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*The following article was published in February 2002 in a newsletter for the Association for Spirit at Work ([www.spiritatwork.com](http://www.spiritatwork.com)), a national organization with over 1,200 members. At the time, Carol was working for Avaya.*

### Quietly Transforming Avaya

I work at Avaya, a global telecommunications firm with over 21,000 employees, revenues of \$7B. We sell communications equipment to 90% of the Fortune 500. I spent 16 of the last 18 years of my working career as an engineer, surrounded by like-minded, logical, rational, left brain thinkers. I now serve this same R+D community, consisting of 1000 engineers as:

- an organizational gardener—creating the right conditions to bring out the best in people,
- a cultural catalyst—forever looking at ways to honor our own humanity in a culture used to honoring technical know-how, and
- a “go-to” person to help with the “soft stuff”—applying my analytical background to find just the right tool for people problems

Avaya is a spinoff of Lucent/AT+T and Bell Labs—big hierarchical companies used to formal titles and policies, ISO 9001, and employees who thought that if they just follow the rules, they'll be able to retire in 30 years. Avaya is not a workplace where you would expect spirituality to thrive. Yet I've seen just that. It has been my privilege to see this culture change bit by bit. How does spirituality find its place in Avaya?

- Starting last fall, we now have a room set aside for prayer and meditation. This is especially appreciated by our engineers who follow the Muslim religion, which requires prayer five times a day. It started with one engineer telling me of the predicament of trying to pray in front of her computer monitor. She hoped to have even the humblest of rooms to be able to practice her spirituality in a more appropriate environment. It took one phone call to an administrative assistant to set this room up. And a single email to announce the availability of this room.
- Over the course of the last two years, I have hosted a series of lunchtime brown bag seminars, discussing topics such as creating sacred spaces at work, chapters from David Whyte's book, The Heart Aroused, and understanding the role of spirituality in leadership. Sprinkled in between have been Native American flute circles and talks by outside speakers on the topic of spirituality and work (Judi Neal was a favorite!). Attendance ranges from 5-35 people. The common thread has been employees' yearning to express their own uniqueness and to lead a meaningful life, in a thoughtful and safe setting. We always start with a “check-in” by the participants and a few deep breaths to set the tone. Sometimes I bring flowers and candles and even play a CD to welcome employees to a different kind of space. Always, people notice and are delighted by the small nod to our own humanity. I have found that creating the right space—giving clear guidelines that provide intimacy, safety, and respect for others—allows the discussion to flow freely in a way that otherwise would not be possible. People become human beings again, talking about all the angst, joys, disappointments, humor and hopes usually seen

only by one's soul. We end these sessions by discussing the question, "What will you do differently in the coming week?"

- During the last year, I have introduced the beauty and influence of flowers in the corporate setting. It started with bringing flowers to meetings. Sometimes these were meetings that I was leading. Sometimes these were meetings where I was a presenter. In either case, people noticed. How could they not? I witnessed the power of the *fragrance* of flowers when I coordinated flowers for a large retirement party for 100 employees leaving the company last summer. The entire R+D community was invited, all 1000 engineers. I had a small budget (<\$200) so I went to the local flower market, to grocery stores with specials on gladiolas, and even to several Home Depot gardening departments for end of the summer specials. Little did I know that the phlox I ordered from the vendor at the flower market would have an overpowering aroma that made us all think we were having garden party. We added candles to make it even more special. The result was spectacular. People talked about this party for weeks afterwards. Since then I have introduced flowers at other corporate events, including a send off for summer interns and a rewards and recognition event. We try to use the flowers afterwards to brighten conference rooms and other public areas in the building.
- Breathing—how could something so simple be so powerful? Earlier this year, we brought in a yoga instructor to teach a class once a week. The demand was overwhelming. The first 8-week session filled our auditorium to capacity. We added a second class per week for our next 8-week session. And throughout it all, people learned the calming, restorative effect of deep breathing. I have also found the breath to be a way to start meetings in a different way, to allow myself and others to become more mindful and thoughtful in our discussions. I once started a presentation at a VP's staff meeting with a request for a few deep breaths. It seemed like the right thing to do and everyone went along with it--I suspect mostly to humor me. Later, I heard that one of the people present at that meeting then went on to start another staff meeting with the same request for a few breaths. Sometimes, we set examples and never see the ripple effects; in this case, I was lucky enough to hear about this small ripple effect.
- Storytelling is one of the most powerful ways knowledge is handed down from one group to another. So why shouldn't this be how wisdom is transferred in companies? I recently started a monthly set of talks entitled, "Career Development: Passing Down Wisdom Through Stories". In these talks, 3 employees/retirees, usually consisting of a VP, a first line manager, and a technical guru, speak about their careers, each for 15 minutes. Again, setting the stage is crucial to enabling the stories to come out. So I use a room that is large enough to form a circle of about 30 chairs but still small enough to feel intimate. I turn the lights down low and create a corporate "campfire" (floating candles in a bowl of water). We limit the audience to 30 in order to preserve the intimate setting, and each month we end up with a waiting list of 20 additional people. And then I let each speaker tell his/her story. People talk about their best decisions and their worst decisions of their careers. They talk about setting a drop dead time when they guarantee their family they will be home at night and changing business trips so they can fulfill their childcare duties as a divorced parent. They talk about trusting your intuition and making time for learning. And they talk about staying true to your values, especially in tough times like the ones we are currently facing. There is something very compelling about these stories, told in this setting. The human side of work comes out so clearly.

How did this happen? It took just the smallest of steps, from just a single person, to start the ball rolling. Here's how you can be the person who ignites the pilot light for others to burn brightly.

- **Don't assume you need permission to do this work.** *In fact, assume you don't need permission.* I started doing this work from the role of "member of the community". No one sanctioned me to host the brown bags, arrange the flowers or start the storytelling. I just saw an opportunity and made it happen. And no one ever tried to stop me.
- **Start with something that you are passionate about.** Passion is a great antidote to fear. My passion for storytelling as a means to guide careers put to rest any fear I might have had of inviting a VP to speak and being rejected. By the way, no VP has ever rejected my request to tell his/her story (and I've approached plenty of them!)
- **Choose a friendly setting as a trial.** It can be as simple as putting flowers in a break room. I did this for several months, bringing in flowers from my backyard. People may not say much at first, but I guarantee that they notice.
- **Never underestimate the power of a single person to change the landscape.** You can be the one who starts the meeting with a breath, who hosts a brown bag lunch to talk about the role of integrity in business, who sees a new opportunity to make the workplace more about humans than about machines and systems.
- **Get others involved after you've had some small "wins".** I started out doing this work alone. But after awhile, I could see that others were of the same mindset—it's just that I was a few steps ahead of them in gumption and chutzpah. So now, I almost always partner with at least one other person to make things happen. And the result is inevitably better than if I had tried it alone.

In the end, people will thank you for putting into action what their soul has been wanting to do all along. It's a wonderful thing when you hear that the work you've done has touched someone in a way that changes their outlook on their work, that inspires them to be their best. I can think of no better reward and motivation to do more of the same.

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