

# Spiritual Considerations for Managers: What Matters Most to Workforce Members in Challenging Times

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**ABSTRACT.** A survey conducted among 50 members of the Los Angeles Workforce, all within the age range of 20–50 years, and with a minimum of 2 years of work experience and a minimum of 2 years of college education, delivered results that may be of interest to managers in their efforts to enhance workers' satisfaction and successfully transcend the challenges of these times. The focus of this study was on values that mattered most in challenging times to members of the workforces. The hypothesis that inner- and inter-human aspects would be considered more important than money and status in such times was highly supported, with values such as love and relationships, and positive motivation, in an overwhelming lead. While financial worries were undoubtedly considered, it was underscored that in times of trouble, employees reach inwardly and outwardly to inner-human and inter-human connectedness.

**KEY WORDS:** connectedness, workforce, values, motivation, relationships, spirituality

## **Introduction**

As the economical downturn affects increasing numbers of workers throughout many industries, people reflect in real time and with substantial experiences on a number of issues, such as the validity of their jobs, the choices to make for the near future, and what matters most to them in these difficult times. This study gathered feedback from 50 members of the workforce, selected on basis of three criteria: they had to have a minimum of 2 years of work experience, a minimum of 2 years of college education, and they had to be within the common working age group of 20–50 years old. In this

article, a brief review of literature about important issues in difficult times will be presented, after which the study will be explained, the data analyzed, and a set of conclusions and recommendations for managers listed.

## **Brief literature review**

In this new millennium, a clear trend has been set toward increased human values and less focus on material gains and fleeting positions. While not everyone may see the current economic downturn as evidence that the spiritual movement is on the right track, there seems to be general agreement on the fact that challenging times bring us closer to human values than to aggressive financial moves. Nooyi (2009) feels that there is, indeed, more focus on value-based issues these days. She states, “the decline in economic activity has more direct consequences too. Suddenly people will be more searching in their quest for good value. This is something we are seeing the world over” (p. 67).

For clarification purposes, with “spiritual movement” I am not referring to a religious stream here, but rather to a revisiting of human workers to senses of interconnection and mutuality. The spiritual movement in and of itself has been in full swing since the beginning of the 1990s, and various definitions have been presented since. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003), for instance, define workplace spirituality as “a framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employees' experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy” (p. 13).

Ashmos Plowman and Duchon (2005) have explained spirituality at work as “the recognition that employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community” (p. 807). Marques et al. (2007) presented the following definition:

Spirituality in the workplace is an experience of interconnectedness among those involved in a work process, initiated by authenticity, reciprocity, and personal goodwill; engendered by a deep sense of meaning that is inherent in the organization’s work; and resulting in greater motivation and organizational excellence. (p. 12)

The terminology in all the three above definitions implicates a revived human awareness toward internal and external connections, and the fact that well-being for the entire group can get established through that. With the challenges of contemporary times, this language has grown stronger and has diverged into multiple directions and dimensions. The following reviews of values and characteristics highlighted in recent publications will demonstrate the vibrancy of the spiritual mindset.

In a review of today’s financial challenges, Force capitalizes on a key theme of the current US President Obama by focusing on *hope*. She states, “Hope is such a critical aspect of the human experience. Whatever boat we’re in, we know we can hope for something more. Something better. Something different” (Force, 2009, p. 4). In another article, Force (2008) stresses that the phrase, “doing more with less” has transcended the status of being a popular buzzword to now enter the realm of everyday life. It is here where she also points out that we should *nurture our relationships* and *focus on unity* instead of division. Focus is also high on Isaac’s (2008) agenda: he calls for *focus on the purpose*, *enhanced connection* with stakeholders, and *adding value* to a higher degree than competitors do.

In a speech delivered to the University of Miami earlier this year, Aldrich Sevilla-Sacasa, former President and CEO, US Trust Co, emphasized the *inter-connectedness* of today’s world, and the need for *greater transparency* in business transactions. He also commented that success in the future will be reserved for those who apply effective and quick *communication*, and demonstrate *sensitivity* to a wide variety of cultures. This perspective is seconded by Dyer (2008/

2009), who asserts, “Although a company shouldn’t have to go to these extremes to value the importance of communication, the unfortunate truth for many is that internal communicators are now having to prove their worth more than ever” (p. 1).

Orrell (2009) accentuates a focus on *work-life balance*, *mentoring*, and *accessibility* of management for corporations that want to outsmart this economic downturn, while Blausten (2009) highlights *reliability*, *integrity*, and *authenticity* as the ultimate requirements for our business leaders today. Schanz (2009) adds yet another dimension to the picture of important values by earmarking *trust* as a damaged but crucial attribute toward survival of these times.

## The study

In order to find out what really matters to working people in these challenging times, I conducted a survey from two different workshops, in which a wide variety of members of the Los Angeles workforce participated. The participants varied from 20 to 50 years of age, had a wide range of work experience, varying from a minimum of 2 years to a maximum of 33. The participants were all current college attendants or recent graduates, with a minimum of 2 years of college to their credit. Religious affiliations, cultural backgrounds, financial affluence, and levels of job positions were also widely divergent. This was specifically preferred, because the study aimed to find out whether there were differences in opinions from the participant groups.

## Hypothesis

Prior to the study, the following hypothesis was formulated: *In challenging times, inner- and inter-human aspects are considered more important than money and status.*

The hypothesis was based on insight attained from literature review and the researcher’s perspectives prior to the study. The aim was to find out whether this hypothesis would hold true during this economical downturn.

The survey consisted of one single question: *Please share three things that matter most to your personal and professional wellbeing in challenging times?*

From the 50 participants, a 98% response rate was obtained, most probably to be attributed to the fact that the survey was conducted in the course of the workshops.

### Findings

Table I below represents the values and the frequencies in which they were listed. Because of the freedom given to participants to formulate their own statements, it was necessary to cluster themes with similar meanings to attain better comprehension of the data. For instance, love and relationships were sometimes mentioned together, and sometimes separate. Based on their personal frame of reference, the participants sometimes referred to “family and friends,” or “caring co-workers,” or simply, “connectedness,” or “support.” All these terms were included under the common denominator of “love and relationships.” A similar approach was applied to the other values. Therefore, while this study is quantitative in foundation, it should be emphasized that a qualitative approach known as phenomenological reduction was applied here. In phenomenological reduction, the researcher classifies themes with similar meaning under one common name to enhance understandability of the study findings.

As can be deduced from Table I, the clustered themes of *love and relationships* and *positive motivation* were most often listed by the participants to this study. These two clustered themes cannot be interpreted in any way other than as non-material and highly emotional values. Most of the themes can also be linked back to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. “According to Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, there are five levels of personal needs: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, self-esteem needs and self actualization, or growth needs” (Aigiang, 2009, p. 27). The theme *love and relationships* clearly falls under the love and belonging needs section in Maslow’s hierarchy. It should be clarified that love, in this case, should be thought of as a caring concern for others and in the romantic sense.

A shared level of importance was allotted to *less stress—more peace*; *safety and security*, and *staying focused*. Of these three clustered themes, only safety and security could partially be interpreted as financial

stability. Yet, *safety* also relates to a sense of protection or general wellbeing, while *security* can also be interpreted as refuge or protection. In the next section, a different analysis of the data will be presented, in which further attention will be allotted to the themes of *less stress—more peace*, and *staying focused*.

An equal place of importance was subsequently granted to the clustered themes, *faith and spirituality*, and *understanding and flexibility*. As for the first of these two themes, it should be mentioned that there was divergence in phrases used, whereby some of the participants clearly mentioned “God,” “faith,” or “religion,” while others clearly referred to “my spirituality” or “spiritual practices.” Within the theme of *understanding and flexibility*, several participants also used words such as “consideration” and “acceptance,” while there were also many who referred to the importance of “being receptive to change.”

While *Education and growth* was also presented in different wordings, the participants to this study made it clear that they considered furthering of abilities and skills crucial in downtimes. This may, of course, also be attributed to the fact that all participants were involved in college, or had been in previous years.

The themes, as listed in Table I, are rather clear in their implications, and all demonstrate a clear emphasis of the participants on non-material issues in critical times. Figure 1 presents the issues listed in Table I in chart format.

### Inner-human and inter-human values

The issues that were presented as most important to the participants in this survey were overwhelmingly concentrated in two areas: inner-human and inter-human values. This insight was, once again, attained on basis of the qualitative study technique of phenomenology, as earlier explained as clustering of the themes. In this case, the themes formulate in Table I were further reviewed and analyzed, and listed in the main categories of inner- and inter-human values. In order to get to this categorization, a simple distribution was applied: The inner-human values are those that reflect very personal emotions, not to be applied through interactions, but completely toward the self. The inter-human values, on the other hand,

TABLE I  
What matters most in challenging times

Love & relationships	22
Positive motivation	22
Less stress, more peace	12
Safety & security	12
Staying focused	12
Faith & spirituality	10
Understanding & flexibility	10
Education & growth	8
Resilience	6
Patience	6
Appreciation	6
Being trustworthy	6
Staying updated	4
Creative thinking and doing	4
Infusing humor	4
Accessibility of top mgmt	2
Health	1

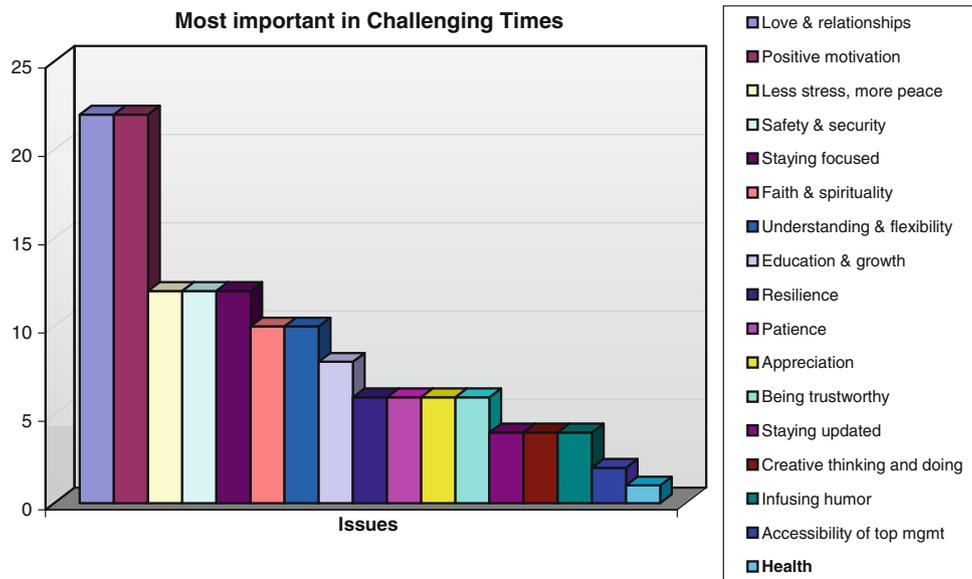


Figure 1. What is most important in challenging times.

pertain to issues and actions that can only be applied with others involved. Some values, such as positive motivation; less stress, more peace; understanding and flexibility; and patience, qualified for both clusters, because these themes can be applied toward the self as well as in interaction with others. Table II presents the two clusters, while Figure 2 depicts the inter-human and inner-human values in one chart.

**Implications for managers**

As we are heading toward a more humane-oriented organizational climate, some familiar theories, such as Maslow’s earlier mentioned hierarchy of needs, start reclaiming their essence. Aigiang (2009) recommends, “Since in some cases, employees spend more than eight hours in the workplace every day,

TABLE II  
Inner-human and inter-human values

Inner-human values		Inter-human values	
Positive motivation	22	Positive motivation	22
		Love & relationships	22
Less stress, more peace	12	Less stress, more peace	12
		Safety & security	12
Staying focused	12		
Faith & spirituality	10		
Understanding & flexibility	10	Understanding & flexibility	10
Education & growth	8		
Resilience	6		
Patience	6	Patience	6
		Appreciation	6
		Being trustworthy	6
Staying updated	4		
Creative thinking and doing	4		
		Infusing humor	4
		Accessibility of top mgmt	2
Health	1		

companies should spend a lot of time on serving [Maslow's] hierarchy" (p. 27). Aigiang (2009) emphasizes that issues such as belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization needs, which are now crucial in establishing a gratifying work climate, have very much to do with company cultures. Aigang, therefore, recommends managers to work closely together with their Human Resources staff to help create "a company culture of cooperation and respect as a shared mindset of the company and establishing a transparent system of recognition, reward and motivation" (p. 27). As Bidwell et al. (2009) state, "This is a time when leaders must show their worth. Now is that time" (p. 36).

*Positive motivation* was one of the four elements included in both the inner- and the inter-human category. This is, because one can self-motivate, while positive motivation can also come from others. Sharma and Kaur (2008) list autonomy and empowerment as two significant means in workplaces to instigate positive motivation.

Another theme that was listed under both categories was "*less stress, more peace*." The reason for doing this can also easily be explained: stress comes from many sides, and sometimes it can be attributed to factors outside one's relationships with others.

The same goes for peace: we can attain peace within ourselves even if our environments are turbulent, but we can also experience inner-turbulence in spite of a peaceful environment. Managers can, therefore, often only work on reducing stress and enhancing peace as far as it pertains to the work environment. One way is communicating openly and honestly about pending changes in the workplace. Another is to demonstrate empathy and lend a listening ear when workers display signs of distress. If they open up, the manager can determine further steps, possibly with assistance of the Human Resources department. Another simple suggestion is to ensure a clean, uncluttered work environment ("*Three Big Myths of Getting Organized*," 2009), as this may have a larger effect on workers' peace of mind as managers may normally think.

A value that should not be underestimated in our interactions in these challenging times is *safety and security*. I listed this theme as an inter-human value, because the sense of safety and security most often comes about in our interactions at work. In fact, it can very well be perceived as a macro issue, pertaining more to the economic structure of the entire country rather than one workplace. In that regard, Bordoff et al. (2007) claim that several policy reforms

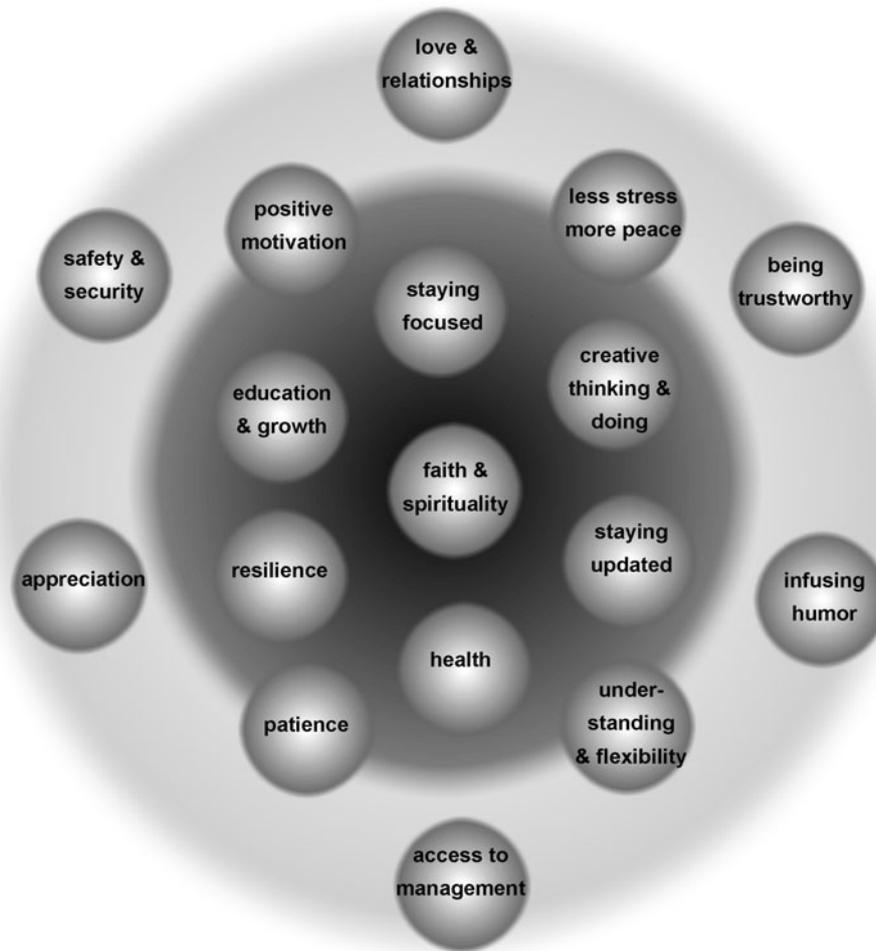


Figure 2. Inner-human and inter-human values that matter most in challenging times.

will be necessary to provide for America's future economic growth and broad-based opportunity. They mention action points such as, "helping people enter the labor force and rewarding their work; making the right long-term investments in our people; shoring up our social insurance programs; and increasing the progressivity of efficient tools like the tax code to share the gains of growth more broadly" (p. 30). It is not easy for managers today to guarantee worker's security, because of the volatile economic situation that brings unpleasant surprises for all of us. But while this need may not easily be fulfilled under the current circumstances, the fulfillment of another need may help workers cope with this issue: positive motivation. This should be done honest through communication and

authenticity. If managers can nurture a climate of trust and authenticity, they also establish higher levels of understanding and resilience among them.

*Staying focused* is listed as an inner-human value, because it is predominantly a self-enhanced quality. It is the task of each of us to remain focused on the path that we want to follow. A January 2009 article in *Health and Medicine Week* alerts us that "staying focused on job-search basics – such as nurturing one's professional network and keeping an updated resume – can help stem anxiety and prevent a career from stalling in 2009" ("*Yahoo Inc.: More Than a Third of American Workers*," 2009, p. 3208). The article suggests heavy engagement in all kinds of activities that can help you get ahead, such as networking, updating your resume, applying for jobs,

or exploring a career switch. Managers can assist their employees through communication and encouragement, yet the ultimate act of being focused will remain in hands of the worker.

While listed as an inner-human value, *faith and spirituality* often becomes an important factor in group settings, such as workplaces. Proper caution should be applied with regard to faith, as many observers and authors have warned for the fact that some workers may feel forced into religious expressions that they don't adhere to. Yet, spirituality as a movement in workplaces and among people does not have to pertain to religion or faith. "This new spiritual movement embodies employees' search for simplicity, meaning at work, and interconnectedness to something higher" (Marques et al., as cited in Karakas, 2009, p. 17). The spirit at work movement has predominantly focused on acts that relate to "doing well by doing good," which basically means that people should engage in reciprocal support and encouragement acts to enhance a sense of togetherness, and with that, elevate their own performance as well the their workplace, to a higher plane. At the personal level, people get in touch with their faith and spirituality to a higher degree in troubling times. They pray more often, attend church sermons, and may even start prayer circles or groups in their neighborhoods. For managers, the message could be to demonstrate greater understanding and compassion toward workers who deal with laid-off family members and other consequences of the current economic turmoil. Understanding and compassion are elements of a spiritual approach in the workplace.

The reason why *understanding and flexibility* was categorized in both groups is because this combination of values can be perceived as personal as well as interactive. At the personal level, one should try to understand the circumstances one is placed in, and work up the flexibility to maneuver him- or herself out of the situation. At the interactive level, this combination of themes can be interpreted as that one should attempt to be compassionate and empathetic toward those around him or her, and be flexible in decision-making, directions, and interactions. Collins and Long (2003) call for those in charge to consider team building in performance; humor in-between, and relaxation exercises after work, such as sports, massages and aroma therapy, and leisure

activities, such as reading and going to the movies, as ways to demonstrate compassion and understanding and help workers deal with their troubles.

It has been proven many times before that people return to school and seek avenues for growth more aggressively in challenging times. Blumenstyk (2008) confirms this axiom by asserting that especially for-profit colleges are noting financial improvements due to increased enrollment – a trend, which is likely to increase in the next few years. Some colleges, according to Blumenstyk (2008) have even seen a greater growth in the last half-year of 2008 than they had seen in the 3 years prior to that. The data Blumenstyk provides shows us that this economic downturn is no exception to the desire of working people to return to school for additional education and augmented personal growth. This, then, may explain why eight (16%) of the 50 participants indicated that they considered *education and growth* as one of the important avenues for them in these times.

The quality of *resilience* was mentioned enough number of times to be examined. Resilience is, of course, an important trait to maintain to continue moving ahead when the going gets tough. The McClatchy Tribune Business News reported in April 2009 that American entrepreneurs have not decreased their sense of optimism and willpower toward resilience. While they have halted their investments for growth, many entrepreneurs see opportunities in the near future as a result of the current recession. Resilience is very much a psychological quality, which managers can help instill in their co-workers by maintaining and communicating a realistic yet creative and inspirational attitude. If the manager is not the suave speaker type, then he or she can always solicit some internal or external assistance in boosting morale during informal gatherings.

Another important issue to be underscored is *patience*, which was categorized as a theme under both listings. The philosophy behind doing that is, that patience, just like *understanding and flexibility*, is not just an internal skill, but often has to be applied in interactions with others as well. The need for patience surfaces everywhere around us, particularly because we have gone through a continuously accelerating pace of change in the past 20 or 30 years. Danielson (2009) provides a good example

of the need for patience in job seekers today. He states, “Networking in this recession demands organization, patience and persistence. You have to figure out what you can offer an employer, what gives you an edge over hundreds of other candidates” (p. 1).

The participants that listed *appreciation* added various notes behind the main theme, such as “appreciation for the small blessings,” and “appreciation of those closest to me.” Perceived in that light, appreciation is more of a cure than a trait, as it pertains more to a paradigm shift from taking our lives and the simple everyday things and people for granted, to valuing them for what they’re really worth. Cooper (2008) agrees with the idea of a need for new outlook on life when he states, “The country had been gripped by a collective insanity in which many of us lost our appreciation for the value of money. Waste had become prevalent due to irrational exuberance, and poor decisions accompanied rampant greed” (p. 16). Managers can help set a trend here, starting with genuineness and the nurturing of a climate of trust, and to also show appreciation through positive reinforcement to workers in this time of insecurity.

The topic of *trust* is a loaded one in these days of shameless corporate greed and deceit lying at the foundation of the current mishaps. Nooyi (2009) clarifies, “Corporate America, after the immediate financial crisis, has now found itself thrown into a far more corrosive and durable crisis – a crisis of trust” (p. 67). The individuals who noted trust in their list of three themes must have considered that, and may have realized how important trust is to restore balance and a sense of stability in the world of work. The key message for managers here may be to remain honest toward co-workers, and neither sugarcoating nor glooming the organization’s performance.

Another strong theme that was listed and classified as inner-human was *staying updated*. Nicholson (2009) warns, “On a personal level, don’t assume your job is any safer than anyone else’s. Be aware of your strengths and weaknesses – play to one, and work actively on the other” (p. 29). The worst a working person can do today is losing touch of reality, because the only way to make a fast and smart move is to distinguish trends and keep an eye on what is going on, not only in your own industry,

but in any other area where your talents could be applicable. Staying updated should, therefore, be seen within a broader perspective than the confined reality of one’s performance industry.

There have been many articles written lately about *creative thinking and doing*, Nissley (2009) stated that the successful people of today and tomorrow will be those who apply creativeness and stop doing what everybody else does. Nissley made it clear that these are the people, who stop scanning the newspaper ads for more of the same, and start considering alternatives based on their passions and creative skills.

The individuals who listed *infusing humor* as an important theme in grim times also included some brief clarifications in their submissions. They explained that a little humor can go a long way in difficult times, and that it can help people cope better with stress. Soule (2009) demonstrates an effective way of using humor by presenting a proven adage, true to his purpose of reviewing the golfing sport, “getting laid off at least leaves spare time for some extra rounds of golf” (p. 21). As one of seven secrets to weather the economic downturn, O’Reilly (2009) also refers to humor: “when times are tough, it’s ideal to go out and find your sense of humor. Whether it’s a comedy club, a funny movie or getting together with a particularly comedic friend, locating your funny bone will help you release those feel-good endorphins” (p. 17). O’Reilly elaborates, “This will help not only with your emotional state, but also your physical being. Think about it. When you laugh, you breathe. Try it and do a big belly laugh and see what happens” (p. 17). Infusing humor should be seen as a non-traditional way of displaying compassion, because the ultimate goal is to reduce stress and therewith enhance wellbeing of co-workers.

While there were not too many participants who listed *accessibility of top management* as an important theme, the cry can be detected from many other points such as relationships, trustworthiness, safety and security, understanding and flexibility. Mesmer (2009) encourages management to remain in touch, take control of the rumor mill so that it does not unnecessarily preoccupy employees, respond immediately to requests for assistance, and involve staff members in everyday problem solving activities. The participants to this survey were all members of the workforce, reflecting on their work situations

when filling out the survey. Managers should, therefore, consider the accessibility issue strongly if they want to maintain a satisfied and gratified workforce throughout these turbulent times.

The topic of *health* was least listed, yet that may be attributed to the fact that many people do not immediately think of their health when considering issues that are important in economic downturns, even though they would verify that their health is precious when confronted with it. Paton (2008) verifies, "More evidence has emerged that the economic, financial and job insecurity created by the global downturn is causing a sharp increase in stress, anxiety and general mental ill health among workers" (p. 5). At the same time, health is a derivative of all the other points that were mentioned: more peace, less stress; love and relationships, safety and security; positive motivation and appreciation, to name a few: shortage of these issues can be hazardous to health. Therefore, the theme of health should not be underestimated in its prominence.

## Conclusion

The findings from this small survey brought to the surface an important paradigm shift that is taking place among the members of Corporate America. Kadlec (2009) confirms, "for most of us [the current recession] amounts to a large-scale makeover of the way we think about money and life" (p. 84). Kadlec specifies, "We're not just cutting our bills, we're rejecting materialism. We're placing safety and intrinsic rewards like relationships and personal growth ahead of profit. We're embracing family and community and asking how we can help others, not just ourselves" (p. 84). Indeed, the spiritual mindset that started in the early 1990s is heading for a peak, now that greed has run us into a brick wall of mistrust and economic freefall. Yet, conforming to what many sources agree upon, this long overdue wake up call, while tough to weather, should be seen as the beginning of a great improvement in sensitivity and reality sense. It will be those who sharpen their creativity, boost up resilience, choose to learn, get educated, grow, and stay updated, and try to understand and support where possible, that will be the shining stars of the future.

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