

A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AMONG SPIRITUALLY-LED EDUCATIONAL LEADERS IN INDIA

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Decision making as a crucial factor in leadership effectiveness has been extensively investigated from multiple perspectives. This qualitative study argues on the incalculable and indispensable role of spirituality in the decision making responsibility of today's educational leaders. Anchored on the Corbin and Strauss grounded theory design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 spiritually-led educational leaders in the state of Tamil Nadu, India. Field texts were subjected to the three-step process of open, axial, and selective coding. Results of constant comparison method generated the development of a funnelling model of decision making by spiritually-led educational leaders, with four distinct yet inter-related phases each having two sub-phases, namely, *contemplating phase* – praying and preparing; *consulting phase* – listening and learning; *consensus building phase* – discerning and directing; and *crystallizing phase* – advancing and achieving. Implications to leadership practice and policy are discussed in this paper.

Keywords: spirituality, educational leadership, decision-making, funnelling model, grounded theory

The study of organizational decision making began in late 1930s and 1940s (Hodgkinson & Starbuck, 2009). Historically, rational decision theories – “bounded

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rationality” (Simon, 1947), behavioural decision theory (Edwards, 1961), adaptive decision model (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996), “garbage can” model (Cohen, March & Olson, 1972), the role of reasoning, information processing, interpreting and enacting in decision making (March, 1997; March & Simon, 1958; Shapira, 1997; Weick, 1995) - have made great contributions. In recent years, studies on organizational decision making have attracted the interest of a number of scholars (see Craft, 2013; Johnson & Kruse, 2009; Loe, Ferrell, & Mansfield, 2000; O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). Decision making, though a complex process (Jones, 2010), has become central and inseparable from leadership exercise and indispensable to organizational success (Delbecq, Liebert, Mostyn, Nutt, & Walter, 2003; Johnson & Kruse, 2009; Lecourt & Pauchant, 2011). Notably, a growing number of investigations underscore the shift in focus of decision making research from “how” decisions should be made to “what” impacts decision making process of leaders. In fact, scholars began to investigate increasingly the influence of a multitude of factors (Craft, 2013) such as age, gender (Chan & Leung, 2006; Eweje & Brunton, 2010), education, experience (Awasthi, 2008; Krambia-Kapardis & Zopiatis, 2008), personal values (Ho, 2010), philosophy, situation (Chan & Leung, 2006; Valentine & Bateman, 2011), intuition (Evans, 2007, Hodgkinson, Langan-Fox & Sadler-Smith, 2008), and emotion and affect (Ashkanasy & Ashton-James, 2005; Daniels, Harris & Briner, 2004) in decision making. Besides the aforementioned variables, this study argues that the role of spirituality in the dynamics of decision making processes of educational leaders remains an interesting area for empirical exploration.

In recent decades, spirituality has generated enormous interest in the study of leadership effectiveness (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Fairholm, 1998; Freeman, 2011; George, 2010; Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Phipps, 2012) and there exists a burgeoning literature on spirituality in the workplace, management, organizational leadership and development (Fernando, 2005; Geigle, 2012; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Pawar, 2009; Riasudeen & Prabavathy, 2011). Spirituality in organizations has potential benefits in ensuring the well-being of individuals, organizations, and societies (Fry & Matherly, 2007; Sheep, 2006) providing quality of life, sense of purpose, interconnectedness, and community in organizational settings (Karakas, 2010). Fry and Slocum (2008), for their part, averred that spirituality could contribute to the triple bottom-line in organizations – people, planet, and profit.

Clearly, spirituality influences the decision making process of leaders. Scholarly investigations hitherto into the role of spirituality in leadership decision making have

yielded interesting findings (Fairholm, 1998; Nelson, 2004; Phipps, 2012). Specifically, spirituality has been found to influence greatly strategic decision making (Phipps, 2012) and ethical decision making (Vitell, 2010). Kohn (2008) posited that “decision making is tied to spirituality” whereas Fairholm (1997) claimed that spirituality “serves as the basis for decision making” (p.77). Fernando and Jackson (2006) in an empirical study found conclusively that spirituality facilitated decision making of leaders especially in difficult and demanding situations. Spiritual beliefs and values acted like a schema to filter and frame information in the decision making process (Phipps, 2012; Ramirez, 2009). Woods and Woods (2008) found that developing spiritual awareness and spiritual capacity enhanced democratic decision making processes. Spiritual practice of solitude, prayer, and intuition increased the capacity for decision making (Akrivou, Borantas, Mo & Papalois, 2011; Vasconcelos, 2009) while preparing leaders for inclusive forms of decision making (Jones, 2008).

Spirituality is a highly complex, elusive, mysterious, and “notoriously difficult term” to define (Wright, 2000). Karakas (2010) found over 70 definitions of spirituality in the extant literature. However, there is a striking convergence of the different components of spirituality espoused in various definitions. The significant components emphasized in the definition of spirituality by various scholars include: Search for meaning and purpose in life (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Collins & Kakabadse, 2006; Conger, 1994; Gibson, 2011; Hoppe, 2005; Karakas, 2010; Pawar, 2009; Phipps, 2012; Tisdell, 2003; Woods & Woods 2008; Wright, 2000; Zohar & Marshall, 2004), community and interconnectedness (Asmos & Duchon, 2000; Crumpton, 2011; Estanek, 2006; Marques, Diman, & King, 2005; Pawar, 2009), transcendence and connection with something greater than self (Collins & Kakabadse, 2006; Crumpton, 2011; Gibson, 2011; Karakas, 2010; Pawar, 2009; Phipps, 2012), feeling of connectedness to the creation and the entire universe (Crumpton, 2011; Gibson, 2011; Mitroff & Denton, 1999) and realization of one’s full potential, personal growth, authenticity, and genuineness (Hoppe, 2005; Maslow, 1970; Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Phipps, 2012; Tisdell, 2003). Whereas many scholars make a clear distinction between religion and spirituality (Geigle, 2012; King, 2007) others find that spirituality and religion were interrelated (Estanek, 2006; Hicks, 2003; Tisdell, 2003) and spiritual aspects existed at the heart of all religions (Minney, 1991). For many, religion is concerned with formalized practices, rituals, beliefs, and theological systems whereas spirituality is concerned with the qualities of the human spirit based in values of love, compassion, forgiveness, community, and sense of harmony with one’s environment (Snyder & Lopez, 2008). Thompson (2012) expressed thus: “A leader does not have to be religious

to have a spiritual foundation” (p. 116), whereas Dalai Lama (1999) wrote: “religion is something we can do perhaps without. What we cannot do without are basic spiritual qualities” (p. 22). This study did not specify any definition except that the participants believed themselves to be spiritual persons and their spirituality influences their leadership life and practice. Interestingly, none of the participants of the study viewed his or her spirituality severed from his or her religion. Nonetheless, many of them perceived spirituality going beyond their religious practices and dogmatic beliefs.

India is historically a deeply religious country having given birth to two major religions, namely Hinduism and Buddhism, and having welcomed other religions such as Christianity and Islam (Clothey, 2006; Sikora, 2002). Religiousness seems to permeate everything in India and is deeply embedded in its social, moral, and political life (Chattopadhyay, 2007; Kumar, 2012; Prabhakar, 2006). In India, schools are considered “temples” of learning and teachers are revered as “gurus” (a religious term for master). One is likely to find the image of the Goddess of knowledge and arts (Saraswati) in most of the state schools even today although religious instruction is not permitted in state schools (Indian Constitution Art. 28:1). Private schools have their religious affiliations (Hindu, Muslim, Christian) and religious education is guaranteed by the Constitution in such institutions (Indian Constitution Art. 28:2). Hence, generally, religiousness/spirituality is quite at home in Indian schools and so among Indian educational leaders. Till date no study on educational leadership related to spirituality has been made in the Indian context. Therefore it is worthwhile to explore this area.

Research on the influence of spirituality on educational leadership is on the increase (Houston, Blankstein & Cole, 2008; Malone & Fry, 2003; Ramirez, 2009; Rshaid, 2009; Thompson, 2004; Walker & McPhail, 2009; Wellman, Perkins, & Wellman, 2009; Wheatley, 2002; Woods, 2007) and their findings vouch for positive relationship between them. However, Gibson (2011) found that spirituality in the realm of educational leadership remained under-researched, and according to Woods (2007) there is a great need to give “attention in depth to the significance of spiritual experience in educational leadership” (p.135). Craft (2013) found the need to investigate decision making practices of various populations in different locations. Interestingly, scholars in developed countries are showing great interest in the study of this phenomenon. However, research in educational leadership and management in a developing country such as India lags behind (Hallinger & Chen, 2014). Consequently little is known about the leadership practices of educational leaders in India, much less

about the role of spirituality in their leadership exercise, particularly in the realm of decision making. Shakun (2013) observed that whereas western problem solving was based on science and systems, eastern problem solving was more open to spirituality in addition to science. Hence, this qualitative grounded theory study is an attempt to investigate decision making processes among educational leaders in India as informed by their spirituality. Hence the central question: How does spirituality influence the decision making process of educational leaders? The findings of this study would contribute to the growing field of spirituality in educational leadership and specifically to enhancing the effectiveness of sound decision making by educational leaders at large. Additionally, it is expected that this study will succeed in triggering fruitful discussions on the role of spirituality in educational leadership practices, identifying the sources that sustain spiritually-led leadership, and integrating spirituality into leadership and management training programs and on-going development interventions.

Research Method

Research design and Selection

Spirituality is intricately embedded in educational leaders' lived experience. Allowing them to articulate their experience freely lets the researcher explore and come close to understanding the phenomenon under consideration. A qualitative research approach is better suited towards this purpose. The intent of this qualitative research was to investigate the decision making exercise of select educational leaders in India, as informed by their spirituality, employing grounded theory design. This offers the possibility to capture the patterns, themes, and processes inherent in the complex, rich, and thick spectrum of data through rigorous analysis of coding, constant comparison, and inductive reasoning. Grounded theory design leads to the discovery of a theory from systematically obtained and analysed data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Patton (2002) opined that the credible sample size for a study would depend on what a researcher wanted to know and the purpose of enquiry, but more importantly cases that manifested the phenomenon intensely were of great value. Saturation of data is vital in the development of theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Riley (1996, as cited in Evans, 2013) is of the opinion that most studies achieve saturation with between 8 and 24 interviews, depending on the focus of the topic. For this study, 30 educational leaders were purposively selected and invited to participate in the research based on the following: (a) educational leaders from reputed educational institutions known for their academic and other achievements; (b) educational leaders who have

served in the capacity of an educational leader (Principal/Administrator of a College or a Higher Secondary School) for a minimum period of five years; and (c) educational leaders who are willing to cooperate in the research in terms of in-depth sharing of experiences related to leadership practices as influenced by their spirituality. Thirty spiritual educational leaders (20 male and 10 female) belonging to different religions (24 Christians, 4 Hindus, 2 Muslims) with an average age of 54.9 years and educational leadership experience of 12.6 years participated in the study.

Data Collection

After purposive identification of possible participants, a request letter was sent to the participants informing the nature and the purpose of the research and the extent of their involvement. Once consent was obtained a preliminary meeting was scheduled during which rapport was built establishing trust and relationship (Polkinghorne, 2005) and basic information was gathered to establish participants' profile, ending the meeting with an appointment for the main interview. Interview which is a "conversation with a purpose" (Berg, 2001, p. 66) and a "relationship" (Seidman, 2006) was the principal source of data for this study. The semi-structured in-depth interview which lasted generally from 50 to 60 minutes was conducted in English. The central question of the probe was: *How does spirituality influence your decision making?* Other probing questions included: *What do you initially do when you have to make a decision? How do you approach the process? What role does your spirituality play in the process? Do values come in to play and how? What purpose do you intend to achieve through your decisions? How are other members involved in the process?* The interview questions were open-ended and offered enough stimulation to reflect and capture details of the process while allowing undisturbed flow. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The audio-recorded interviews were carefully transcribed and analyzed. The themes that emerged were later taken back to the participants to confirm whether they reflected their sharing. Those who responded (21 of them) answered affirmatively. In some cases, depending on the need for clarification and further description, a short telephonic interview was carried out. The process of data collection lasted from January to April 2014.

Mode of Analysis

Field texts organized on a dendrogram were carefully read and reread, and the relationships were understood. Further analysis subjected the field data to the three-

step grounded theory process of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss, 1987). Open coding procedure yielded 176 codes while axial coding procedure led to the understanding of patterns and relationships between the codes and to meaningful categorization of themes (see figure 1). Further analytic procedure of constant comparison and selective coding led to the emergence of core categories (Evans, 2013) leading to the development of a theory. The codes, when grouped according to their similarities and relationships, gave rise to the emergence of four categories (ideas that seemed central) with substantial frequency viz., prayer/ contemplation – 19 references; consultation – 24 references; consensus building – 21 references; and crystallizing – 17 references. Validity and trustworthiness were ensured through participants’ corroboration via correspondence and member checking procedure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) while reflexivity was safeguarded through conscious phenomenological reduction (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007) to “maximize objectivity” but reasonably and responsibly assuming the freedom the methodology offers for developing substantive theory (Simmons, 2011).

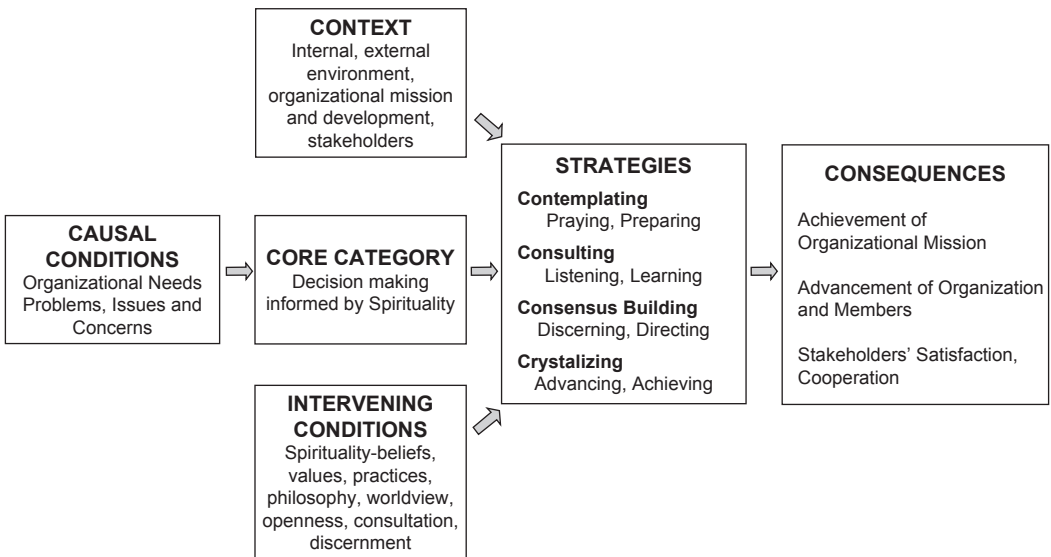


Figure 1: Axial Coding Paradigm of Spiritually-led decision making

Findings

Faced with the ubiquitous necessity to take decisions, spiritually-led educational leaders in this study embark on the process of decision making in a calm and focused manner. The thickness and richness of the field texts yielded in this study afforded the emergence of a *funnelling model of decision making* (see figure 2) employed by spiritually-led educational leaders, with four distinct and yet inter-related phases, namely, contemplating, consulting, consensus building, and crystallizing.

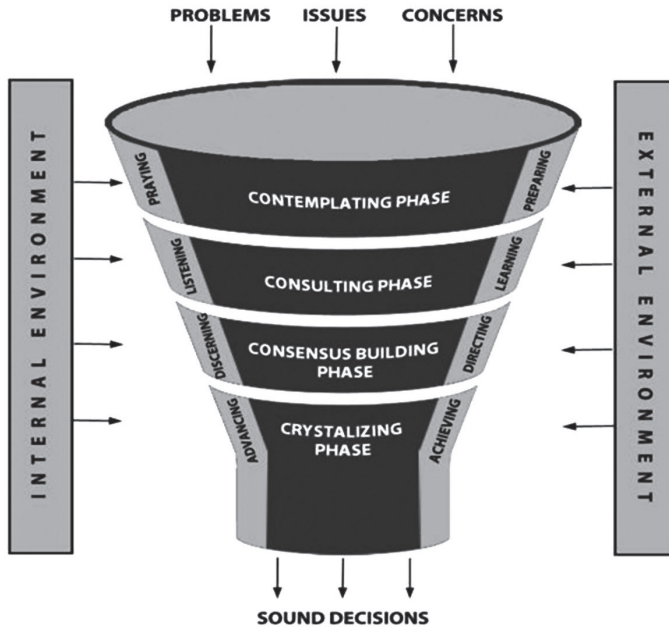


Figure 2 A funnelling model of spiritually-led decision making

Contemplating Phase: The art of connecting while opening up

The *Contemplating phase* commences when the spiritually-led educational leaders enter into personal reflection trying to comprehend the issue at hand holistically and engage in requisite personal preparation to arrive at a shared decision beneficial to all stakeholders. As one respondent articulated, “*First thing I do is to seek solitude to understand comprehensively the issue at hand. It is getting into a contemplative mood requesting God to enlighten and guide me*” (R14). Another mentioned, “*Going away from the noise and din into the quiet is helpful for me to start the process of decision making*” (R9).

Contemplation has a religious connotation referring to the relationship to the Divine in prayer and meditation. Spiritually-led educational leaders feel the significance and the certainty of God's help and guidance in the process of making the right decisions. Therefore they surrender themselves before God in prayer, for enlightenment. Praying is the primary activity they engage in while having to take decisions. They believe that they have been called to lead and have a worldview influenced by their spirituality which offers a prime space to the Divine/Ultimate. They trust in the providence of the Divine power to reveal them the right direction as one participant expressed, *"I believe it is God who has brought me here, when he has called me he will take me through. This is my strong conviction"* (R8). Connecting with God in the midst of concerns and issues which call for decisions is the primary activity of spiritually-led educational leaders.

Notably, the respondents in this study do not shirk their responsibility. Instead they beseech God for the grace to exercise their responsibility dutifully in the process of making proper decisions. As verbalized:

*Before every interview, every appointment, every decision I spend time with the Lord....
Lord, it is an important decision I am making for the institution.'* (R8)

I believe whatever God wants to do, nobody can stop it. So I always pray to be able to do what God wants. (R23)

While praying for God's guidance they simultaneously prepare themselves positively for the ensuing process. Driven by their spirituality, their firm values and value system guide their actions. They recall their past experiences and the wisdom they have gained to stand by to assist in the process of decision making. As spiritual people they have reached a certain level of maturity which pervades their cognition, psychology, and social relations. This maturity is characterized by the "openness" that has become part of their life. The sub phase of "preparing" is a conscious personal preparation which enhances their ability to become genuinely open to the process, removing any possible bias, prejudice, close-mindedness, and any tendency to misuse power or authority as one participant boldly expressed, *"My spirituality helps me grow in this openness"* (R10), while another said, *"As a leader I don't impose or misuse my power and authority"* (R13).

This phase also leads educational leaders toward total involvement, commitment, and dedication. As one educational leader shared, *"This is one of my traits of spirituality, total involvement and responsibility. I put my heart and soul in any situation, in what I do... that needs decision making"* (R26). This phase also reminds them of the need to reflect virtues that flow from their spirituality. Another participant observed:

I also see in my spirituality as God loving people, God trying to understand people. What I see in my spirituality is, if God were to react to our wickedness we will be nowhere. God responds to our wickedness in terms of kindness and compassion, mercy and forgiveness. I would like to reflect that in my dealings including decision making.
(R16)

Consulting Phase: The art of maximizing while growing

While exploring the role of spirituality in the important process of decision making, the aspect of openness (open-mindedness) emerged as an overwhelming theme, which most of the participants attributed to their spirituality. *Consulting phase* in the funnelling model of spiritually-led decision making begins with the gathering of maximum pertinent information through individual consultation and thinking through before entering the next stage of decision making. The respondents' high degree of openness enables them to accept and appreciate differences of opinions and ideologies.

It is of immense importance for the spiritually-led educational leaders to include all the stakeholders and make the decision making process participatory. Hence they make serious efforts and time to listen to all who have a stake in the decision. *Listening* is an indispensable phase in the decision making process of a spiritually-led educational leader. This is done not just for the sake of carrying out a formality, instead, with a desire to know every opinion with great care and sensitivity. Therefore, it is active listening that is involved in the process. Listening is the ability that has the ears to the ground comprehending what is said with words and without words. This phase offers an opportunity to everyone relevant to the decision making process to voice his/her opinion and this makes the process shared and participatory. In the very words of some spiritually-led educational leaders:

Before taking decisions I consult and listen to people and solicit cooperation. (R25)

For me decision making is participatory, and not authoritarian. Being impartial I would attribute to my spirituality. Everything comes from spirituality... that radiates in my leadership behaviour. (R6)

Spiritually-led leaders are also humble to learn from people who have the experience and expertise in related matters. They seek advice and guidance from experts. Learning in the process is part and parcel of the consulting phase in the process of decision making. *Learning* is characterized by the virtues of humility and the willingness to augment knowledge about issues needing deliberations and decisions. As one participant shared,

I ask the help of umpteen number of people who are capable of looking at things from different perspectives, positively or negatively. I always consult people and arrive at decisions. This is where my spirituality comes into play, making me humble, open to consulting and listening to people. When you are spiritual you don't play a boss or all powerful. I am here for others, is the core of my spirituality. (R22)

Thus they gather maximum information pertinent to the issue at hand. Interestingly, spiritually-led educational leaders have the willingness to learn and the humility to listen. *“In the institution I don't make any decision on my own. We have different committees, commissions, and departments. There is a lot of discussion. I never dictate terms” (R29).*

Consensus Building Phase: The art of collaborating while valuing

Having listened to all stakeholders and having gathered maximum information from experts in the field, spiritually-led educational leaders get into the next phase of *consensus building*. The interests of various people and all the available information do not converge neatly into one direction making decision making an easy work. They point to conflicting interests and diverse possibilities. Looking for a harmonious, acceptable, and beneficial decision is integral to consensus building. Spiritually-led educational leaders in the course of their administrative life have gained the valuable experience and skills to steer the consensus building process tactfully. Their good will, openness, and clarity of purpose help facilitate the consensus building phase successfully.

During the *Consensus building* phase all the cards are played open on the table. All possible options and decisions are identified and in the light of their pros and cons, consensual decisions are arrived, consistent with vision of the organisation and the overall welfare of the stakeholders. As expressed:

Actually, I personally believe in values and principles. Before taking decisions I consult and listen to people... solicit cooperation, try to build consensus by all stakeholders. (R25)

In decision making, values are significant. I hold discussions, consultations, gather maximum information. No hurried decisions, but timely, well-reflected, involving everyone concerned. Discernment is vital in the process. (R9)

Two sub phases emerged during consensus building phase, which include *Discerning and Directing*. On the one hand, *discerning* involves clear and intelligent recognition of

the various issues and concerns focusing into the best possible decision. Co-operation and collaboration become the hallmarks of the discerning process. In the words of one of the educational leaders:

In decision making, the process of discernment is very important. The spiritual exercise of Ignatius of Loyola [founder of the Society of Jesus] is very helpful... nothing in a hurry, we also learn from our experience. Decision making itself is a spiritual process... inclusive, consensual. A process of discernment is considering everyone's view... the lasting joy, the lasting peace... you are confident when you arrive at it and the consequences that follow because of such decisions are the positive vibrations as a result of decisions. (R3)

The process of discernment is guided by deeply-held personal and organisational values. Thus such process is value-driven encompassing the practice of compassion and fairness among others. Directing, on the other hand, as the steering component of the discernment process, operates within the framework of organisational vision and policies.

I cannot dictate terms as per records or rules and regulations. It should be combined with moral values, humanitarian values, and compassion. Think of all possibilities, options for arriving at a decision which is acceptable for all. (R2)

As a leader I don't impose or misuse my power and authority. Humaneness tempers the exercise of power. I always have a lenient heart to the student community. Following strictly the possibilities of power does not help. (R13)

Crystallizing Phase: The art of enabling while yielding

The *crystallizing phase* is marked by the outcome of a win-win decision. The effort of the entire process of contemplation, consultation, and consensus building resulting in a good decision is characterized by *advancing* and *achieving*. The former involves facilitating the growth and development of the institution, consistent with the changing environment. Good decisions have the potential to power organisational growth. As expressed:

The one secret for the growth of this institution in all these 63 years is that in every decision the spiritual values are being taken care of in this institution. Growth is seen today in the number of students and the reputation. (R18)

The latter involves ensuring increased academic performance of students, the commitment of the staff, and goodwill of the parents. The reputation of the institution

expands and services offered become manifold. As one participant joyfully expressed, *“You are confident when you arrive at it and the consequences that follow because such decisions are the positive vibrations as a result of decisions”* (R3). Good decisions contribute to the realization of the organisational mission, goals, and objectives while fostering an enhancing and empowering environment in the organisation. Some other educational leaders shared:

Finally decisions which are impartial and morally correct are arrived at. People are satisfied. (R1)

For me that is spirituality. People oriented and value guided decisions aimed at making them better from what they are. (R4)

Summarily, in all these phases, as intensely enumerated by the respondent educational leaders, their spirituality plays a distinctive and constructive role in shaping and guiding the process of decision making.

Discussion

Undoubtedly, the success and the future of an organisation are determined by its leaders (Collins, 2001; Covey, 1992; Dantley, 2003; Fairholm, 1998; Nica, 2013; Scott, Bell, Coates, & Grebennikov, 2010; Thompson, 2012) whose decision making ability is deemed pivotal (Kohn, 2008; Delbecq et al., 2003). It should be noted, however, that leaders follow different decision making styles, techniques, and models (Baraldi, 2013; Faraci, Lock, & Wheeler, 2013; Jabeen & Akhtar, 2013; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012). The purpose of this research was to develop a model of decision making among a select group of spiritually-led educational leaders in India. This study generated the *funneling model of spiritually-led decision making* encompassing four phases namely, contemplating, consulting, consensus building, and crystallizing. Nevertheless, it is good to bear in mind that the participants were mostly Christians (80%) and male (66%) with an average age of 54.9 years and experience of 12.6 years as educational leaders and hence, the findings were typical for this group. The findings were based on their personal accounts and were not verified on the ground as this was beyond the scope of this research.

In this study, contemplation, a unique spiritual practice involving prayer, silence, and meditation, forms the platform for the decision making process of spiritually-led educational leaders. Contemplation offers them clarity of the issues and the procedures to be followed. This finding is corroborated by some previous studies. Ambiences of prayer believing in the benevolence of a higher power for decision making (Walker &

McPhail, 2009) and the conviction that such “spiritual experience enables the leader to be better resourced internally” (Woods, 2007, p. 135) are indispensable experiences of spiritually-led educational leaders. Fernando and Jackson (2006) found that spiritually motivated leaders often and most specially when having to take complex decisions resorted to prayer which facilitated the relevant disposition leading to the arrival of sound decisions.

Spiritually-led educational leaders in the study consciously endeavour to experience transcendence which liberates them from being self-obsessed and self-centred and empowers them for altruistic service which is repeatedly affirmed by them as their calling. Fry (2003) found the sense of calling as a crucial element in spiritual leadership. Spiritual leaders are conscious of the divine being present in their daily life (Lecourt & Pauchant, 2011) and use spiritual means in the decision making process (Jones, 2010). Contemplative practices of prayer and meditation act as a support system (Toler, 2006) while helping them listen to an inner voice, granting guidance and direction (Burgess, 2012; Ramirez, 2009). According to Woods and Woods (2008), in spiritually-led organisational cultures, incorporating spiritual awareness and its influence in the decision making process is immensely valued and emphasized.

Personal preparation along with prayer enables spiritually-led educational leaders to develop the attitude of openness for differences, as found in this study, resonates with some previous studies. Decision making, in addition to being a rational process, needs also to take care of interpersonal and social issues involved, never losing sight of the larger and ultimate goal (Fernando & Jackson, 2006; San Juan, 2012). Spiritually-led educational leaders are aware of the need to identify and reduce biases before embarking on the process of decision making and adopting the right mental disposition (Kahneman, Lovallo & Sibony, 2011). Personal preparation, resulting from deep reflection which is a “tool to effective self-management” (de Guzman & Hapan, 2013) includes the willingness to offer valid space for various viewpoints, for healthy and quality deliberations and debates. Spiritual leaders, as also found in the study, often retreat to engage in self-assessment and self-reflection especially when confronted with challenging circumstances (Lecourt & Pauchant, 2011; Ramirez, 2009; Thompson, 2012), and prefer contemplation-led processes for problem solving than confrontation (Thompson, 2012). As explained by the participants in the study, praying and preparing are proven practices providing a favourable foundation for the leadership exercise of decision making. However, it should be admitted that no leader downplayed the need for logical, analytical approaches and creative skills in the process of decision making. Prayer does not substitute those requirements.

The study revealed that spiritually-led educational leaders abhor authoritarian or autocratic styles of functioning; instead, encourage participation and engagement. Openness manifested in their desire to listen and learn characterizes their approach to decision-making. This is akin to the findings of Woods and Woods (2008) that promotion of democratic values of sharing and participation are greatly valued and practiced by spiritual leaders. They create an open system for involvement and inclusiveness (Toler, 2006; Walker & McPhail, 2009) a culture where people feel free and willing to contribute (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011; Lecourt & Pauchant, 2011). They appreciate, encourage, and value the beliefs, thoughts, and the contributions of their colleagues and stakeholders (Reave, 2005; Thompson, 2012). Spiritually-led educational leaders of this study value active listening and interpersonal communication skills. They understand that responsive listening (Reave, 2005) is an asset (Thompson, 2012) and key to effective communication (Whitaker, Whitaker, & Lumpa, 2000).

It is interesting to note that spiritually-led educational leaders of this study do not consider themselves the repository of all knowledge. They are willing and looking for opportunities to learn. Various other studies support this finding. Spiritual leaders engage in research and are open to new ideas (Thompson, 2012). Leaders actively look for exhaustive information and credible alternatives that will enhance the possibility of the emergence of effective decisions (Kahneman, Lovallo, & Sibony, 2011), seek new ideas from various quarters (Delbecq et al., 2003) and “go to school” of the experience of other leaders (Toler, 2006). According to Blackaby and Blackaby (2011), “A major aspect of a leader’s decision making is maintaining a teachable spirit” (p. 226). In their effort to learn all the relevant matters they also build critical relationships, partnerships, and networks (Thompson, 2012) which can contribute significantly to the decision making endeavour. The outstanding feature of the spiritual leader in this process is his humility to learn. This runs parallel with Collins (2001) who found humility being the hallmark of the highest level leader. Acts of humility make them more trustworthy for their followers and create an affable climate for credible relationships as evidenced in the study.

Consensus building as found in the study forms the crucial phase of deliberation marked by cooperation and at times confrontation, nevertheless fundamentally guided by collective discernment, synergy, transparency, and organisational values and vision. Discernment as a decision making tool has been studied by others whose findings resonate with this. Lecourt and Pauchant (2011) found that “Spiritual discernment allows for pondering the arguments of the decision, as well as providing a choice

means and a study of each possible option” (p. 20). As expressed by Delbecq et al. (2003) discernment is a “spiritual habit” that removes any form of fear or favour, anxiety or opportunism in the process of decision making and lets God guide the leaders. The phase of discernment offers an opportunity to leaders and those involved to commit to important shared values such as freedom, generosity, and selflessness, among others (Nicholas, 2013). The discernment as a collaborative and democratic process in the decision making paves the way for greater understanding of the decision (Ensley, Pearson, & Pearce, 2003); ownership, belongingness, and commitment to the decision by members (de Guzman & Hapan, 2013; Faraci, Lock, & Wheeler, 2013; Nicholas, 2013) and subsequently successful implementation. This practice also serves as an empowering process while enhancing the commitment of the members to organisational mission for “people support what they help create” (Wooten & White, 1999 as cited in Anderson, 2012). However, many of the respondents admitted the challenges of the time consuming and tedious nature of elaborate consultation and discernment process.

In the study, deeply held personal and organisational values direct the process of discernment. This resonates with the findings of some earlier studies. The discernment and decision making process is steered by values of compassion and fairness, among others (Storey & Beeman, 2009). Compassion is an integral part that impacts the decision making process (Dutton et al., 2006; Jones, 2010) of spiritual leaders. Integrating ethics into the decision making endeavour becomes the normal way spiritually motivated leaders act (Thompson, 2012; Vittel, 2009; Woods, 2007) and “key competency for effective educational leadership” (Catacutan & de Guzman, 2015). Generally, the respondents look for not only correct decisions (compliant with norms and policies) but correct decisions which are also good and uplifting (moral and ethical). Integrating values and ethics give organisational decisions a “human face” and thus attract appreciation and ownership as articulated by them.

Respondent spiritually-led educational leaders of the study “begin with the end in mind” (Covey, 1989) which is to advance the growth of the organisation and achieve the good of the stakeholders. Hence, they encourage the implementation of the decisions. Thompson (2012) expressed that the objective of the spiritual leadership style is to make the school better. An overwhelming message that emerged in the study was that the spiritually-led educational leaders are committed to promoting the welfare of the members. They consider their leadership to be a service to the organisation, the stakeholders, and ultimately, to the society. This runs parallel to

Thompson's (2012) finding that some school leaders may call spiritual leadership a new form of servant leadership. The benefit of the students is the driving force for spiritual leaders (Ramirez, 2009). Various researches including this have found that spirituality certainly influences decision making processes and the decisions (for example, Delbecq et al., 2003; Fernando and Jackson, 2006; Fleming, 2005; Kohn, 2008; Lecourt & Pauchant, 2011, Ramirez, 2009; Thompson, 2012). The striking feature is, such decisions prove to be beneficial to organisations and their members as Malloch (2008) asserted that spiritually based decisions change organisations for better just as they change human lives.

Conclusion

The overall intent of this qualitative study was to develop a model that describes the decision making process of a select group of spiritually-led educational leaders in India. Capitalizing on the power of grounded theory design, this study afforded the development of a funnelling model of decision making by spiritually-led educational leaders with four distinctive yet inter-related phases, each having two sub phases: contemplating phase – praying and preparing; consulting phase – listening and learning; consensus building phase – discerning and directing; and crystallizing phase – advancing and achieving. The contemplating phase is characterized by deep prayer, meditation, personal reflection, and preparation as a means of embarking on the decision making journey. During the consulting phase the spiritually-led educational leaders listen actively to various viewpoints and learn humbly pertinent matters from all possible quarters. Proceeding further to consensus building phase, they engage all stakeholders in collective and synergistic discernment of the best decision directed by deeply held values. Finally, the crystallizing phase is marked by the ownership and implementation of the decisions to induce growth of the organisation and good of all stakeholders.

This study complements the existing literature on the role of spirituality in leadership effectiveness especially relative to the construct of decision making. Findings of this study, in this region and population which is known to place high premium on spirituality, corroborate the positive effects of spirituality on leadership practice found in other regions of the world. This calls for granting due importance to spirituality in organisational leadership, membership, and culture. The theoretical model grounded in the data from this study can help educational leaders to reflect on their current decision making practices and emulate its positive elements such as: looking at the organisation as interconnected to a larger reality, personal reflective practice, active

listening, maintaining a “teachable” spirit, democratic and collective discerning in the decision making process, and integrating spirituality into leadership training programs and on-going development interventions.

However, it should be noted that the skewed state of participation (the majority belonging to a single religious background, and two-third belonging to one gender) may have contributed to the homogeneity of the views expressed, leading to the absence of heterogeneity of views, and possible gaps or silences in the data. This is a limitation of the study. Further research among other religious groups and among spiritual educational leaders who have no affiliation to any institutionalized religion will be worthwhile and can shed further light. Studies with greater gender parity and regional representation are also required. It would also be worthwhile to supplement or compare the introspective analysis of the leadership styles by the leaders with their leadership style as perceived by their staff and students. The present study, with its limitations, hopes to offer educational leaders at large some new insights to improve their leadership effectiveness, especially their decision making practices.

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