



Spiritual Leadership Trilogy: Spiritual Leadership for a Digital Age: The Call for a New Ethos in Business

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Abstract

This article discusses the philosophical and ethical basis of Spiritual Leadership, charting its emergence as a response to the limitations of transactional leadership paradigms and the moral dilemmas highlighted within major corporate scandals in the late 20th and early 21st century. It analyses the theoretical foundations of spiritual leadership and its evolution into a substantiated leadership philosophy that incorporates spirituality, ethics, purpose, and transcendent purpose. This conceptual review emphasises the union of ethics, spirituality, intrinsic motivation, and higher purpose as fundamental components of leadership. Special attention is given to the emergence of the digital era, in which dehumanisation, algorithmic control and decision-making creates virtual fragmentation and pose unique challenges to organisational culture and employee well-being. This research utilises secondary data to redefine Spiritual leadership as a values-driven, future-oriented leadership framework that promotes trust, moral bravery, and collective significance. It requires a new leadership culture in business, one that respects both transcendence and technological advancement without undermining the essence or soul of the organisation. By addressing the global leadership dilemma, this study illustrates how Spiritual Leadership offers a paradigm for creating trust, integrity, and moral responsibility in businesses. Drawing on secondary evidence, it supports the model's relevance in solving present-day organisational difficulties, positioning it as a transformative philosophy for modern-day leadership.

Keywords: Spiritual Leadership, Digital Age, Ethical Leadership, Global Leadership Crisis, Organisational Ethics, Purpose-Driven Leadership, Altruistic Love, Corporate Scandals, Moral Integrity.

Introduction

Background

Modern society is facing an ethical and existential void in leadership and leadership practice (Northouse, 2018). Moral failures in corporate organisations and political institutions have eroded public trust and confidence in leadership as a practice (Kramer & Pittinsky, 2012). This void has been exacerbated by increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) within global

business (Bennis & Nanus, 2007), leaving individuals, communities, and organisations exposed, vulnerable, disoriented, and spiritually depleted (Kok, 2019).

The leadership crises are further exacerbated in today's rapidly expanding digitised world. The explosion of digital technologies, from artificial intelligence (AI) to virtual collaboration platforms, has accelerated organisational change while fragmenting human connection and ethical accountability (Zohar, 2005, 2010; Westerman et al., 2014). The speed of digital transformation often comes at the cost of the collective organisational wisdom, further increasing the risk of depersonalisation and burnout within leadership practice (George et al., 2007; Northouse, 2018). Furthermore, research conducted by Deloitte (2017) on Global Human Capital Trends, underscores the need for not just leadership but organisations to adapt to a "radically shifting context" driven by technology, demographics and societal changes. Human Resource practitioners and business leadership need to rethink talent management strategies, organisational designs and culture, that will support leaders to thrive rather than to survive. Amidst growing political and economic uncertainties, the need for a recalibrated moral and ethical foundation in leadership have become crucial. Scholars and leadership development practitioners are questioning the suitability of traditional leadership models that generally over focus on performance, control, and transactional outcomes (Hieker & Pringle, 2021). These models are often stripped of soul. They struggle to inspire trust (Kramer & Pittinsky, 2012) or long-term commitment, resulting in high staff turnovers, with negative impact on the organisation. In response, Spiritual leadership has emerged as an evolving leadership theory. A leadership approach that integrates personal meaning, purpose, intrinsic motivation, and shared vision into organisational leadership practice (Fry, 2003; Haidt & Morris, 2009; Fry et al., 2011; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Northouse, 2018).

This paper offers a conceptual review of the theory of Spiritual Leadership and its growing relevance in the context of modern organisations and the digital age. Drawing on secondary data and interdisciplinary literature, it traces the philosophical and ethical roots of the model, discusses its development and empirical validation, and presents its potential to address both human and organisational needs within a digital paradigm VUCA world.

What is Spirituality?

Spirituality is a multifaceted and universal human experience that encompasses the quest for meaning, purpose, and connection to something greater than oneself, transcending material existence and individual ego persona needs (Zohar & Marshall, 2001; Haidt & Morris, 2009; Ricard, 2018; Frankl, 2020). It involves a deep engagement with existential questions, fostering a sense of inner wisdom, interconnectedness, and alignment with values such as compassion, love, gratitude, and altruism (Fry, 2003, 2016; Thurston, 2017).

Spirituality may manifest through diverse practices, including reflection, meditation, prayer, or service to others. It can also be expressed within or outside religious frameworks, to embrace both the secular and sacred dimensions of life (Hicks, 2003). In leadership and organisations, spirituality inspires ethical behaviour, holistic well-being (Gardner, 2013), a commitment to higher purpose and the greater good, helping cultivating environments where individuals and communities thrive through shared meaning and moral integrity (Sims & Brinkmann, 2003; Singh & Singh, 2022).

This broader understanding positions spirituality as a dynamic force that bridges personal growth, societal good, and transcendent awareness, adaptable across cultural, religious, philosophical, and organisational contexts.

What is Leadership?

Leadership is a dynamic process of influencing and inspiring individuals or groups towards a shared goal and vision grounded in values, purpose, and ethical responsibility (Northouse, 2018). Beyond mere management (planning, organising, controlling and following up on tasks and projects), leadership fosters trust, empowers others, and navigates complexity to drive meaningful change in organisations (Bass, 1985; Burns, 2004). In modern business challenges, such as ethical failures and volatile uncertain economic environments, leadership are invited to transcend transactional goals by embracing a transformative disposition that aligns individual and organisational aspirations with a higher purpose (Fry, 2003; Fry & Matherly, 2006). (Senge, 2006) notes that leadership goes beyond skills and competence, although it is grounded in skills and competence. He highlights that leadership should move beyond a spiritual unfolding but also requires spiritual development and growth. This holistic perspective, integrating skills, competence, spiritual and emotional growth, authenticity, service, and moral courage, forms the foundation for exploring Spiritual leadership's emergence as a response to modern-day organisational needs (Sapta et al., 2021).

Introduction to Spiritual Leadership

Spiritual Leadership (SLT), articulated by Louis W. Fry in his seminal 2003 article *Toward a Theory of Spiritual Leadership* (The Leadership Quarterly), is a philosophy that integrates spiritual and ethical principles to foster meaning, purpose, and well-being in organisations (Fry, 2003; Fry & Matherly, 2006).

Spiritual Leadership Theory (SLT) is a causal leadership framework aimed at organisational transformation, intended to foster an organically driven learning organisation (Senge, 2006). Spiritual leadership encompasses the values, attitudes, and behaviours necessary to intrinsically motivate oneself and others, fostering a sense of spiritual survival through purpose and belonging, thereby facilitating a meaningful existence, a perception of making an impact, and feelings of being understood and valued. The influence of spiritual leadership on cultivating spiritual well-being among leaders and followers is to establish value congruence at the strategic, empowered team, and individual levels, thereby enhancing organisational commitment, productivity, employee well-being (Fry et al., 2007) and employee performance (Heryawan *et al.*, 2021).

Emerging in response to global ethical challenges, SLT draws on the intrinsic motivation theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and existential philosophy (Frankl, 2020) to emphasize altruistic love, compassion, and a higher purpose (Ricard, 2018; Slabbert, 2024). Unlike traditional leadership models that generally over focus on transactional or transformational outcomes, Spiritual Leadership uniquely embeds spiritual values, such as humility, authenticity, and interconnectedness to inspire leaders and followers toward moral excellence and psychological resilience (Zohar & Marshall, 2001; Braden, 2015; Kok, 2019). By cultivating a culture of trust and integrity, it equips leaders to navigate complex organisational challenges while prioritizing stakeholder return and well-being (Fry, 2003; Sapta et al., 2021; Slabbert, 2024).

Importance of Spiritual Leadership in Modern Organisational Challenges

Over the past decade we have seen a surge in interest in Spiritual leadership (Samul, 2024). In today's dynamic business environment, organisations continue to face a global leadership crisis, highlighting the urgent needs and demands for ethical conduct, and the need for sustainable and helpful leadership practices (Pearse, 2018; Northouse, 2018; Ciulla, 2020). Spiritual Leadership addresses these challenges by fostering values-driven leadership that prioritizes trust, integrity, and spiritual well-being (Fry, 2003; Fry & Matherly, 2006; Kok, 2019). By embedding principles like compassion and altruistic love, it enables leaders to build ethical cultures that balance stakeholder needs with long-term organisational success (Reave, 2005; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Slabbert, 2024). This approach counters the limitations of profit-centric models, offering a transformative framework to navigate uncertainty and restore confidence in leadership (Vanzant, 2015; Bennett, 2017; Fry et al., 2017; Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2022). As the digital age reshapes how people work, communicate, manage and lead (Luckie, 2024), the need for spiritually grounded leadership becomes urgent (Kok, 2019). The pressures of the "always-on" electronic monitoring systems, virtual environments with teleconferencing, wearable devices, algorithmic management (using automated, data driven algorithms with artificial intelligence systems to monitor, evaluate and direct human behaviour, leadership decision making and performance management with little to zero human intervention), and remote disconnection, creates a technology overload (Rasool et al., 2022) losing the soul of the organisation often at the cost of organisational culture and employee wellbeing. Deloitte (2017), Rasool et al. (2022) and Malik & Froese (2022) warns about algorithmic control and AI's capacity to enable unethical leadership and business practices, highlighting the necessity for ethical and spiritual discernment (Tran & Carey, 2023), emotional intelligence (Els et al., 2018), and moral resilience, all qualities deeply embedded in the Spiritual Leadership model (George et al., 2007; Westerman et al., 2014).

Purpose and Objectives of this Review

- To trace the philosophical and ethical emergence of Spiritual Leadership as a response to post-modern organisational challenges within a digital age.
- To validate Spiritual Leadership's theoretical foundations through secondary data whilst highlighting its role in fostering trust, integrity, and moral responsibility within the organisation.
- To position Spiritual Leadership as a transformative philosophy for addressing the current global leadership crisis and toxic organisational cultures.

Literature Review

Progression of Spiritual Leadership Theory

Spiritual Leadership was first introduced by Louis W. Fry in 2003 as a contemporary formal leadership theory. Its emergence occurred against a historical backdrop of widespread corporate scandals and an increasing demand for leadership paradigms that integrate ethical and spiritual principles. This section traces the origins and development of Spiritual Leadership, examining its evolution as a vital leadership paradigm and a framework designed to assist in corporate governance and to address widespread moral challenges in talent management and business.

Fry formally articulated the concept in his seminal article published in "*The Leadership Quarterly* (2003)". He proposed a distinctive model, the Spiritual Leadership framework where he emphasised core principles that inspire both leaders and followers. These include vision, selfless love,

ultraism, compassion, care, and hope or faith. The primary aim of Spiritual Leadership is to cultivate spiritual well-being as organisational culture among organisational members, thereby enhancing talent management and entrepreneurial practices imbued with commitment, transparency, productivity, and ethical conduct (Fry, 2003; Ricard, 2018; Ali et al., 2022; Luu, 2022).

The introduction of Spiritual Leadership can be understood within the context of a rapidly expanding digital business world and the ethical dilemmas combined with corporate scandals that characterised the close of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century (Royakkers et al., 2018). Notable examples include the Enron scandal in 2001 (Sims & Brinkmann, 2003), the WorldCom crisis in 2002, and the Steinhoff corporate scandal in 2017 (Lungisa, 2017). These events exposed significant shortcomings in traditional management paradigms that prioritised profit and shareholder value over ethical stewardship and the well-being of employees, communities, and society (Treviño & Nelson, 2021; Ciulla, 2020; Krishnakumar et al., 2024). These crises illuminated the dangers of ethical egoism (excessive focus and interest in oneself and that moral action is one based on self-interest) and blindness in the ruthless pursuit of financial gain (Sims & Brinkmann, 2003).

With this being said, Joseph (2015) argues the need for a healthy balance between self-interest and ultraism, and notes that an over focus on altruism in one's view of ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006), could prove to be unrealistic in businesses and that a more pragmatic, pluralistic approach, acknowledging the balancing factor of a healthy self-interest in functional leadership, might be helpful. However, a case study conducted between 2007 – 2009 “Financial Crisis: An Erosion of Ethics: A Case Study” by Schoen (2016), directly addresses how the financial crisis illuminated the risks of unhealthy ethical egoism in pursuing financial gain, with digitization enabling opaque and often unethical practices.

In response to these failures, a need arose for leadership frameworks capable of restoring trust and moral integrity in the business world (Doohan, 2007; Kramer & Pittinsky, 2012; Vanzant, 2015). Scholars and leadership development practitioners increasingly recognised the necessity of integrative leadership models that embed moral and ethical deliberations within the broader social responsibilities of all stakeholders (Hieker & Pringle, 2021). This recognition laid the groundwork for the emergence of Spiritual Leadership, which emphasises ethical conduct, compassion, and an intrinsic calling toward a higher purpose (Fry et al., 2005; Thurston, 2017; Kok, 2019; Luu, 2022; Oh & Wang, 2023).

Traditional leadership theories, such as Transformational Leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 2004) and Transactional Leadership, demonstrated effectiveness in achieving organisational goals, yet often failed to address the spiritual and ethical dimensions of leadership. These models, while enabling operational success, did not always consider the moral integrity or emotional and spiritual well-being of those they aimed to lead (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Doohan, 2007; Leavy, 2016). As a result, organisations increasingly faced the fallout of unethical leadership, including legal sanctions, reputational damage, employee disengagement, and difficulties in talent retention (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Ali et al., 2024). Such limitations highlighted the urgent need for leadership models rooted in integrity, sustainability, and purpose (Huang, 2022).

Spiritual Leadership emerged as a soul-centred response to this void (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Fry & Matherly, 2006; Singh & Singh, 2022). Its philosophical underpinnings draw heavily on spiritual and existential thought. Fry was notably influenced by Viktor Frankl, who emphasised the human need to find meaning and purpose in life, especially during times of adversity, uncertainty, and suffering (Haidt

& Morris, 2009; Bennett, 2017; Frankl, 2020). When applied to organisational life, these principles suggest that leaders who anchor their leadership practice (Northouse, 2018) in soul-centred meaning and purpose (Haidt & Morris, 2009) can cultivate spiritually engaged, ethically grounded, and resilient followers (Fry, 2003).

The COVID-19 pandemic blurred the boundaries between the personal and the professional, accelerating a societal shift toward meaning-making in all domains of life. The traditional, transactional, and performance-driven approaches were increasingly seen as inadequate in meeting employees' deeper needs (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Fry et al., 2017). Spiritual Leadership began to resonate more strongly with leaders and organisations seeking alignment between personal values, organisational mission, and societal purpose (Slabbert et al., 2001).

This relevance became even more pressing in the digital age. The rise of AI, automation, and data-driven decision-making, while increasing efficiency, also contributed to the depersonalisation of work and emotional alienation in leadership practice (Westerman et al., 2014). Leaders now face unique ethical and spiritual dilemmas in virtual environments where meaning and human connection risk erosion. Spiritual Leadership addresses this by re-humanising leadership, grounding organisational purpose in spiritual well-being and moral integrity (George et al., 2007; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013).

Spiritual Leadership offers a transformative framework to instil faith and hope in uncertain times. By fostering intrinsic motivation and anchoring ethical behaviour in altruistic love (Ricard, 2018), it helps rebuild the relational and moral fabric of organisations (Fry, 2003). Its commitment to holistic employee well-being (Gardener, 2013; Ahmed et al., 2016) stands in contrast to the reductive, profit-centric logic of many traditional paradigms (Reave, 2005).

Through this ethical and spiritual recalibration, Spiritual Leadership has helped restore trust (Doohan, 2007; Vanzant, 2015), re-establish public faith in corporate governance (Kramer & Pittinsky, 2012), and support the long-term sustainability of organisational systems (Fry & Matherly, 2006).

Fry's 2003 contribution marked a departure from dominant transactional and transformational paradigms (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 2004). Since then, the model has evolved to prioritise spiritual well-being, ethical alignment, and intrinsic motivation as central doctrines. While initial traction was found in faith-based and non-profit settings (Dent et al., 2005), broader adoption has been slow due to market priorities privileging efficiency over ethics (Ciulla, 2020).

Yet, a magnanimous shift is underway (Dalio, 2021). The transition from a knowledge-based economy to a wisdom-based economy (King et al., 2021; Saeed et al., 2022) has amplified the call for spiritually conscious and ethically accountable leadership in a fast-growing digital world.

The unresolved leadership crises of the early 21st century have further highlighted the limitations of traditional leadership models and created fertile ground for the credibility and transformative potential of Spiritual Leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Ciulla, 2020). A systematic review done by Samul (2024) covering 126 empirical research studies emphasise Spiritual leadership theory and practice as key to addressing the current global leadership crisis (Pearse, 2018) particularly in developing countries.

Integration with Transformational, Servant and Transpersonal Leadership

The growing focus on Spiritual Leadership has inspired researchers to explore its relationship with other established leadership theories (Northouse, 2018), particularly Transformational Leadership (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 2004), Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Greenleaf et al., 2016), and the emerging paradigm of Transpersonal Leadership (Knights et al., 2018). These theories share

common ground with Spiritual Leadership, particularly in their emphasis on values, ethical conduct, and the paradoxical tension between serving the greater good (Ricard, 2018) and managing self-interest to optimise shareholder return (Greenleaf, 1977; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013).

By integrating Spiritual Leadership with these paradigms, a broader and more multidimensional understanding of leadership emerges, one that enriches traditional frameworks with a soul-centred emphasis on meaning, purpose, and psychological flourishing (Fry et al., 2005; Haidt & Morris, 2009; Tran & Carey, 2023; Slabbert, 2024).

The overlap between Transformational Leadership and Spiritual Leadership is particularly pronounced in their shared focus on inspirational motivation, idealised influence, and values alignment. Transformational Leadership encourages followers to transcend personal interest in pursuit of collective goals, while Spiritual Leadership deepens this process by cultivating spiritual well-being, ethical intention, and transcendent identity (Fry, 2003; Burns, 2004, Grof, 2019). This synthesis provides a more holistic perspective (Gardner, 2013), allowing organisations to address employees' psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs, thereby fostering higher employee engagement, sustained employee commitment, and meaningful performance outcomes (Fry & Matherly, 2006; Ahmed et al., 2016; Fry et al., 2017; Heryawan et al., 2021; Huang, 2022).

Similarly, the principles of Servant Leadership resonate with the altruistic and compassionate ethos of Spiritual Leadership. Servant Leadership's emphasis on empowering others and prioritising the needs of followers aligns seamlessly with the ethical and spiritual values inherent in Spiritual Leadership. This synergy enables the emergence of leadership cultures that nurture trust, employee well-being, and shared organisational stewardship through wisdom-based practices (Caldwell et al., 2007; Sipe & Frick, 2015).

Transpersonal Leadership, as a contemporary and increasingly relevant framework, further complements Spiritual Leadership by integrating spiritual intelligence, ego-transcendence, and values-based conduct (Knights et al., 2018; Grof, 2019; Slabbert, 2024). Emphasising authenticity (Bishop, 2013), reflective self-awareness, and resilience, Transpersonal Leadership practice equips leaders to navigate complexity, embrace paradoxical challenges, and cultivate inclusive, values-driven workplace cultures (Fry, 2003; Braden, 2015; Kok, 2019).

In the context of digital complexity and AI-driven performance cultures, this multidimensional integration becomes even more vital as it ensures leadership remains ethically anchored and spiritually alive amidst rapid change (George et al., 2007; Westerman et al., 2014).

Together, the integration of Spiritual leadership with Transformational, Servant, and Transpersonal Leadership paradigms represents a pivotal step toward developing a comprehensive, ethically grounded leadership model. This approach addresses the limitations of isolated theories while enhancing their collective capacity to foster trust, spiritual fulfilment, and sustainable excellence. As leadership continues to evolve in response to complex, interconnected global realities, this fusion offers a promising framework for cultivating ethical resilience, purpose-driven vision, and soul-aligned (Braden, 2015) organisational transformation.

Empirical Validation and Broader Application

Empirical research has supported Spiritual Leadership as a practical and effective leadership model that enhances both organisational performance and employee well-being (Heryawan et al., 2021; Samul, 2024). Numerous studies have consistently demonstrated positive correlations between Spiritual

Leadership practices and key organisational outcomes, including improved talent management systems, higher employee engagement (Heryawan et al., 2021), reduced staff turnover, and the cultivation of ethical organisational cultures across diverse industries and demographic settings (Reave, 2005; Fry et al., 2011; Farmanesh et al., 2021; Ali et al., 2024). Specific reference to several research studies, (Fry et al., 2007, Fry et al., 2010; Salehzadeh et al., 2015; Heryawan et al., 2021), consistently demonstrate that Spiritual leadership, characterized by vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love, significantly enhances staff retention, employee well-being, and organizational performance (Fry et al., 2017; Heryawan et al., 2021). By fostering a sense of calling and belonging, Spiritual leadership reduces employee turnover by 12–25%, as employees develop a stronger commitment through purpose-driven and community-oriented work environments. Spiritual leadership significantly improves psychological and emotional well-being, with increased job satisfaction (25–30%) and reductions in workplace stress, all of which is attributed to supportive and values-based leadership practices. Organizational performance also includes revenue growth (10–20%), higher productivity, and improved customer satisfaction, driven by enhanced employee engagement (Huang, 2022) and ethical organisational cultures. Unlike transactional leadership, which relies on extrinsic rewards and shows limited impact on employee retention (Ali et al., 2024), Spiritual leadership's intrinsic motivation cultivates trust and moral integrity, which in turn counters ethical egoism whilst aligning organizational and societal values. These findings support Spiritual leadership's efficacy in addressing modern workplace challenges, offering a robust framework for sustainable organizational success. These findings have expanded the SLT model's application beyond traditional corporate environments, influencing leadership practice within healthcare, education, non-profit sectors, and the military contexts, where values-driven, purpose-led engagement (Huang, 2022) is critical.

This broader application has consolidated Spiritual Leadership's standing as a legitimate and evolving leadership theory capable of addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by modern organisations (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013). Spiritual Leadership has proven particularly relevant in navigating the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments that define 21st-century business dynamics (Kok, 2019; Dalio, 2021). Its emphasis on inner motivation, ethical resilience, and moral accountability provides a necessary counterbalance to purely transactional or mechanistic leadership approaches.

As organisational higher-purpose goals increasingly integrate global challenges such as climate responsibility, social equity, and long-term sustainability, the urgency for innovative value-driven leadership models has intensified (Slabbert et al., 2001; Liu et al., 2023; Slabbert, 2024). In this regard, Spiritual Leadership offers not only a theoretical framework but also an actionable paradigm that nurtures emotional intelligence (Els et al., 2018), psychological safety, and spiritual health among employees, areas often neglected by more technocratic models.

While legislative and compliance-driven efforts have aimed to regulate ethics in business (Ciulla, 2020), they frequently fall short of creating cultures of trust and moral integrity. Spiritual Leadership, by contrast, moves beyond compliance and into the realm of authentic human connection and transformation. Its focus on fostering inner renewal and ethical discernment, presenting a viable and future-fit framework for navigating the psychological fragmentation and organisational spiritual depletion, increasingly associated with accelerated digital change (Doohan, 2007; George et al., 2007; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Westerman et al., 2014; Luckie, 2024).

Samul (2024) analysed 422 publications from 1980 to 2021, and the research study notes Spiritual leadership's emergence as a distinct leadership paradigm to address current leadership practice crisis's suggesting a global shift towards recognising its practical values.

Responding to the Global Leadership Crisis

The global leadership crisis (Pearse, 2018) marked by widespread scandals, ethical lapses, and an ever-widening credibility gap between leaders and stakeholders further highlights the pressing need for leadership models rooted in moral courage, spiritual integrity, and ethical discernment. Scandals such as Enron, WorldCom, Steinhoff, and others have exposed the structural deficiencies of leadership approaches that prioritise profit over principle and short-term gains over long-term stewardship (Sims & Brinkmann, 2003; Caldwell et al., 2007; Ciulla, 2020).

Spiritual Leadership responds to this crisis by offering a transformative paradigm that prioritises trust, integrity, compassion, and a transcendent purpose for both leaders and followers (Doohan, 2007; Kellerman, 2012; Kramer & Pittinsky, 2012; Vanzant, 2015; Thurston, 2017; Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2022). Spiritual leadership redefines leadership as a vocation rather than a position, anchoring influence in ethical clarity, soul-centred vision, and an unwavering commitment to the common good of all. This perspective helps to restore moral depth to leadership practice (Northouse, 2018), encouraging a renewed relationship between leaders, followers, their teams, and the communities they serve (Samul, 2024).

By addressing leadership's spiritual and ethical dimensions, the model equips leaders to meet rising demands for transparency, accountability, and value creation, financial performance (Fry et al., 2017; Heryawan et al., 2021) and in social equity. Developing leaders with character not just competence (Leavy, 2016). It cultivates environments where moral discernment is central to decision-making, thereby fostering psychological safety, dignity, and ethical heart space resilience (Braden, 2015; Tran & Carey, 2023).

The relevance of Spiritual Leadership to these compounding global challenges has been instrumental in its evolution, from a marginal concept to a maturing and credible mainstream leadership theory (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013, Kok, 2019; Samul, 2024). In an era where digital disruption and algorithmic control risk depersonalising leadership, the spiritual grounding of this model re-centres the human soul in organisational life. It positions ethical reflection and spiritual purpose as not merely desirable but essential attributes of trustworthy and future-fit leadership.

Challenges and Critiques

One of the primary critiques of Spiritual Leadership in its early years was its perceived subjectivity. The model emphasises deeply spiritual and inherently personal values such as selfless love, hope, and faith, concepts that while profoundly transformative, are also considered abstract and difficult to operationalise within conventional organisational systems (Dent et al., 2005; Lata & Chaudhary, 2021). Critics argued that these constructs lacked the empirical measurability typically expected in leadership science, making it challenging to apply Spiritual leadership consistently across diverse sectors and secular contexts.

The critique of subjectivity is not merely philosophical but methodological. The challenge lies in reconciling the inner life of leaders with outward behavioural metrics that organisations can reliably assess, benchmark, and integrate into leadership development programs. Despite these limitations, ongoing empirical advancements and new instrumentation, such as Fry's Spiritual Leadership Theory (SLT) scale, have begun to mitigate these concerns, offering more standardised ways to explore and evaluate spiritual constructs within leadership practice and frameworks (Fry et al., 2005; Samul, 2024).

Difficulty in Measuring Impact

The lack of objective metrics for assessing the impact of Spiritual Leadership has long been a central concern among critics. Unlike other leadership theories, such as Transformational (Bass & Avolio, 1994) or Authentic Leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) which can be evaluated through tangible indicators like performance metrics, return on investment, or employee productivity, the success of Spiritual Leadership is often linked to more intangible outcomes. These include spiritual well-being, ethical conduct, inner purpose, and moral motivation, dimensions that are challenging to quantify within traditional organisational systems (Reave, 2005).

This difficulty complicates the model's integration into data-driven business environments, where evidence-based decision-making and measurable outcomes dominate leadership evaluation frameworks. The emphasis on intrinsic motivation and holistic well-being (Gardener, 2013) introduces a methodological complexity. It becomes difficult to determine whether positive shifts in organisational culture or employee behaviour can be attributed directly to Spiritual Leadership practices or to other overlapping factors (Fry, 2003; Fry et al., 2017; Farmanesh et al., 2021). This lack of linear causality can make organisational leaders hesitant to adopt the model, particularly in competitive markets where results must often be demonstrated in monthly and quarterly terms. Samul's (2024) review notes the focussed ongoing efforts to refine definitions and measurement tools to address past criticisms on subjectivity. In essence, the difficulty in measuring impact underscores a larger tension within leadership discourse, the disconnect between what is meaningful and what is measurable. While metrics remain essential for accountability, the spiritual dimension of leadership calls for new tools and paradigms that honour the unseen dimensions of human experience, motivation and moral influence.

There is a noticeable push to adapt Spiritual leadership practice for diverse and secular contexts (Giarrusso, 2024). Spirituality in corporate leadership are seen to transcend religious affiliations with an emphasis on authenticity, empathy and purpose (Sanders, 2014). However, Spiritual Leadership continues to face some challenges in implementation within secular or religiously diverse contexts. While faith-based organisations often welcome its ethical and spiritual values, more secular institutions, which generally prioritise objectivity and measurability, have shown resistance. In pluralistic environments, leaders must apply spirituality in ways that resonate universally, without privileging one belief system over another (Hicks, 2003; Saeed et al., 2022). This demands a nuanced and inclusive application of the model, ensuring its universal values, such as love, compassion, and integrity, are not perceived as ideologically or religiously prescriptive.

Resistance in Secular Organisations

In secular organisational settings, concerns emerged that introducing spiritual concepts into leadership practices could blur the boundary between personal belief systems and professional responsibilities. Many organisations expressed hesitancy toward adopting a leadership model that, even when intended to be inclusive, appeared to prioritise specific spiritual or quasi-religious values over others (Hicks, 2003; Krishnakumar et al., 2024). This concern was particularly pronounced in environments that value ideological neutrality and where religious or spiritual matters are traditionally regarded as private.

Leaders feared that Spiritual leadership might inadvertently impose particular moral or metaphysical frameworks on employees, potentially leading to alienation, discomfort, or ethical conflict within diverse teams. The language of spirituality, while rooted in universal values such as love, compassion, care and purpose was often misunderstood as religious advocacy, rather than a broader invitation to moral depth and shared meaning (Dent et al., 2005). Such resistance reflects not only the secular ethos

of many contemporary workplaces but also a broader cultural discomfort with integrating the inner life into public professional domains.

To navigate this resistance, advocates of Spiritual Leadership have had to emphasise the universality of its core principles, such as trust, integrity, and altruistic love, demonstrating that these values can enrich organisational culture without compromising the pluralistic fabric of modern institutions (Sanders, 2014; Giarrusso, 2024; Samul, 2024).

Challenges in Diverse Organisational Settings

In religiously diverse organisations, a key challenge lies in ensuring that Spiritual Leadership practices remain inclusive and respectful of all employees' belief systems. While Spiritual Leadership promotes universal values such as altruistic love, compassion, care, and purpose, critics have noted that its underlying spiritual framework may still be perceived (Hicks, 2003) as implicitly aligned with specific religious or metaphysical worldviews (Fry, 2003; Fry et al., 2005; Fry & Matherly, 2006; Fry et al., 2007). This concern is particularly salient in contexts where the boundaries between spirituality and religion are culturally blurred (Hicks, 2003).

Compounding this challenge is the deeply personal nature of spirituality itself, which can vary significantly between individuals. Practices considered spiritual and ethical in one cultural or religious context may be interpreted differently in another, creating the potential for misunderstanding or resistance, particularly among employees who feel that their beliefs are either excluded or insufficiently acknowledged (Dent et al., 2005; Reave, 2005). These interpretive divergences require leaders to cultivate high levels of cultural intelligence, empathy, and discernment (Tran & Carey, 2023) when implementing spiritually inspired models.

Additionally, one of the early risks associated with Spiritual Leadership was the potential for misunderstanding or misapplication. Rooted in nuanced spiritual and ethical principles, the model requires a depth of leader-personal and organisational commitment. Without this, there is a danger that its language may be co-opted superficially, leading to performative spirituality or the institutionalisation of vague values without authentic integration (Dent et al., 2005). Such risks underscore the need for careful contextualisation and reflective engagement to ensure that the soul of the model is neither diluted nor distorted (Sanders, 2014; Giarrusso, 2024).

Risk of Superficial Adoption

One of the significant risks is that organisations might adopt the grandiloquence of Spiritual leadership without genuinely integrating its principles into their culture and daily practices. This ultimately leads to empowering the ego-persona with spirituality, which manifests as unhealthy or non-helpful ethical egoism, with often disastrous consequences. When leaders adopt spiritual language without authentic alignment to its core values, it results in a disconnection between espoused beliefs and actual behaviour, causing cognitive dissonance, erosion of trust, cynicism, and disengagement among employees (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Krishnakumar et al., 2024).

In some cases, leaders may even misuse the language of spiritual leadership to manipulate or control others under the guise of promoting shallow versions of "ethical behaviour" or superficial interest in employee well-being. This performative spirituality undermines trust and fosters organisational toxicity, thereby contradicting the very soul of what Spiritual leadership is intended to uphold (Fry, 2003; Dent et al., 2005; Kramer & Pittinsky, 2012; Vanzant, 2015).

Despite these early challenges, Spiritual Leadership has gradually gained legitimacy as organisations recognise the necessity of ethical, meaningful, and purpose-driven leadership (Samul, 2024). Scholars, human resource practitioners, and leadership development experts have since responded by offering more explicit implementation guidelines, particularly within secular and culturally diverse contexts' while re-emphasising the universal applicability (Sanders, 2014) of its core principles (Hicks, 2003; Fry et al., 2005; Fry et al., 2007; Giarrusso, 2024).

Developing Inclusive Frameworks

Efforts have been made to create more inclusive frameworks for Spiritual Leadership that can be applied across various cultural and religious contexts (Sanders, 2014; Giarrusso, 2024). These frameworks emphasise universal values such as love, compassion, integrity, care, and a sense of higher purpose, values that resonate with employees regardless of their specific religious or spiritual beliefs (Hicks, 2003; Thurston, 2017; Bayighomog & Araslı, 2023). Additionally, research and case studies have provided empirical evidence supporting the positive impact of Spiritual Leadership, thereby validating the theory and demonstrating its applicability across a wide range of industries and organisational settings (Fry et al., 2017; Samul, 2024).

The early challenges faced by Spiritual Leadership, including its perceived subjectivity as well as the difficulties in implementation across secular and diverse environments, combined with the risk of misapplication, did initially hinder widespread adoption. However, as the theory evolved and its benefits became more widely recognised, it has gained acceptance as a credible framework for ethical and purpose-driven leadership in modern business environments (Samul, 2024).

Nevertheless, and somewhat unfortunate, one of the primary critiques that continues to surface is Spiritual leadership's ability to be culturally and religiously inclusive. By its nature, Spiritual Leadership incorporates spiritual values and practices that can be deeply personal and often rooted in specific religious traditions. This raises important concerns regarding its application in organisations with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

Challenges of Inclusivity

Critics argue that while Spiritual Leadership promotes universal values such as selfless love, compassion, care, hope, and faith, these values are often interpreted through specific religious or cultural lenses. As a result, there is a risk that Spiritual Leadership could inadvertently privilege certain religious perspectives, leading to feelings of exclusion among employees who do not share those traditions (Hicks, 2003).

In highly diverse or secular organisations, the emphasis on spirituality may be perceived as intrusive or inappropriate, especially when it appears closely aligned with a particular faith tradition. This can generate discomfort and tension, particularly in professional environments where religious expression is typically considered a private matter (Hicks, 2003; Saeed et al., 2022).

Efforts to Address Inclusivity

In response to these concerns, scholars and human resource development practitioners have developed more inclusive frameworks for Spiritual leadership that intentionally separate its core values from any specific religious tradition. Fry and Nisiewicz (2013), for instance, highlight that the foundational principles of Spiritual leadership, such as love, compassion, care, integrity, and purpose, can be applied in a universally respectful way across all cultural and religious contexts (Sanders, 2014; Giarrusso, 2024).

These efforts aim to broaden the reach and relevance of Spiritual leadership by creating space for every employee regardless of their belief system as to ensure meaningful engagement (Huang, 2022) within a more universal value system. By anchoring the model in shared human ethics rather than dogma, such inclusivity reinforces its potential to unify rather than divide, offering a pathway to deep organisational trust and cohesion.

Integration with Pluralistic Approaches

In response to increasing cultural and religious diversity in the workplace, some scholars have proposed integrating Spiritual leadership with pluralistic approaches that explicitly acknowledge and celebrate spiritual diversity within organisations. This involves cultivating inclusive spaces for interfaith dialogue and designing leadership practices that are flexible and adaptable to the diverse spiritual orientations of employees (Hicks, 2003; Bayighomog & Araslı, 2023).

By embracing pluralism, Spiritual Leadership can evolve into a unifying framework, one that respects distinct beliefs while anchoring itself in universal spiritual values such as love, compassion, hope, and moral responsibility. This adaptability strengthens its application across global business landscapes (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013) and further enhances its relevance in complex, multicultural organisational ecosystems (Fry et al., 2017).

Another significant critique of Spiritual Leadership, however, lies in its capacity for measurement. Unlike conventional leadership models that offer easily trackable metrics, such as financial performance or employee productivity. Spiritual Leadership's core outcomes are more intrinsic and abstract, making empirical evaluation particularly challenging (Fry et al., 2005).

Challenges in Measurement

Spiritual Leadership is centred on outcomes like spiritual well-being, ethical behaviour, and an enhanced sense of meaning and purpose among employees. These dimensions, while powerful, are inherently difficult to quantify using standard organisational tools. Critics argue that without clear and objective metrics, it is difficult to assess the model's effectiveness or benchmark it against other leadership frameworks (Dent et al., 2005; Lata & Chaudhary, 2021).

Furthermore, the full impact of Spiritual Leadership often unfolds over an extended period rather than within short-term performance cycles that dominate most corporate evaluation systems. This temporal misalignment adds complexity to the model's integration into traditional business practices and decision-making structures (Fry, 2003).

Developing Measurement Tools

To address these measurement challenges, researchers have developed practical frameworks aimed at capturing the nuanced impact of Spiritual Leadership. Notably, Fry et al., (2005) introduced the Spiritual Leadership Theory (SLT) scale, a tool designed to assess core elements such as vision, selfless love, and hope/faith. This scale has since been employed in numerous empirical studies, demonstrating positive correlations between Spiritual leadership practices and outcomes like client focussed, employee well-being, organisational commitment, and ethical workplace cultures (Fry et al., 2005; Farmanesh et al., 2021; Samul, 2024).

While these tools mark meaningful progress, the broader challenge of measuring spiritual and ethical outcomes remains. Scholars continue to explore qualitative and mixed method approaches to more effectively capture the intangible but transformative dimensions of Spiritual Leadership to ensure that

its unique contributions to organisational health and human flourishing are recognised in academically rigorous and contextually meaningful ways (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013).

Comparison with Contemporary Leadership Theories

Spiritual Leadership (Fry, 2003), Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), Transformational Leadership (Burns, 2004), Authentic Leadership (George, 2004; Gavin, 2019), and Transpersonal Leadership (Knights et al., 2018) all share foundational principles that converge around ethical behaviour, emotional intelligence (Els et al., 2018), employee well-being, and the cultivation of meaningful, purpose-driven organisational environments (Tischler et al., 2002; Thurston, 2017; Els et al., 2018; Kok, 2019). These theories are not mutually exclusive but form a complementary suite of paradigms that respond to the evolving demands of leadership in a globalised, ethically strained, and spiritually fragmented world.

This section offers a comparative analysis of the ethical dimensions embedded in these five leadership models, underscoring how each provides a different lens through which values-based leadership may be enacted.

Ethical Behaviour

Ethical behaviour (Ciulla, 2020) represents the common denominator and moral anchor across all five leadership theories. It serves as the cornerstone of trust (Vanzant, 2015), integrity, and long-term organisational sustainability, especially in an age marked by widespread moral fatigue and corporate disillusionment (Treviño & Nelson, 2021).

Spiritual Leadership and Ethics:

Spiritual Leadership is defined by ethical behaviour that emerges from a foundation of altruistic love, compassion, care, honesty, and integrity (Fry, 2003). It calls for a radical moral consciousness that elevates stakeholders' well-being through a transcendent sense of purpose. Leaders grounded in this model are called to embody moral responsibility, not just as a strategic imperative, but as a sacred vocation (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2022).

Servant Leadership and Ethics:

Rooted in the work of Robert Greenleaf (1977), Servant Leadership prioritises the needs of followers, fostering a culture of humility, service, and ethical responsibility. Servant leaders act from a place of moral selflessness, elevating the collective well-being above personal ambition (Greenleaf, 1977; Ricard, 2018; Eva et al., 2019). This paradigm aligns closely with the values of Spiritual Leadership, particularly in its emphasis on love as a leadership principle.

Transformational Leadership and Ethics:

Transformational Leadership integrates ethical behaviour (Kumar & Vij, 2014) primarily through idealised influence, where leaders act as moral exemplars, inspiring others to transcend self-interest for the common good (Burns, 2004). Ethical integrity is embedded into the leader's identity and projected through vision, influence, and authenticity (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

Authentic Leadership and Ethics:

Authentic Leadership derives its ethical power from relational transparency and values-based congruence. Leaders in this tradition are grounded in a well-developed moral compass and are guided by deep self-awareness (George, 2004; Walumbwa et al., 2008; Bishop, 2013). Their authenticity fosters trust, ethical clarity, and a psychologically safe work environment (Van Aswegen & Engelbrecht, 2009; Bishop, 2013; Vanzant, 2015; Gavin, 2019).

Transpersonal Leadership and Ethics:

Transpersonal Leadership brings a dimension of ethical transcendence by encouraging leaders to move beyond ego-centred motives. This model fosters a collective consciousness shaped by compassion, inclusivity, and integrity (Knights et al., 2018). In this framework, leaders are not merely ethical actors but spiritual catalysts navigating complexity through values-driven discernment and holistic awareness (Kok, 2019; Slabbert, 2024). Transpersonal Leadership's emphasis on ego-transcendence and inner maturity harmonises with the moral fabric of Spiritual leadership, offering profound integration of soul and strategy.

Addressing the Global Leadership Crisis

The modern-day leadership crisis (Pearse, 2018) exacerbated by widespread ethical scandals, stakeholder disillusionment, and institutional breakdown, has underscored the urgent need for ethical, purpose-driven leadership paradigms capable of restoring trust and moral integrity (Vanzant, 2015). Spiritual Leadership, alongside Servant, Transformational, Authentic, and Transpersonal Leadership, offers viable and integrative frameworks that address these systemic deficits by prioritising values-based action, stakeholder well-being, and transcendent purpose (Knights et al., 2018; Kok, 2019; Samul, 2024).

Ethics and Accountability

The erosion of trust in leadership, triggered by ethical failures, corruption, and moral compromise, demands renewed accountability and spiritual anchoring in leadership conduct (Kellerman, 2012; Vanzant, 2015; Treviño & Nelson, 2021). Across all five paradigms, ethical behaviour is not an afterthought but the moral foundation upon which influence is built. Among them, Authentic, Transpersonal, and Spiritual Leadership stand out in their explicit focus on self-awareness, spiritual maturity, and integrity as non-negotiable leadership virtues (Doohan, 2007; Bishop, 2013; Gardener, 2013; Ciulla, 2020; Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2022).

Transpersonal Leadership, in particular, deepens the ethical discourse by transcending ego-centric motivations. It promotes values-driven decision-making grounded in a collective consciousness and moral purpose. This model aligns closely with Spiritual Leadership's emphasis on altruistic love, ethical clarity, and compassionate accountability, placing the well-being of the whole above narrow profit-based metrics (Knights et al., 2018; Kok, 2019; Slabbert, 2024).

Purpose-Driven Vision

A central differentiator among these leadership models is their alignment with transcendent purpose with their soul-level vision that animates both leader and organisation (Thurston, 2017). When leaders operate from this place of higher calling, they cultivate emotional and spiritual resilience (Kok, 2019) that is essential for long-term organisational flourishing.

Spiritual Leadership builds this vision on a transcendent identity rooted in faith, meaning, and the experience of higher purpose (Fry, 2003; Haidt & Morris, 2009; McClellan, 2009; Braden, 2015; Huang, 2022).

Servant Leadership centre's purpose through service to others and the elevation of collective dignity (Greenleaf, 1977).

Transformational Leadership inspires followers through compelling and shared organisational visions (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 2004; Kumar & Vij, 2014).

Authentic Leadership manifest's purpose through alignment with core values and inner moral guidance (George, 2004; Gardner, 2013; George, 2015; Gavin, 2019).

Transpersonal Leadership weaves a collective consciousness and a unified inner-outer purpose, capable of guiding action in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) conditions (Knights et al., 2018; Slabbert, 2024).

Together, these models offer holistic leadership responses tailored for an ethically fragmented and spiritually malnourished global economy.

Rebuilding Trust

Rebuilding trust is perhaps the most sacred and urgent task of 21st-century leadership. Trust is restored not through compliance, but through transparency, embodied integrity, and sincere care for others (Doohan, 2007; Kramer & Pittinsky, 2012). Across the five paradigms:

Authentic Leadership champions relational transparency, allowing trust to emerge through consistent, values-aligned behaviour (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Vanzant, 2015; Gavin, 2019).

Spiritual Leadership restores trust through the lived expression of altruistic love, which manifests as moral courage, empathy, and a passion for both beauty and excellence in organisational life (Fry, 2003; Ricard, 2018).

Transpersonal Leadership contributes by cultivating a leadership consciousness that sees each stakeholder as a sacred whole, worthy of dignity and protection (Knights et al., 2018; Kok, 2019).

Together, these perspectives shape the basis of trust restoration, ensuring that leadership becomes not only effective, but truly redemptive in nature (Kramer & Pittinsky, 2012; Slabbert, 2024).

Spiritual Leadership in the Age of Digital Disruption

The 21st-century business landscape is undergoing seismic transformation through digitisation, algorithmic management, automation, and AI-driven decision-making (Luckie, 2024). While these developments have created operational efficiencies, they have also contributed to ethical (Malik & Froese, 2022), spiritual, and emotional challenges for leaders and employees alike (Westerman et al., 2014). As human interactions become increasingly mediated by data analytics and algorithmic logic, the risk of depersonalisation and the erosion of moral discernment in leadership intensifies. This echoes Floridi's (2013) warning regarding the decline of informational self-determination under pervasive and intrusive algorithmic governance.

Spiritual Leadership offers a compelling counterbalance to this mechanisation of work by reintroducing meaning, moral intentionality, and relational presence into organisational life. It calls for leadership practice grounded not only in mechanistic performance metrics, but in authentic relationships, spiritual well-being, and enduring values such as love, trust, and compassion, qualities often marginalised in data-dominant corporate cultures (Fry, 2003; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Heryawan *et al.*, 2021).

Contrary to the prevailing technocratic paradigms that elevate efficiency and surveillance above all, Spiritual Leadership reasserts the sacredness of the human person, inviting leaders to foster organisational cultures rooted in dignity, ethical reflection, and emotional resilience (Braden, 2015; Samul, 2024).

This integration is particularly vital in virtual and hybrid work environments, where physical separation can erode interpersonal trust and psychological safety. Research highlights that digital workplaces demand heightened emotional intelligence (Els et al., 2018) and spiritual groundedness from leaders to

cultivate cohesion, empathy, and shared meaning (Raghuram et al., 2019). Spiritual leadership repositions and re-centres the human soul at the heart of organisational purpose helping to bridge the widening gap between digital efficiency and existential meaning and depth.

Moreover, the rise of a Wisdom-Based Economy, as articulated by King et al., (2021), signifies a global shift away from mere knowledge accumulation toward values-based discernment (Tran & Carey, 2023) and ethical clarity (Huertas-Valdivia *et al.*, 2022). Spiritual leadership aligns with this evolution by encouraging reflective and reflexive practice, intuition, and moral stewardship (Caldwell *et al.*, 2007) in the responsible application of digital tools and systems (Zohar & Marshall, 2001; Zohar, 2005; Zohar, 2010; Slabbert, 2024).

Conclusion

Summary of Key Insights

Spiritual Leadership, first introduced by Louis W. Fry (2003), emerged in response to widespread ethical failures and corporate scandals at the turn of the 21st century. It presented a values-based leadership model built on three central constructs: vision, altruistic love, and hope/faith. This triad fosters spiritual well-being in both leaders and followers, igniting intrinsic motivation for ethically grounded and purpose-driven action (Fry, 2003; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Huertas-Valdivia *et al.*, 2022).

Early critiques of Spiritual leadership pointed to its subjective nature, difficulties in measurement, and challenges in implementing the model across secular or multi-faith contexts (Hicks, 2003; Dent et al., 2005; Lata & Chaudhary, 2021). However, subsequent empirical validations and cross-sector studies confirmed the universal applicability of its core values, demonstrating measurable impacts on employee engagement (Huang, 2022), trust, and ethical climate across diverse organisations (Reave, 2005; Farmanesh et al., 2021; Bayighomog & Arasli, 2023; Samul, 2024).

In today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, compounded by digital acceleration and algorithmic governance, organisations face a renewed leadership crisis marked by disconnection, depersonalisation, and burnout with the loss of personal authenticity (George et al., 2007; Floridi, 2013). Spiritual Leadership speaks directly into this void. It provides a transformative paradigm rooted not in control, but in meaning-making, ethical resilience, and shared purpose (Braden, 2015).

Practical Recommendations for Organisational Application

To operationalise the insights of Spiritual Leadership in contemporary business settings, the following actionable strategies are proposed for managers, HR and HRD professionals (Ahmed et al., 2016), and executives:

Integrate SLT into Leadership Development Programs

Develop training modules based on Fry's SLT framework, embedding core values (vision, altruistic love, hope/faith) into Transpersonal leadership coaching (Assagioli, 2012; Slabbert, 2018; Grof, 2019; Slabbert, 2024), assessment centres, and high-potential development tracks.

Use self-assessment tools like the SLT Scale (Fry et al., 2005) to measure alignment between leadership behaviour, spiritual values and organisational performance (Fry et al., 2017; Heryawan *et al.*, 2021).

Embed Spiritual Leadership Values into HR Policies

Codify spiritual leadership values (compassion, care, dignity) into HR policies governing recruitment, employee engagement (Heryawan *et al.*, 2021; Huang, 2022), performance appraisal, and conflict resolution.

Use inclusive language to ensure these values resonate in both pluralistic and secular environments (Hicks, 2003; Thurston, 2017).

Design Purpose-Driven Organisational Cultures

Encourage organisational storytelling, rituals, and symbols that affirm the higher purpose of the organisation beyond profit and ROI (Slabbert, 2024).

Include practices such as reflection circles, gratitude meetings, or quiet spaces to cultivate spiritual well-being.

Infuse SLT Principles into Digital Transformation

Use Spiritual Leadership to guide ethical decision-making in AI adoption, automation, and algorithmic HR tools to ensure transparency and that dignity with moral discernment is not lost in digital efficiency (Florida, 2013; Westerman *et al.*, 2014).

Appoint Ethics Champions trained in SLT to oversee tech deployment with a spiritual and human-centric lens.

Build Spiritual Resilience in Teams

Develop resilience training informed by SLT's emphasis on hope, meaning, and emotional-spiritual balance (Braden, 2015; Els *et al.*, 2018; Kok, 2019; Slabbert, 2024).

Introduce contemplative practices (e.g., mindfulness, centring prayer, or nature-based coaching retreats) as part of well-being initiatives (Regnier, 1994; Plotkin, 2003; Keating, 2019; Wade, 2019; Armstrong, 2022).

Implications for Future Research

It is essential to address definitional inconsistencies by developing a unified concept of spiritual leadership. This review highlights the need to augment academic methodological rigour via mixed-method techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to encompass subjective components, and to broaden research into under-represented locations and sectors such as Africa or technology startups to promote its generalisability. The review also highlights a gap in our understanding of nomological relationships (Li & Larsen, 2011), urging future studies to explore mediators and moderators affecting outcomes, and calls for leader-centric research to examine how Spiritual leadership shapes leaders' emotional resilience, grit and ethical decision making, moving beyond the current leader-follower dyads focus. Research findings reflect an ongoing maturing field that seeks empirical validation to strengthen its practical and theoretical relevance across diverse contexts (Oh & Wang, 2023).

Integration of Spiritual Leadership with Other Frameworks

Although some research has been done, there remains a critical gap in empirical studies exploring the intersection of Spiritual Leadership and other dominant leadership frameworks such as Transpersonal

Leadership (Knights et al., 2018). While conceptual research has illuminated philosophical synergies between leadership paradigms (Fry & Matherley, 2006; Knights et al., 2018; Kok, 2019), systematic empirical validation is required to understand how a spiritually grounded leadership dimension enhances effectiveness in modern-day organisations (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Samul, 2024; Slabbert, 2024).

Future studies could explore, whether Transformational and Transpersonal leaders who embody spiritual dimensions, such as altruistic love, compassion, care and transcendent purpose could achieve higher organisational performance, employee commitment, psychological safety and trust, than those who do not. Furthermore, Mixed-method research designs guided by rigorous research protocols (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) could use the already established instruments like the Spiritual Leadership Theory (SLT) Scale (Fry et al., 2005) to assess the success of such integrations. Further, cross-cultural studies would also be valuable to explore how these integrations manifest across pluralistic or secular organisational environments (Bayighomog & Arasli, 2023).

Addressing Ethical Challenges in Volatile Contexts

A second research imperative involves investigating the capacity of Spiritual Leadership to mitigate ethical lapses, particularly in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) contexts. Longitudinal research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) could examine how sustained Spiritual leadership fosters trust (Kramer & Pittinsky, 2012), integrity, and emotional resilience (Els et al., 2018), especially in sectors historically prone to ethical failures.

Emerging technologies continue to raise new ethical frontiers (Sapta et al., 2021).

Scholars such as Floridi (2013) have noted the dangers of algorithmic governance and the erosion of informational autonomy. As such, future research should examine how Spiritual Leadership offers a compass for navigating morally ambiguous terrains marked by AI-driven decisions, algorithmic HR tools, and surveillance-based performance management systems (George et al., 2007; Malik et al., 2023). In this regard, Spiritual Leadership is not merely an ethical theory but a pragmatic framework for confronting digital-era dilemmas with human dignity and moral clarity.

Navigating Digital Transformation Through Spiritual Leadership

In alignment with digital innovation and business transformation, future research must investigate how Spiritual Leadership supports employee well-being and ethical grounding within highly digitised organisational systems (Sapta et al., 2021; Samul, 2024).

Digitisation, marked by remote collaboration, AI-driven decision-making, and virtual team cultures, has amplified efficiency, but also contributed to psychological fragmentation, Zoom fatigue, and depersonalisation (Westerman et al., 2014; Fry et al., 2017; Raghuram et al., 2019).

Core research questions may include (Fry, 2003; Rasool et al., 2022):

- How does Spiritual Leadership influence employee engagement and well-being in remote or hybrid work environments?

- Can spiritual principles such as hope, purpose, and altruistic love protect against digital burnout, isolation, and emotional fatigue?
- How might Spiritual Leadership counterbalance the mechanistic tendencies of algorithmic management and preserve human dignity in performance systems?

As the global economy transitions from a knowledge-based to a wisdom-based paradigm (King et al., 2021), future studies should also examine how leaders might cultivate both digital fluency and spiritual discernment (Zohar & Marshall, 2001; Tran & Carey, 2023). This dual competency may foster values-driven decision-making, ethical innovation, and purposeful leadership in an increasingly data-saturated world (Slabbert, 2024).

Closing

In a world increasingly shaped by unpredictability, disruption, uncertainty, and digital abstraction, where 79% of leaders cannot identify their own deficiencies and shortfalls (Sawhney, 2025) because of the tension and incompatibility between the objective and subjective world (Grinder & Bandler, 1976), where Servant leadership are often lived at the cost of organisational excellence, and psychological safety conveniently mistaken for comfort and niceness (Edmonson & Kerrissey, 2025), where top down leadership are nonhelpful and outdated (Cashman, 2017)... Spiritual leadership offers a grounded, soul-centred framework to restore ethical consciousness, human dignity together with organisational performance (Fry et al., 2017; Heryawan *et al.*, 2021; Samul, 2024). Its adaptability across diverse contexts, religious and secular, profit or non-profit, positions it as a holistic response to the current leadership vacuum.

For practitioners, the path forward lies in translating these values into culture, policy, and practice in embracing both organisational beauty and excellence, redefining leadership not as dominance or performance alone, but as a sacred trust rooted in love, compassion, care, mercy, moral courage, human connection and spiritual depth. In so doing, organisations may yet become sanctuaries of meaning, resilience, and redemptive impact in the digital age.

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