transcendence, contributes to well-being and fulfillment (Reed, 2014; Wong, 2016). Self-transcendence, as Maslow's highest form of human development, is recognized to be present in Sternberg's balance theory of wisdom (Koltko-Rivera, 2006) which integrates intelligence, creativity and values for the common good, balancing intrapersonal, interpersonal and extrapersonal interests, in relations with environments (Sternberg, 1998).

Despite the multiplication of studies on spirituality at work, spirituality in leadership is an emerging topic, lacking empirical investigation, especially involving leaders. In a systematic literature search conducted in December 2021, based on the application of Joanna Briggs Institute's PCC (Population, Concept, Context) guidance (Peters *et al.*, 2020) and a structured strategy, we obtained 18 (near 2%) from 753 initial results. We conducted this search in 11 databases [1] on the EBSCOhost platform, applying a search string [2] designed for this purpose, as well as defined inclusion [3] and exclusion criteria [4], subsequently. We highlight that with the application of the third inclusion criterion (articles classified in methodology as empirical studies, quantitative studies, qualitative studies and/or with reference to the methods used), we obtained 70 results, after eliminating duplicates. With the application of the third exclusion criterion (articles focusing on other themes and/or without clear reference to participants with leadership roles were excluded), we obtained 18 results as eligible studies, published in *Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion* (8), *Journal of Business Ethics* (6), *International Journal of Organizational Analysis* (2), *Journal of Nursing Management* (1) and *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* (1).

Furthermore, in a systematic review of spiritual leadership literature, Oh and Wang (2020) examined empirical studies with no time restriction for publications and identified 59 studies after applying selection criteria. Concerning the definitions of spiritual leadership, the authors recognize variations but also agreements in relation to some characteristics, particularly that "*spiritual leaders are those who inspire and motivate followers/coworkers based on organizational and ethical values to build a meaningful and connected work environment*" (Oh and Wang, 2020, p. 8). From the definitions and models analyzed, Oh and Wang observed recurrence of the Fry's spiritual leadership theory. These authors found a prevalence of quantitative studies (80%). They noticed that researchers focused on followers, missing other stakeholders, namely leaders, uncovering the need for further qualitative research on the topic with this population.

Fry contributed to the scientific visibility and development of the theme by proposing a model of spiritual leadership, based on the intrinsic motivation of the human being related to calling and membership needs (2003, p. 693). Fry highlights a context of growing social and organizational change forces, within which a "*learning organization is one in which expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured and collective aspiration is set free*", with spiritual leadership being key (Fry, 2003, p. 694). This author defines "*spiritual leadership as comprising the values, attitudes, and behaviors that are necessary to intrinsically motivate one's self and others so that they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership*" (Fry, 2003, pp. 694–695). This involves, in organizations, creating a vision in which people fulfill their calling and

meaning and developing a culture based on altruistic love and genuine care (Fry, 2003, p. 695). To that, “leaders must get in touch with their core values and communicate them to followers through vision, values, and personal actions” (Fry, 2003, p. 696). According to Fry, “*Spiritual leadership theory can be viewed in part as a response to the call for a more holistic leadership that helps to integrate the four fundamental arenas that define the essence of human existence in the workplace - the body (physical), mind (logical/rational thought), heart (emotions; feelings), and spirit*” (Fry, 2003, p. 722). Later, inner life, as “*a quest for a source of strength that fuels hope/faith in a transcendent vision to love and serve others*” including practices “*to help individuals to be more self-aware and conscious*”, and life satisfaction, “*as a global evaluation by a person of his or her life and is considered to be an important component of subjective well-being*” were added to this model (Fry, 2003, p. 3). In a distinct approach, through an analysis of the responses of ten internationally renowned human rights leaders to challenging circumstances and how they generate social innovation, Parameshwar (2005) identified ego-transcendence as a higher-level category. The author reveals eight ego-transcendental processes from the analysis of the exceptional responses of these leaders, non-violent and spirituality engaged, such as “*Demonstrating perspective agility*”, “*Uncovering thick nexuses among institutional structures*”, “*Invoking transcendental epistemologies*”, “*Choosing ‘higher purpose’ over societal norms*” (Parameshwar, 2005, pp. 696–707). Parameshwar notices that the “*leader’s ego-transcendental gaze is an impartial extension of one’s zone of caring for others*” (Parameshwar, 2005, p. 711), and highlights the “*potential of ego-transcendence and transcendental epistemologies towards contemporary organizational challenges*” (Parameshwar, 2005, p. 716).

We approach spirituality in organizational leaders, considering this ancestral and unexplored dimension of the human being (not as a type of leadership), regardless of religion (Costa Catré *et al.*, 2016), involving deepening self-knowledge, higher meaning, transcendence and relationships with others/world. Thus, we expect to observe aspects of human multidimensional awareness, coherence and consistency in practice. This leads us to the need to understand the meanings and experiences of spirituality of these humans, who assume leadership roles in organizations, following their ways in a lifelong development (Cartwright, 2001). We focus on leaders for the organizational responsibilities, namely the strategies and cultures they promote.

This exploratory study, integrated within a more extensive research on the theme, aims to fill gaps identified in the literature, namely the need for empirical research on spirituality in organizational leaders, building on existing studies (Pawar, 2014) and access to the meanings and experiences of leaders themselves, addressing antecedents and impacts on them, especially applying qualitative methodologies (Oh and Wang, 2020). Through an empirical approach and a qualitative design, we intend to answer one major question (MQ) and four research subquestions (SQ):

MQ. What are the views/meanings of organizational leaders about spirituality?

SQ1. What are the spiritual practices of organizational leaders today?

SQ2. What do the spiritual practices of organizational leaders give them?

SQ3. How do leaders relate their spiritual experience to their development as a person?

SQ4. How do organizational leaders integrate their spirituality into work?

Based on the results, we propose a framework of spirituality development, through the organization of emerging categories.

Methods

Following a phenomenological epistemology, we intended to assess the own interpretations of organizational leaders (Willig, 2008). Specifically, capturing where their gaze lands, what

emerges into their consciousness and forms their interpretation of the questions posed (Moustakas, 1994), revealing how leaders feel, think, relate and live their spirituality. With this aim, we developed a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured, individual, in-depth interviews and applying content analysis techniques in a comprehensive approach focused on the participants' meanings and subjective experiences.

Participants

A summary of the research goals and the invitation to participate was sent to Portuguese organizational leaders following diversity criteria, namely, gender, location, size of the organization and industry. We chose a purposive sampling procedure, mobilizing professional networks. Twenty-five organizational leaders participated in the study, during the period proposed. Our sample has a distribution of 52% men and is characterized by a high level of education of the participants (64% with a degree and 20% with a master's) with emphasis on the areas of management, followed by economics and engineering. A total of 64% of participants were in the 45–54 age group, and 28% in the 35–44 age group. We also highlight that 56% of the participants have 15 or more years of experience in leadership roles, and 52% work in a large organization. Regarding the type of leadership positions held, 64% of the participants assume direction positions (directors/managers of a department/organizational area) and 32% are administrators (including several or all departments/organizational areas). Concerning the main activity (sector) of the organizations, 72% are various service industries (tertiary) and 24% are different manufacturing industries (secondary).

Data collection

Previous procedures for informed consent were ensured. Considering the pandemic period experienced, the interviews were performed remotely and occurred between November 2021 and March 2022. With the consent of the participants, the audio of the interviews was recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Data collection and analysis were performed by the first author, as principal researcher, with a background of empirical experience using qualitative approaches with this population and attending circumstances of the research. Situations of considerations requested by the participants from the researcher during the interview were directed to reflection and response by the participants themselves or sent to post-interview so as not to influence the development of the leaders' thinking or the shared meanings. Field notes were used to register key elements, ideas and reflections when necessary.

Data analysis

The analysis of qualitative data followed six phases:

- (1) a first complete reading of the transcriptions to get in touch with the global content expressed by each participant;
- (2) a second reading focusing on the research themes and respective codification following a work in-progress technique in the elaboration of the categories;
- (3) a category analysis, including redundancy reduction and regrouping of categories by content affinity;
- (4) a third reading and new coding based on the consolidated category grid;
- (5) the calculation of response frequencies and percentages by category, selection of the categories to illustrate and identification of illustrative quotations on the transcriptions;

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- (6) elaborating a spirituality development framework based on emerging processes and high-level categories. Leadership and spirituality

The following strategies were applied to ensure consistency, data check and recheck, reflexivity and to create a trail of the process developed: several readings of the transcriptions; a second codification using a consolidated category grid; systematic use of memos to document thoughts and decisions during the analysis and coding process. The research team agreed upon major decisions on the analysis methods and process.

Regarding the following data presentation, in the category *Views/Meanings about Spirituality*, we include two quotes for each of the six lower-level categories that emerged to allow readers to get in touch with the interviewees' expressions in all the identified understandings. For reasons of space management in this paper, relative to the *Spiritual Practices*, *Spirituality Experiencing*, *Relations with Development*, and *Integration in Organizational Leadership*, and respective lower-level categories, we opted to illustrate the ones with higher frequency (48%–100%) and also included two quotations per category. In total, 54 quotations reveal the interviewees' discourse, with the 25 participants (P) being represented (P1–P25). Also, as a quality criterion, we included the main issues that arose and decisions made/strategies followed.

Results

Plural views and meanings regarding the main question

The results of this study suggest different *Views/Meanings about Spirituality*, our first higher-level category, among the participants. We highlight comments related to (1) the difficulty of having a definition, (2) being a definition under construction, (3) doubts about whether or not referred understandings are spirituality and/or (4) an evolution of views/meanings according to past and present views/meanings referenced by participants. We focused on present views/meanings about spirituality in the analysis. Participants' responses also evidenced hybrid views, checking distinct categories simultaneously. The analysis resulted in elaborating six lower-level categories, which we specify in Table 1, with their frequency percentages and participant quotations.

Higher and lower-level categories related to the subquestions

Focusing on the research subquestions, from the content analysis emerged four higher-level categories and 38 lower-level categories (seven common to distinct higher-level categories), as presented in Table 2.

Regarding the higher-level category *Spiritual Practices* and the lower-level categories identified, about half or more of the participant leaders reported practices involving *Self-reflection*, *self-analysis*, *perspective* (80%), *Contact/connection/part of nature* (48%) and *Meditation* (48%), as illustrated in Table 3.

Following, in the higher-level category *Spirituality Experiencing* and the lower-level categories identified, we highlight with the highest frequencies, *Self-knowledge/self-awareness/interiorization* (76%), *States of spiritual well-being* (76%), *Management of one's psychological processes* (64%), and *Feelings of emotional well-being and balance* (60%), illustrated in Table 4. The categories in this group include what the participants perceive they feel with their practices and/or what their practices give them.

Focusing on the higher-level category *Relations with Development*, we identified lower-level categories with significant similarity with the categories of the previous group, *Spirituality Experiencing* (out of eight, seven are common). The results suggest that what the participants perceive that their spiritual practices give them has similarity to what they relate to their development as a person. As the categories with higher frequencies in this group we

Views/meanings about spirituality	Quotations
Multidimensional self-awareness, impacts, relationships (60%)	<p>“I would say that spirituality is a conversation, first of all, with myself, to understand where I am and why I am here, effectively, what I want and where I am going, and what is what should I do to get there (. .) an inner conversation, but without forgetting the relationships I have (. .) I think this conversation has to be with us first, but linked to the our context, to understand to what extent what I want, what I feel is the best for me, is also the best for others” (P3);</p> <p>“the most spiritual dimension of my life comes a little from this need to transcend myself (. .) Therefore, stop living in such a way on autopilot (. .) and increasingly try to have a sense of who I am, what I represent, what I think, what I feel, emotions, how what I think conditions what I feel, and in what way what I feel can also somehow manifest itself emotionally in my body, and attend more and more, and try to understand (. .) in a way that my body is also capable of having a kind of intelligence in the emotions he manifests (. .) and having the ability to interpret” (P16)</p>
An orientation of life, guiding principles, existential questions (52%)	<p>“Spirituality will end up being everything that is behind our actions and that deep down influences us, guides us (. .) our principles (. .) more to do with values, with beliefs, I take much more to the practical sense, to what later represents our conduct and our way of being on a daily basis” (P7);</p> <p>“spirituality (. .) is that area of mine, more emotional, but also of thinking, which always leads me to, a little bit, the reason why we are all here, why I am here myself, what are we all doing with our lives, our feelings (. .) it always takes me to a thought of, well, here, a greater cause (. .) what is it that governs me, here, in the most emotional part, more of the soul, (. .), let’s call it that, that’s it, my relationship with myself and with this life and this earth (. .) with everything that surrounds me” (P10)</p>
Worldview of energy, nature, connection (52%)	<p>“I can feel and think, feel something, try to connect with something higher (. .) regardless of what it is (. .) a moment when I am trying to obtain peace and tranquility through (. .) understanding (. .) of a connection with nature, I manage to achieve this spirituality (. .) it does not have to be linked to a religion (. .) it is a moment of tranquility, something that I can explain by this peace, let’s say, inner. For me, spirituality is an inner peace that I can get something more, and I can understand, I can connect with my interior, with my thoughts” (P8);</p> <p>“I know I’m very intuitive (. .) I feel good in environments of pure spirituality (. .) I don’t like to be in a ritual environment, all those rites (. .) of groups (. .) I think my spirituality is more with myself, maybe (. .) in nature, much more this connection to nature and the earth (. .) my knowledge of my inner self, which is my search for my own energy (. .) I feel more and more that there is, in fact, energy in people, very empirical in this sense, I think it also has everything to do with the energy you feel, and I capture this energy a lot” (P25)</p>

(continued)

		Leadership and spirituality
Views/meanings about spirituality	Quotations	
Secular recognition of the divine in life, higher power (48%)	<p>“for me it’s a way of being and a way of life, I think that’s the basis of it. I was always taught since I was a kid that we’re not alone and that we have to live in community, and I also always believed that there was something else besides this life (. . .) spirituality is part of people’s lives. I think (. . .) that we are a spirit that comes to manifestation in matter” (P19);</p> <p>“I am more and more in what I don’t know, in what is subjective, in what may be over there, that I don’t see, and I think that spirituality is found there. That is, I think that the world is more than what we see (. . .) or what we hear. Because there are many things that we cannot understand (. . .) I see when I calm down, when I am more sensitive, when I am more receptive to other things (. . .) I feel energies (. . .) I make decisions based on feelings, on sensations, that I can’t explain (. . .) very right” (P22)</p>	
Well-being and balance approach (36%)	<p>“a component of human health (. . .) mental health and similar (. . .) if you have spiritual well-being, maybe, let’s say, everything in you ends up being functioning better. If you are not well from a spiritual, spiritual, non-religious point of view, maybe at a certain point you will have a tendency to depression, or (. . .) tend to more easily contract a disease because your defenses and your immunity are low” (P6);</p> <p>“It has to do with us, with our state of mind, with the way we feel, and the way we are in terms of capacities, whether intellectual, soul or physical, I always link spirituality to that (. . .) I have always been a person (. . .) much more connected to this practicality of things, and what is to be done, is to be done, is to be resolved (. . .) for me, spirituality has to do with moments that we have at that time, and the way in which it helps us, or makes us trace that path” (P9)</p>	
Religious recognition of the divine in life, higher entity (32%)	<p>“the experience of faith (. . .) and experiences of, for me that are linked to the religious dimension. I think there is a big connection there (. . .) being a person, in terms of faith, believer (. . .) and being Catholic (. . .) you live that and that is part of your daily reality, or should be part of your daily reality. Because (. . .) if you believe and have faith in a certain religion (. . .) is embedded in your principles, in your values and in your experience and (. . .) you have to be consonant with that, because otherwise, it makes no sense” (P5);</p> <p>“I consider myself a person who strongly believes in God (. . .) I am a practitioner. I am not from the Roman Catholic Church, my religion is (. . .) There is no decision in my life that I make without first consulting God, and without first hearing the word of God. And I have a very strong connection” (P17)</p>	
Source(s): Authors work		Table 1.

evidence *Openness to others and human qualities in relationships* (80%), *Self-development/ evolution, path, improvement, better person, transcendence* (76%), *Self-knowledge/self-awareness/interiorization* (76%), *Management of one’s psychological processes* (64%), *Orientation by universal values, criteria, consistency in practice* (60%), *Feelings of emotional well-being and balance* (48%) and *States of spiritual well-being* (48%), illustrated in Table 5.

Finally, approaching the higher-level category of *Integration in Organizational Leadership*, we highlight with the highest frequencies, *Human qualities in work relationships* (84%), *Spirituality and evolution in the whole person, transversal, process*

Higher-level categories	Lower-level categories	Frequency (%)
Spiritual practices	Self-reflection, self-analysis, perspective	80**
	Contact/connection/part of nature	48**
	Meditation	48**
	Moments alone, silence, individual experience	44
	Regulation of relationships, principles, values, qualities, meaning	40
	Prayer	36
	Personal development readings	32
	Physical exercise, sports activities, body/mind practices	28
	Trust/connection to the divine/higher power/entity	20
	Self-care and habits for health and well-being	16
	Sharing/learning with significant people	16
	Training/actions for personal development	16
	Wellness massages/therapies	16
	Consultations/sessions for self-knowledge	12
	Religious rituals	12
	Service of healing, actions for development/support to others	12
	Affirmations, mantras	4
	Spiritual retreats	4
Spirituality experiencing	Self-knowledge/self-awareness/interiorization*	76**
	States of spiritual well-being *	76**
	Management of one's psychological processes*	64**
	Feelings of emotional well-being and balance*	60**
	Inner connection/with one's essence/now/nature/something/ everything	44
	Meaning and purpose in life, orientation beyond self, purpose*	44
	Openness to others and human qualities in relationships*	40
Relations with development	Orientation by universal values, criteria, consistency in practice*	40
	Openness to others and human qualities in relationships*	80**
	Self-development/evolution, path, improvement, better person, transcendence	76**
	Self-knowledge/self-awareness/interiorization*	76**
	Management of one's psychological processes*	64**
	Orientation by universal values, criteria, consistency in practice*	60**
	Feelings of emotional well-being and balance*	48**
Integration in organizational leadership	States of spiritual well-being *	48**
	Meaning and purpose in life, orientation beyond self, purpose*	40
	Human qualities in work relationships	84**
	Spirituality and evolution in the whole person, transversal, process	80**
	Facilitating the development of others, helping to grow	56**
	Governed by guiding principles of life in organizations, doing things well/ethics, values	56**
	Orientation towards purpose and greater good/cause at work, vision of the collective, community	56**
	Influence and impact on culture and organizational climate	48**
	Personal leadership, balance and well-being, coherence, consistency	48**
	Professionally, integration of feelings; self-knowledge, tranquility	44
	Being an example, attitudes, inspiration, positive influence, criteria	40
	Reflection practices; self-analysis, context analysis, conscious action	36
	Service-to-others orientation, sharing, less materialism	24

Table 2. Higher and lower-level categories and frequencies

Note(s): * lower-level categories common to both *Spirituality Experiencing* and *Relations with Development* higher-level categories

****** lower-level categories with frequency between 48 and 100%

Source(s): Authors work

		Leadership and spirituality
Lower-level categories	Quotations	
Self-reflection, self-analysis, perspective	<p>"I have to be grateful because even with some difficult times, things have had an effect and I have quality of life (. .) so this exercise is perhaps the first and the one that I do most regularly, which is the question of being grateful (. .), the exercise that I do regularly is trying to understand myself, ok, it makes it much easier my experience (. .) with myself and with others. But it is a difficult exercise and it is an evolutionary exercise" (P1);</p> <p>"I try to be a correct person, a person (. .) who helps others, a person who does what is right, that is, guiding myself by certain values. This is very important to me. Feeling that I am doing good, I am helping people, I am helping myself and my people, I am being fair. I don't know if you can call it that, but for me that's spirituality and it contributes to my well-being. Another thing that I also try to do more and more is to live in the present (. .) give thanks to God for what you have" (P4)</p>	<hr/>
Contact/connection/part of nature	<p>"in my relationship with nature (. .) I am very passionate about [an outdoor sport], and (. .) for me these sensations (. .) that I have, unconsciously and consciously, sometimes I give them a more transcendental dimension, I don't know, I can't explain, there is a concept that is fluidity (. .) the flow, to be a flow" (P2);</p> <p>"The spirituality that I live today is really more connected (. .) to nature (. .) I like nature a lot, and therefore, hiking and walking outdoors (. .) opportunity to really, sometimes, think about things and find some peace, and really see the beauty of things (. .) because there is this contemplation (. .) if the relationship with things and with the world is spirituality, therefore, this will be the experience I currently have" (P15)</p>	
Meditation	<p>"I've been discovering meditation lately, which I couldn't either, and I think it makes us better, because many times, with the aggressiveness of the world, in general, our tendency is to respond, or if we don't tend to respond, it's feeling bad, or both, and I think it's a little bit to be able to have that calm and that inner peace" (P8);</p> <p>"you can either take it personally, or not, or you can contextualize it (. .) this requires training, it requires a lot of mental exercise. For example, I try to do meditation, because of that too, because meditation helps us a lot to having that serenity, and the ability not to act reactively and emotionally, in situations (. .) then you have different types of meditation" (P12)</p>	
Source(s): Authors work		Table 3. Spiritual practices – categories (48–100%) and quotations

(80%), *Facilitating the development of others, helping to grow* (56%), *Governed by guiding principles of life in organizations, doing things well/ethics, values* (56%), *Orientation towards purpose and greater good/cause at work, vision of the collective, community* (56%), *Influence and impact on culture and organizational climate* (48%) and *Personal leadership, balance and well-being, coherence, consistency* (48%), illustrated in [Table 6](#).

Discussion

Plural views that generate common achievements – ways to inner

Findings reveal simultaneously, diversity and universality in participants spirituality. Diversity evidenced in the plural and hybrid *Views/Meanings* found. Universality, considering the processes of interiority lived. In other words, participants could present different *Views/Meanings* about spirituality, even *Spiritual Practices*; however, despite eventual differences, a common process emerged in their *Spirituality Experience*: the encounter/deepening of their interiority – as we called: *Ways to Inner*. Nevertheless, it is still worth highlighting the lower-level categories with higher frequency evidenced (in [Tables 1 and 2](#)), pointing to its higher significance among these participants.

Lower-level categories	Quotations
Self-knowledge/self-awareness/ interiorization*	“to have some time of inner reflection, some time of perception even of my emotions (. .) why am I more anxious or not anxious (. .), in my big picture of life how I feel when end of this day (. .) what energies am I feeling today, how is my life going for me to deal more or less with this day (. .) sometimes, in some issues that one is confronted with (. .) I do a lot for, that’s it, I’ll process this later, I’ll think better about what this means, what this has affected me in relation to the way I face life, even sometimes in some moments of almost inner conflict between what a person is and what sometimes have to do” (P10); “to, in some way, be more aware of myself, and transcend myself (. .) to calibrate and to refocus myself (. .) I have small pauses, small moments in which I have this awareness of myself, awareness of my body, awareness of my thoughts, and I try to restore that balance, in some way (. .) we have an idea of what we are feeling and why we are feeling it, why we are reacting in a certain way, to a certain event (. .) it helps to face and better deal with the most difficult day-to-day issues” (P16)
States of spiritual well-being *	“It gives me a tranquility, and peace, and, really, and when we are doing that, we are not doing other things, are we? We are not being distracted (. .) much more focused on what we want, on what we are enjoying (. .) it brings me peace of mind and a taste for life (. .) It’s usually for life in general” (P15); “being alone with myself, just with my thoughts, just observing, without talking, without listening (. .) and that reassures me a lot (. .), the silence (. .) I really like being with myself (. .) Peace and tranquility and serenity (. .) I am a nervous person, and explosive, and this makes my engines cool down” (P17)
Management of one’s psychological processes*	“When you start to put things in another perspective, you start to interact with other people in a more constructive way, in a more positive way, and you break this cycle a bit, sometimes of the negative reactions that we have towards each other (. .) And who says that, it can be in other circumstances, through the practice of generosity, helping others through, countless situations. You can cultivate strengths of character that help you to deal with situations in a positive and constructive way. In a more human way, and good for everyone” (P12); “I like my times to think, I need to think (. .) My weeks are so agitated that (. .) I need some time to process and to be quiet and to put my ideas in order (. .) it has to do with being with myself, it has to do a little with interiorizing what my interactions with the outside world are (. .) trying to understand, seeing things from the side of others, it’s something I need that time to be able to structure the base ” (P18)
Feelings of emotional well-being and balance*	“I need to do this reflection, sometimes I do it through meditation (. .) because it’s good for me, I feel it’s good for me. Other times (. .) a prayer made by myself (. .) and that it comforts me, and I don’t know how to explain why, but I truly believe in it. In moments of great anxiety, of great anguish, I, I miss that (. .) I look, from time to time, or a space in nature, where I am alone (. .) as if it is, if I am in a big city, if I pass by a cathedral (. .) preferably that it is very lonely, and few people, I feel well-being at that moment (. .) in a place where I feel small, minuscule, insignificant, but which gives me enormous comfort” (P3); “I often look for serenity and my strength (. .) I feel that it does me good and that it rebalances me and gives me energy (. .) that’s where I go to look for mine, that spirituality, and a little bit that balance” (P18)

Table 4.
Spirituality
experiencing –
categories (48–100%)
and quotations

Note(s): * lower-level categories common to both *Spirituality Experiencing* and *Relations with Development*
higher-level categories
Source(s): Authors work

Lower-level categories	Quotations
Openness to others and human qualities in relationships*	<p>"I know perfectly well that when I stop, (...) when I am more aware of my surroundings, (...) I make much better decisions, I am much more human, and I can think much more of others, I can be much more empathetic, and being more empathetic makes me much happier (...). Normally, when someone tells me to help someone (...), I go there and do it (...). I don't even hesitate. If it's to help someone, I'm there." (P22);</p> <p>"my development as a person is greater the more I know myself. And my search for myself, to know myself and to understand what impact I have on relationships with others, and how I can improve, or how can I impact positively on the other, or more positively on the other, it's ... important, I think this is how it has an impact on my development as a person, clearly (...). I think it's here the openness, too, to the other, and the concern, I think it's a little connected here with listening, feeling the other. It's being predisposed and being available to understand what's going on with the other. And I think that only happens when we are, we realize what is happening to us" (P25)</p> <p>"I increasingly reconsider what is truly important, because many times they ask from here, they ask from there, and (...) it makes us not think clearly if this expenditure of energy is worth it (...) another thing that I've always valued, but now even more, it's time. Time, it's worth a discussion about this, it's worth a friction about that (...) when we're always counting down, and this concern to make better use of time, time, both mine and other people's, has also been helping with this improvement in me as a person" (P3);</p> <p>"I was very rational (...) and now, I think that over time I realized that maybe, after all, this isn't because others say (...) maybe it's worth thinking about, and connecting your values and what makes sense to you, and what makes sense in what you believe in (...) I find myself having an idea, for example, why I'm paying I don't know how many euros per hour to someone and the other completely different. They are two people (...) but the difference is too much (...). Even this issue of refugees, what can we do (...) more and more I think about this world. Which is not fair (...) And in this world, what can I do differently (...) If I can do it, I do it, whatever I can, I do it, ok, I contribute. Even if it's for discussion" (P4)</p> <p>"the spiritual part has to do with deepening knowledge, understanding, esotericism, and therefore, the question of faith, because either you have it or you don't have it, and therefore, everything that the teachings are, the understanding of the teachings, the experience of them, translates into the way we pass into practice, this whole dimension has to have a direct relationship with my day to day (...) it has been a path that has been taken, in terms of decisions, in terms of making options" (P14);</p> <p>"First, we have to be more and more able to reconcile with ourselves (...) We become more aware of our sides (...) darker, or less bright, and obviously we also have to learn to live with ourselves the way we are (...) I try to make my conduct more and more adequate to what I understand to be correct conduct (...) improve my character traits (...) But I am fully aware of my defects and obviously there is this path, this construction (...) try never to let any kind of feelings or conditions boycott our potential of what we can become, and try to find the path" (P16)</p>
Self-development/evolution, path, improvement, better person, transcendence	
Self-knowledge/self-awareness/interiorization*	

(continued)

Leadership and spirituality

Table 5.
Relations with
development –
categories (48–100%)
and quotations

Table 5.

Lower-level categories		Quotations
Management of one's psychological processes*		<p>"as a person I am much more capable of evaluating things, not evaluating, making decisions, because, many times, even when we are in the middle of that discussion, or in the middle of the problem, I manage, I try, and I think that sometimes I manage to put me in the person's place (..) And instead of criticizing, ok, I am here to help (..) it has to do a little with practicing this feeling of inner peace, of tranquility, and saying, hey man, everything will be solved, let's find a way together to solve this" (P19);</p> <p>"The more we are capable of getting to know ourselves, of listening, of, I hear this expression a lot, which is, listening to our own body, the body gives immense signs of immense things, we have to be predisposed to listen. And therefore, starting ... the management of anxiety, the calm that the person gains, the fact that with that calm we manage to relativize, think better, ponder better, this inevitably makes us better people, because we also become like that in interaction with others" (P20)</p> <p>"it structured me a lot as a person and helped me to make certain decisions (...) in the criteria that I adopt in my day-to-day (...) it really structured me as a person, and I had training, I felt that I was forming myself, because I was in contact with people who, perhaps, are already at a level of spirituality above mine (...) it was a component that contributed to my formation as a person" (P2);</p> <p>"you start to have a different conscience when you do some things and have some different precautions, and you question whether what you are doing on a daily basis is in accordance with what you are looking for in that path, in what are the principles (...) That is, you question a few more things, if they are in line with that practice (...) And so you try to be more consistent with that, and try to be more aligned with that way of being (...) For example, being more tolerant in some things (...) with more compassion, with more mercy (...) maybe it makes me say the thing in a way that is more, less judgmental and more of trying to understand (...) there is a little voice inside (...) which helps me try to do a little bit here (...) take it easy (...) think about what your principles are (...) and see if you are acting in accordance with that" (P5)</p> <p>"I even say it from a perspective of gratitude (...) for me, I always associate spirituality with well-being. It's not a state of mind, it's really well-being. So, I could even say, spirituality can be an inner state of mind that makes us feel different emotions, depending on the context, or our exposure ... For example, to different environments (...) this well-being results from this principle of living more intensely what we value" (P13);</p> <p>"getting to know ourselves and looking for a balance (...) of being comfortable with ourselves and accepting things that happen with some naturalness (...) the balance that I find, that I look for, because I know I need it (...) it can only really be given by questions of spirituality. By self-knowledge, knowing how to accept, knowing how to manage moments (...) tranquility to reflect and to have clearer thoughts, without any doubt" (P24)</p>
Orientation by universal values, criteria, consistency in practice*		
Feelings of emotional well-being and balance*		

(continued)

Lower-level categories	Quotations
States of spiritual well-being*	<p>“the challenge between the teaching of thought and action, and that is a real challenge that I feel (. .) this connection with spirituality is sometimes when I find myself making, trying to make this connection, which is not nothing easy (. .) my relationship with the spiritual part is more in that sense, it's conquering that calm, conquering that space, conquering that certainty, in quotes, because there is absolutely nothing certain, but finding some peace here (. .) it has been a path that has been growing (. .) Peace. Calmer. I feel more peaceful” (P14);</p> <p>“At this moment I feel much more the need to stop, look inside myself and think that the universe itself will take care of correcting any situation that may be out of balance. (. .) it's a moment, I don't know if it's [spiritual practice], or if it's really just my moment, which is just for me to look at myself, to calm down, and then everything is better. But the truth is that I come out of that moment reinforced. Other situations (. .) also allow this connection to such spirituality, to inner calm” (P23)</p>
Note(s): * lower-level categories common to both <i>Spirituality Experiencing</i> and <i>Relations with Development</i> higher-level categories Source(s): Authors work	

Table 5.

Table 6.
Integration in
organizational
leadership – categories
(48–100%) and
quotations

Lower-level categories	Quotations
Human qualities in work relationships	<p>“deep down, I try to cheer people up, I try to calm the people I work with (...) I think that spirituality and the way in which I developed it over time made me more sensitive (...) to dealing with people’s emotions, and to know well the weight that these emotions and that way people are will be reflected later (...) in the performance, and in the activity (...) We are not machines, we are human beings. And therefore, what goes on in our soul is reflected later in everything we do (...) this learning, this evolution (...) each time I notice more that it influences the way especially I work, with the people I work with” (P10);</p> <p>“this can influence my way of relating (...) in a way perhaps more open, more understanding in some aspects, less directive (...) the awareness that, perhaps, there are things as important as work (...) I think that all this influences my way of being (...) knowing that we often have to put ourselves in other people’s shoes and realize that their day to day has another context, another circumstance, which is not exactly ours (...) I think that the theme of spirituality in leadership positions, and even in non-management positions, helps to better understand this circumstance (...) Maybe it gives us more sensitivity, and gives us more receptivity to understand it and to try to combine it with what our objectives are, basically. And at the limit, it is enough to understand it and it is enough to make it clear that we are understanding it to change everything, to change that a little bit, right?” (P21)</p> <p>“I cannot dissociate spirituality, that is, the personal component from the professional one (...) One thing is always intertwined with the other. And therefore, this evolution on the personal side also makes being a leader, or in professional terms, a person in constant evolution too” (P1);</p> <p>“spirituality is a transversal thing, perhaps, in what we do, whether in the professional issue, or in the personal issue, or in the way we approach what we are faced with on a daily basis, spirituality ends up being accentuated or less accentuated (...), I think that spirituality ends up guiding us (...) I think that we, on a daily basis, and perhaps almost unconsciously, end up doing things that are in line with what is our understanding of spirituality” (P6)</p>
Spirituality and evolution in the whole person, transversal, process	

(continued)

Lower-level categories	Quotations
Facilitating the development of others, helping to grow	<p>"It's transmitting, passing these learnings on to the people who are, who are with me, and make them grow too, and realize that there is, there are always other ways of doing things (...) anything more that (...) could give more peace of mind to the person in front of us, or have achieved that goal, that question of seeing what is around (...) I think it has helped me a lot, and more and more, in leadership (...) Greater openness to the other and greater teaching to the other. That thing of sharing, of sharing more" (P9);</p> <p>"It's being in tune, it's helping, it's helping to grow (...) I see this more and more (...) It's helping to take people to another level. It's helping to grow. It's helping to develop (...) It's helping people to have a better life, to be happier (...) to help, because then I help my team, I help [institution users] to be better people (...) these best people will make the world better (...) Empathy. Because if I'm not in tune, I can't help anyone (...) I have to be available" (P22)</p> <p>"those strengths of character or these virtues, putting them into practice, you manage, in a business context, to deal with people, and manage situations, in a more human way (...) are principles, guiding life (...) if you take these principles and apply them in your day-to-day life, at work, first of all, do us good, because you will feel good about yourself, I will feel good about myself, I will feel that I am doing what is right, according to my values and my beliefs, and afterwards, you will actually be doing something better for other people, helping them, and you are building a healthier organization" (P12);</p> <p>"In what is my sense of ethics, in what are the values, which are not enough to be preached, have to be practiced. In what is my sense of equity, in what is, it can be called distribution. And therefore, it has been in this sense. In communication, in the way I communicate. In the values I practice" (P14)</p> <p>"having a purpose (...) And this idea that we have to do a good greater than ourselves and contribute to a whole that is superior to us (...) I try to incorporate these principles, the principle of purpose, with the team, the way I try to motivate people, for the greater good, how I try to make people feel good" (P2);</p> <p>"Spirituality for me brings the Meaning (...). Purpose and Values of this learning journey which is my Why (according to Sinek) in the organization and in life (...) at the service of the other and in my core competencies this is how I try to act and, above all, Serve" (P11)</p>
Governed by guiding principles of life in organizations, doing things well/ethics, values	
Orientation towards purpose and greater good/cause at work, vision of the collective, community	

(continued)

Table 6.

Lower-level categories	Quotations
Influence and impact on culture and organizational climate	<p>"In the way we influence and impact the company's culture, in a certain way of being, that is, the organization in which I am currently a leader, until three, four years ago, there was another leader with completely different characteristics. And therefore, the one who is leader, their behavior, naturally influences the entire organization. We have a much more open, more transparent culture. This makes people feel that they can also have other types of attitudes (...), the others depend on the attitude of those who leads the organization, how far they can go, and (...) that, after some time, changes the organization's culture and changes people's way of being" (P7);</p> <p>"organizations pass on objectives, orientations, and a certain culture. But I think that (...) there is something here that goes beyond that, that creates the connections for this to make sense (...) I would say that it takes me to humanize what we do every day as leaders (...). And if during my work, besides being happy and managing to create company cultures (...) the teams that I manage, despite of being high-performance teams, manage to get humanization here (...) all the paradigms we have (...) preconceptions (...) do not make sense when we are at a completely different level of development of the being (...) I am also creating in them [team] DNA, culture, completely different" (P24)</p> <p>"this tranquility (...). I think I only managed to do this stage that I'm doing, which is, being safe, and that security is analyzing, doing an introspection of mine, which I've been doing, daily, which is in the sense to see if I am on the right path and what I can do better (...), and I come to discover that my day goes well in the morning with this analysis, with the physical exercise, and my attitude is totally different, it's much more positive, it's much more energetic. And so it's a whole path (...) these moments of ours, these moments in which we focus, we perceive, perceive our interior" (P8);</p> <p>"From the moment we also gain more confidence in ourselves, and internalize that humanized leadership is, from my point of view, the best way to lead a work team, it radically changes the way things happen because they happen in a natural, human, close way, where there is no problem not knowing, there is no problem saying we can no longer, and when we share this, the leader also shows by himself that he is also human (...) this peace that I really want to have with me, it's a peace that I really want that the people who work with me also have it, with them (...) I think that leadership, if it is the way of the spirituality that we become better people, it is inevitable that leadership itself does not become better. Because by being the best version of ourselves as a person, this will naturally be reflected in the leadership we exercise on a daily basis in front of work teams" (P20)</p>
Personal leadership, balance and well-being, coherence, consistency	
Source(s): Authors work	

Relating to previous studies, regarding the *Views/Meanings about Spirituality* (our research MQ) that emerged, we identified consonance with the four domains (personal, community, environmental and transcendental) of the model of spiritual well-being proposed by [Gomez and Fisher \(2003\)](#). Still, we also add to existing research evidence (1) of multiple views (through calculated frequencies), (2) of how all or some of these domains may appear combined within specific views/meanings (through illustrating the discourse of participants) and (3) current empirical data on these main sources (beliefs and meanings). Furthermore, we consider this an empirical requirement when researching spirituality in organizational leaders, attending to the recognized influence of the frameworks of beliefs and meanings on human thoughts and behaviors. Relating to Fry's Spiritual Leadership Theory (SLT), with relevant use in spiritual leadership research ([Oh and Wang, 2020](#)), we observe that, conceptually, there is reference to spirituality beliefs, namely as a source of strength, "*be that a Nondual Being, Higher Power, God (theistic or pantheistic), philosophical teachings, or orderly humanistic social system*" ([Fry et al., 2017](#), p. 3). However, empirically, survey items of SLT don't enable discrimination of respondents' beliefs. This study's findings, through *Views/Meanings about Spirituality* categories, although in the context of our sample, add knowledge about operating spiritual beliefs as relevant sources to consider in the analysis, measurement and/or relation with other dimensions, enabling a deeper understanding of antecedents or possible profiles.

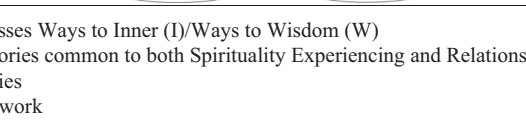
To facilitate the discussion and relations evidenced, we present a summary table of this study empirical categories (lower-level and its integration at higher-level) and processes associated (*Ways to Inner, Ways to Wisdom* or both), along with linkages with SLT dimensions, in [Table 7](#). We will follow the discussion regarding the categories that emerged, answering our subquestions: (SQ1) What are the spiritual practices of organizational leaders today?; (SQ2) What do the spiritual practices of organizational leaders give them?; (SQ3) How do leaders relate their spiritual experience to their development as a person? and (SQ4) How do organizational leaders integrate their spirituality into work?

Concerning the *Spiritual Practices* of the participants, our findings also suggest diversity, despite categories with higher frequencies being distinguished. We find correspondence with items in the dimension *Inner Life* of the SLT survey, particularly "*I maintain an inner life or reflective practice (e.g. spending time in nature, prayer, meditation, reading inspirational literature, yoga, observing religious traditions, and writing in a journal)*" ([Fry et al., 2017](#), Appendix 1). Nevertheless, through the qualitative design applied, the lower-level categories that emerged in this study allow an observation of a broader scope of *Spiritual Practices* and the possibility to verify each specific relevance within the context of the participant leaders.

Following our analysis of the categories which evidenced ways for interiority (marked with "I" or "I/W", in [Table 7](#)), our study illuminates another group of categories (number 25–32) which point to concrete qualities, states, invisible internal processes, which are perceived to occur by leaders through their *Spirituality Experiencing*. Although the revised version of SLT included and highlighted the importance of the *Inner Life*, which our results emphasize, in our view, items of this dimension in SLT survey may be parsimonious in discriminating variables such as participants' perceptions of spiritual well-being, emotional well-being and balance or connection, as examples. We recognize the potential of these possibilities, especially within a comprehensive approach.

In the analysis of participant leaders' interiority processes, we recognize that findings presented are rich in the depth of the categories that emerged (with illustrated content), allowing us to observe descriptions of concrete experiences and capabilities that generate development. Effectively, the findings suggest that these internal processes are similar to the processes identified in the *Relations with Development* of leaders as humans, making the transition to the outer experience (we illustrate this interconnection through the intersection of the ellipses of the *Spirituality Development Framework* presented (final figure, in [Table 7](#))).

Table 7.
Spirituality
development
framework –
categories, processes
and linkages with SLT



* Lower-level categories common to both Spirituality Experiencing and Relations with Development
higher-level categories
Source(s): Authors work

* Lower-level categories common to both Spirituality Experiencing and Relations with Development
higher-level categories
Source(s): Authors work

Leaders as humans/whole beings and self-transcendence – ways to wisdom

In the process of transition from interiority to the concrete manifestations in outer experience – as we called: *Ways to Wisdom* –, besides the common categories identified with *Spiritual Experience*, study findings point a category (number 33, in Table 7) that stands out in *Relations with Development: Self-development/evolution, path, improvement, better person, transcendence*. We argue that, following processes of awareness through interiority, our participants evolve, through conscious development, to transformation and improvement as human beings/organizational leaders, with the ability of transcendence being key. This resonates with the importance of self-transcendence in social change evidenced by Parameshwar (2005), simultaneously answering research recommendations and managerial implications related to the possibilities of manifest self-transcendence in everyday life/work (not just in extreme situations). Now, self-transcendence is at the heart of spiritual development, being demonstrated in the ability of people/leaders to orient and direct towards something greater than themselves, guided by high values, collective and environmental well-being. We believe that the results of this study confirm self-transcendence as decisive in the categories that emerged, also revealing practical examples of *Integration in Organizational Leadership*. In the *Spirituality Development Framework* that we propose (final figure, in Table 7), we illustrate the connections as suggestions. In our view, deepening items in the SLT survey to assess self-transcendence, linked to high orientations/universal values/qualities of spirituality, may enable to discriminate between respondents' profiles of inspiration/development in the context of economic paradigms, and profiles of inspiration/development in the context of holistic organizational paradigms, with implications in further analysis and possible action. This study's empirical findings generated content that may support new items for testing in the analysis of self-transcendence and spirituality in organizational leaders in multiple levels, as we will focus.

Thus, focusing *Integration in Organizational Leadership*, we consider the existence of linkages between the identified lower-level categories and the three pillars of the SLT/SLT Survey (Fry, 2003; Fry et al., 2017, Appendix 1): *Altruistic Love* (through our study categories 34, 35, 36, in Table 7); *Vision* (categories 37, 38, 39, 44) and *Hope/Faith* (categories 40, 41, 42, 43). From our understanding, it is relevant that an empirical study with participants from a specific context has generated results with alignment with anchors of SLT, and adding some practical illustrations of concrete manifestations. For example, SLT *Vision* items focus what it generates in the respondents (e.g: understanding and commitment; bringing out the best; inspiration). Our study categories (37, 38, 39, 44) focus on how our participant leaders integrate their spirituality at their work (e.g.: *Governed by guiding principles of life in organizations, doing things well/ethics, values; Orientation towards purpose and greater good/cause at work, vision of the collective, community; Influence and impact on culture and organizational climate*). Furthermore, we believe that this study provides additional knowledge, and a qualitative approach, advancing this field of research.

SLT emerges from an analysis of the evolution of leadership theories, adding contributes of workplace spirituality and spiritual survival (later, spiritual well-being). It is based on intrinsic motivation. In our view, it reveals a main initial orientation (to what leaders generate) on followers, particularly related to fulfilling calling and membership needs, having evolved to address leaders more directly, in organizations that continually learn, towards a more holistic paradigm. Spiritual well-being is an outcome of meeting these follower's/leaders's needs, and SLT also include other organizational outcomes such as organizational commitment and productivity.

The *Spirituality Development Framework* we propose (final figure, in Table 7), also highlights intrinsic motivation, introducing a distinct angle. We present two relevant

processes, *Ways to Inner, Ways to Wisdom*, which embrace all the categories that emerged. This approach goes further back to the roots/sources and deepens the dimensions of interiority. We propose that (A) *Views/Meanings about Spirituality* influence (B) *Spiritual Practices*, which have mutual implications with (C) *Spirituality Experiencing*. (C) *Spirituality Experiencing* and (D) *Relations with Development* relate mutually, as well as (D) *Relations with Development* and (A) *Views/Meanings about Spirituality* (ellipse *Ways to Inner*, in the Figure). (C) *Spirituality Experiencing* and (D) *Relations with Development* are at the intersection with the second process (ellipse *Ways to Wisdom*, in the figure) and both influence (E) *Integration in Organizational Leadership*. The main orientation is the spirituality living and development aspects of the own leaders. As we mentioned, we start analyzing “earlier” dimensions (antecedents) and privilege the deepening of the categories to identify what happens in the processes of awareness and spiritual development of organizational leaders. The aspects of development identified (inner) and the practical integration at work (wisdom) are the main outcomes. This framework does not focus on subsequent organizational outcomes, although it recognizes that there will be some. As SLT, we consider leaders as agents of change, but the framework presented challenges and invited them to look at their own processes and consciously pursue the transformation that drives/energizes them (roots/sources). We recognize the impact of SLT motivation on followers/leaders, and also of analyzing leader’s spiritual behaviors toward subordinates, namely thought leader’s individual spirituality (Pawar, 2014). Nevertheless, focusing on the potential of self-transcendence (Parameshwar, 2005), we add a gaze to the impact of spirituality and development of leaders themselves, enabling greater impact in teams, other leaders, company owners, communities and environment, towards a holistic paradigm. Intentionally, we do not address leadership theories, but we focus on the human development of leaders, considering the key theme of research, spirituality. As our findings evidenced, this development is often seen as a path, a process, under construction and continuous improvement, reflecting a lifelong process (Cartwright, 2001) and noticing the potential for developmental change (Reed, 2014). We also share the importance of recognizing and distancing from the dangers of instrumentalization or indoctrination of spirituality by organizations with inappropriate strategies (Crossman, 2010) of something that is inherently human. As our findings evidenced, spirituality is related to deepening self-knowledge and self-awareness, simultaneously in openness and relationship with the others/environment/world/something higher/all, with purpose beyond the self, grounded in higher values/criteria and practicing human qualities. The results obtained are scientific seeds with potential to contribute with ways to multidimensionally prepared/developed leaders/humans, especially considering today’s leadership challenges, far beyond growth in numbers or ability to concretize, but challenges about choices that best allow for multidimensional balance (Sternberg, 1998), self-transcendence and global well-being (Parameshwar, 2005).

Managerial and research implications

As mentioned, recognizing growing problems in business contexts and lack of trust in leadership, besides today’s multidimensional challenges, societies and organizations need multidimensionally developed leaders, with spirituality being an identified development need, namely in executive programs for management and leadership development (Rocha and Pinheiro, 2021), with spiritual maturity (Delbecq, 2009). Through this study, we identify empirical categories that can support decision on relevant topics and contend to include in executive programs and subsequent assessment, namely by business schools, to enhance the development of these topics and qualities in organizational leaders (far beyond traditional quantitative and material orientations). Education and development

are key drivers of human and organizational evolution. This study's findings also provide empirical and current information which adds to the existing scientific knowledge on spiritual leadership, answering research gaps as the need for empirical approaches, especially qualitative, and including the own leaders as participants. We build on existing studies, but also provide another gaze in the research of the topic, deepening and illustrating the issues, and focusing on leaders as agents of change, from within to practical manifestations at work. Particularly in relation with SLT, the *Spirituality Development Framework* may reveal synergies. It is empirically based, grounded in the views and meanings of the own organizational leaders, and focus processes of their interiority, development and action at work. We also approach spirituality as a human dimension in leaders and as whole beings. It will be relevant to say: know/develop yourself as a person, and you will know/develop yourself as a leader. We also point out that, besides descriptive dimensions concerning measurement, our findings provide detail on categories which can contribute to refine instruments and improve items, according to what is relevant for measurement. For example, these study findings will support the selection of instruments, dimensions and categories for measurement on this topic, by this research team, for subsequent studies with large samples.

Limitations

This study has limitations. First, participating leaders are characterized by a high level of education and work in urban contexts, so they do not reflect all possible profiles, which may limit the scope of transferability. However, the intended implications of the study, especially related to the identified need to transform executive training programs, including content related to spirituality, justify the relevance of the sample's characteristics. Second, the sociocultural framework is that of the Portuguese reality. This was intentional in the overall research design, considering subsequent objectives of validating instruments in the Portuguese population. However, some participants have experiences from other countries and emphasize the importance of contact with other realities and multiculturalism. Third, this study is exploratory and approaches a theme permeated by subjectivity. This is acknowledged, and we opted for a phenomenological approach to capture the participants' perspectives and interpretations. We use quotations to demonstrate these interpretations. Fourth, the study is not immune to the interpretations and subjectivity of the researchers themselves. Aware of that, we indicated the analysis phases carried out and included abundant quotes from the participants to demonstrate the material on which the analysis focused. Fifth, executing these phases by a single researcher is a recognized limitation, although acceptable in qualitative research. Through verification and reassessment strategies, and procedures to document the research/analysis path, we intend to ensure trustworthiness and methodological integrity.

Value and future research

This exploratory study responds to gaps identified in the literature, especially the need for empirical research on spirituality in organizational leadership and having the own organizational leaders as participants. The phenomenological epistemology and qualitative methodology followed facilitated a comprehensive understanding of this theme, through the collection, analysis and demonstration of the participants' discourse. Further research can apply and improve the higher and lower-level categories identified, in distinct work and socio-cultural contexts, and analyze their relevance, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. We suggest of particular interest to deepen and develop the analysis of categories integrated with *Spiritual Experiencing* and

Relationships with Development, which we consider vital in the leaders/human evolution and transformation. They are the core of the movement from personal interiority to conscious practice, integrating the two processes illuminated: *Ways to Inner*, *Ways to Wisdom*. We also consider it promising to study the relations and effects of *States of spiritual well-being* (such as tranquility, inner peace and confidence) with/in the *Management of one's psychological processes* (namely, awareness of thoughts, relativization, perspective), and with/in *Feelings of emotional well-being and balance* (e.g., gratitude, acceptance, clarity).

Conclusion

In the present study, we apply a qualitative methodology to access and comprehend organizational leaders' meanings and interpretations about spirituality, and integration at work. Following a phenomenological approach, we identified a group of higher and lower-level categories by analyzing the descriptions. In an integrative view of the results, we observe plural *Visions/Meanings about Spirituality*, and two common processes: *Ways to Inner*, *Ways to Wisdom*. We propose a spirituality development framework connecting the higher-level categories of these processes: *Spiritual Practices*; *Spirituality Experiencing*; *Relations with Development*; and *Integration in Organizational Leadership*. We highlight leaders as whole beings and notice that their personal and professional/organizational development will be related. We also emphasize that change and transformation require connection and transcendence. As the results suggest, this involves processes of interiority, well-being and awareness (through slowing down, tranquility, observation and recognition of existing patterns) and relationships with others/world, impacts and collective well-being (choosing and consciously applying intended orientations, thoughts and behaviors in contexts, with coherence and growing consistency). In these processes of deepening knowledge, balance, empowerment and transcendence (personal and professional/organizational), the development of spirituality enables going beyond individual and/or short-term interests and integrating higher purposes, relationships with others/communities and nature/universe. It is a fact that today's organizations need to think and act beyond material interests fostered by current paradigms and formal education. Today, change and transformation imply expanding the vision towards a holistic paradigm and multidimensional impacts, in which the experience of spirituality and relations with development are decisive.

Notes

1. Academic Search Ultimate; APA PsycArticles; APA PsycInfo; Business Source Ultimate; EconLit with Full Text; Education Source; ERIC; Green File; Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection; Sociology Source Ultimate; Teacher Reference Center.
2. TI (spiritual* OR self-transcend* OR ego-transcend* OR transcend*) AND TI (leader* OR manager* OR director* OR executive*) AND AB (work* OR job* OR organization* OR organisation*).
3. Articles published in scientific journals, between 2000 and 2021, in English or Portuguese, and classified in methodology as empirical studies, quantitative studies, qualitative studies and/or with reference to the methods used.
4. We excluded articles identified as literature reviews (we aimed to cover empirical studies), articles published in journals with less than three results (we intended to focus on journals with relevant publication activity on the topic under analysis) and articles focusing on other themes and/or without clear reference to participants with leadership roles (we intend to analyze studies with a focus on spirituality, and with/or including participants who are leaders in organizations).

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