

# Spirituality as a resource to reduce social service skill shortages

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***For many years, professionalism in social service delivery meant being caring but not immersed, empathic but not emotional, and rational not religious. Increasingly academic research is showing the importance of spiritual leadership, mindfulness and personal belief in sustaining social service workers and quality of care.***

Recently, the Australian Parliamentary Library reported that shortages of appropriately skilled workers in social services and healthcare had [reached levels of crisis](#).

The report's authors assessed that strategies to address this by employing more workers will either reduce quality standards or increase costs, if not both. Meanwhile, the challenges associated with attracting appropriately tertiary trained and skilled professionals, not only in adequate numbers but who can translate their studies into complex contexts, has been [identified for almost a decade](#).

Both these strategies rely on the retention of existing workers within the sector. However, this cannot always be assumed, particularly when workers are exposed to poverty, tragedy, conflict, and trauma on a daily basis. Often workforce churn in [child welfare](#), [mental health](#) and other parts of this sector can be high.

This results in a number of challenges for providers, such as inconsistency of service quality, difficulty developing service maturity and high training costs. It also comes at a significant cost to individual workers through [compassion fatigue](#), [work stress](#) and [burnout](#).

## *A focus on resilience*

Historically, the disciplines of psychology, social work and sociology have focussed on the importance of professional boundaries, worker resilience, and work-life balance as ways to support the [human service professions](#). Prominent [handbooks](#) also identify the importance of team support, professional debriefing, mentorship and professional development for resilience in the workplace.

The limitation of all of these approaches is that they focus on the negative. They try to control threat and hold off stress. However, academic research increasingly recognises the importance of [thriving and not just surviving](#) in social service professions.

### *Exploring the personal domain*

My previous work with colleagues at the University of South Australia explored the role of the [personal domain](#) in sustaining these professionals. Based on interviews with experienced social work, education, health and emergency service practitioners (all of whom worked with high needs communities), we found what those at the coalface already know – these people bring a lot more to their work than what is listed on their job description.

Our interviews found a range of factors that contributed to these professionals thriving in tough contexts. These factors included:

- Willingness to embrace challenges;
- Confidence in their own and professional identity;
- Knowing they were making a difference; and
- Believing in something bigger than the role.

As we explored these findings further, we struggled to find conceptual and practical resources to unpack the last two of these points.

This led to a second paper, which explored the metaphor of the [lifeworld](#). This was defined as the individually created and collectively shared, but hard to put into words, realm of lived experience. It included big ideas (such as class values and religious beliefs) and significant relationships (such as role models and family connections). We argued that this lifeworld idea could be useful because it provided new insights into what resources different human service professionals used to thrive in demanding work contexts.

### *Encountering spiritual leadership*

Earlier this year, a team at the Texas A&M University published a paper on the role of [spiritual leadership](#) in reducing worker burnout. Although focusing on healthcare, in some ways it extended our earlier work with social services into how the personal supports the professional. This study defined 'spiritual' in the broad sense of 'the deepest dimension of human experience that drives the need for self-transcendence and the feeling of interconnectedness that can reside or manifest in groups and organisations'. It is not religion, while it may take the form of religious beliefs. In this sense, it is close to concepts such as faith, [mindfulness](#) and [critical spirituality](#).

The study assesses the extent that spiritual leadership can create vision and value congruence across individuals, can empower teams, and foster higher levels of employee well-being, work commitment, and workplace productivity. Its analysis reveals that spiritual leadership exhibited both direct and mediating effects on all of these outcomes.

In short, the role of the personal or spiritual domain can be high in retaining and sustaining high performing human service workers. It should not be just a matter for the individual - it should also be of interest to leaders at every level of a service provider.

### *Spiritual leadership and the social service workforce*

For many leaders of faith-based social service organisations, the insights from the above research will be no revelation – it is already a part of your daily contribution.

In recruitment we look for workers with that additional intangible quality (sometimes described as emotional intelligence or sharing an ethos). In our daily interaction with staff, we seek to embody

empathy and calm. With our leadership teams, we seek to instil a vision and sense of greater purpose.

But, when faced with the constant challenge of trying to make financial ends meet, when it feels like you are moving from one crisis to the next, and when it is hard to find time for yourself (let alone your team), these things can fall down the list of priorities.

That said, it is encouraging to see research evidence that a more mindful and spiritual approach can not only result not only in organisational benefits (through staff retention, quality of care and maturity of service models), but also in sustaining and empowering our workforce.

This research also prompts us to reflect on bigger questions. Is the growing focus on professionalism a threat to what actually enables people to thrive in care work? Are risk management and clinical emphases taking the humanity out of human services? And what may the role of mindful and spiritual leadership be in response?

Clearly, for leaders working in organisations that hold to a bigger vision around making a difference in people's lives, there is scope to learn from and build on these recent research findings.

In the case of the Catholic social services family, it reminds us anew to think about how a shared set of values, faith and social teaching can provide a strong foundation for further growth in spiritual leadership as we deliver vital services in our communities.

*CSSA supports its membership around Catholic belief and social teaching. Father Frank Brennan regularly provides mentorship for leaders and sessions for staff in this area. Interested member organisations can contact [Kate.Harkins@cssa.org.au](mailto:Kate.Harkins@cssa.org.au) for more information.*