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Reflections on Zero and Zero Centered Spirituality in Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to invite managers and practitioners to reflect on the meaning and implications of the concept of zero for individual and organizational spiritual growth.

Design/methodology/approach – Building on spirituality and complexity literatures, this paper stimulates non-traditional thinking in organizational change and leadership. The paper uses the concept of zero as a creative metaphor for organizational development.

Findings – The paper introduces a systemic, unified, multidimensional, holistic, complex, chaotic and dynamic paradigm for organizations based on spirituality: Paradigm Zero. Zero represents paradox, transcendence, interconnectedness, balance, modesty, creativity, inspiration, and the essence and mystery of human existence.

Practical implications – This paper invites managers to consider a futurist perspective called zero centered thinking that enables creativity and reflection in the middle of complexity.

Originality/value – This paper builds on cutting edge spirituality and complexity concepts to enable new thinking for 21st century managers and professionals. Zero philosophy provides organizations a new trans-disciplinary paradigm based on spirituality, complexity, chaos, systems sciences, quantum physics, emergence, and Sufism.

Keywords: Zero, holistic, spirituality, philosophy, creativity, transcendence, wisdom, organizations

Paper type: Viewpoint

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Reflections on Zero

In the history of culture the discovery of zero will always stand out as one of the greatest achievements of the human race.

Tobias Danzig

Spirituality has been described as a holistic, multidimensional humanistic phenomenon that transcends the physical, social, emotional and psychological being. Neal (1997) suggests that the Latin origin of the word spirit is spirare, meaning "to breathe." At its most basic, then, spirit is what inhabits us when we are alive and breathing; it is the life force. Sperry (1994) defines spirit as "that which is traditionally believed to be the vital principle or animating force within living beings; that which constitutes one's unseen intangible being; the real sense or significance of something".

Mitroff and Denton's (1999) study derived the following elements of spirituality: being informal and unstructured; being broadly inclusive, embracing everyone; being universal and timeless; being the source and provider of meaning and purpose in life; the awe felt in the presence of the transcendent; the sacredness of everything; the deep feeling of the interconnectedness of everything; inner peace and calm; an inexhaustible source of faith and will power.

I define spirituality as the journey to find a sustainable, authentic, meaningful, holistic and profound understanding of the existential self and its relationship/interconnectedness with the sacred and the transcendent. This definition emphasizes a) authenticity, b) search for meaning, c) interconnectedness and d) transcendence as the expressions of the “best” of the human condition and “positive deviance” as advocated by positive organizational scholars (Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn, 2003).

This paper is built on the assumption that thinking outside the box of materialism and scientism enables a more liberated, innovative, integrative, systems view of spirituality in organizations. I argue that theoretical models and explanations on spirituality need to be more holistic, complexity based, quantum based, multidimensional, intuitive, integral, and systemic. New models on spirituality should combine rational and "trans-rational" logic and provide new ways to model the non-linear, complex behavior of dynamic systems (Gleick, 1987).

In this reflection paper, I propose the concept of zero as a viable analogy for conceptualizing and symbolizing the spiritual aspects of the human being. Zero is a mystery. Zero is a very thought provoking and powerful analogy. Zero is philosophically deep, meaningful, and paradoxical. Zero symbolizes modesty and humility in Eastern spiritualities. Zero denotes being elevated, purified, awkward, weak, clean, and clear, like a baby. Zero represents the transcendent aspect of human existence. Zero embodies a deep relationship with the infinity. Zero denotes a peak spiritual experience based on interconnectedness: “Yes, oh my God, you exist and you are the only One. I am your servant, you are my Lord. I am your lover, you are my beloved one. I am zero, you are the infinity. I am a droplet, you are the ocean.”

History and Philosophy of a Number

Zero is the mathematically defined numerical function of nothingness. It is used not for an evasion but for an apprehension of reality. Zero is by far the most interesting number among all the others: It is a symbol for what is not there. It is an emptiness that increases any number it's added to. Zero is an inexhaustible and indispensable paradox. Zero is the only number which can be divided by every other number. Zero is also only number which can divide no other number. It seems zero is also the most debated number in mathematics. We know that mathematicians are involved in heated philosophical and logical discussions around the issues of zero: Can we divide a number by zero? Is the result of this division infinity or not? Is zero a positive or a negative number? Is it even or is it odd?

The notation of zero in the decimal system is just a directional separator as in the case of a thermometer. Actually, zero is even “not there”. For example, in order to express 109, a symbol is needed to show that there are no tens. The digit 0 serves this purpose. Zero is placed at the end of the keypad on the computer and at the bottom of the keypad on the telephone. Is zero the beginning or the end? There will always be questions about the true meaning and function of zero. Is it the end or the beginning? What does ground zero mean? Why is it different from the other numbers?

The notion of zero was introduced to Europe in the Middle Ages by Leonardo Fibonacci who translated from Arabic the work of the Persian scholar Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn (al)-Khwarizmi. Khwarizmi in turn documented (in Arabic, in the 7th century) the original work of

the Hindu mathematician Ma-hávíral as a superior mathematical construction compared with the then prevalent Roman numerals which do not contain the concept of zero.

It is surprising to read that early in history, zero was feared, misunderstood and rejected by the West. A product of the Eastern civilizations, zero was in opposition with the Western philosophy of that time and therefore seen as dangerous and was rejected. The Greeks tried to keep zero out of the picture for as long as they could. In fact the Greeks saw zero as dangerous. Because for them it was linked with the void and nothingness and it disrupted their beliefs.

Zero and infinity were present during the Italian Renaissance in art with perspective and the vanishing point. Here the vanishing point is a connection to zero and infinity. The point is an infinitesimal dot on the artwork that represents a spot infinitely far from the viewer and this zero of the art contains infinity of space. Zero and infinity are linked to the vanishing point - just as multiplying by zero causes the number line to collapse- the vanishing point causes some of the universe to be on the dot of the vanishing point.

The introduction of zero into the decimal system in 13th century was the most significant achievement in the development of a number system, in which calculation with large numbers became feasible. Without the notion of zero, the descriptive and prescriptive modeling processes as well as modern advancements and breakthroughs in commerce, astronomy, information systems, physics, technology, chemistry, business, and industry would have been unthinkable. The lack of such a symbol was also the serious drawback in the Roman numeral system.

Psychological Perspective

Zero as a concept, was derived, perhaps from the concept of a void. We know that the concept of void existed in Hindu philosophy and the Buddhist concept of Nirvana, that is: attaining salvation by merging into the void of eternity.

The word zero comes from the Arabic "al-sifer". Zero was used by Muslim scientists and societies throughout the Middle Ages. Muslim mathematicians were using a heavy dot to mark zero's place in calculations. This symbol of 'dot' denotes being small, weak and needy in Islamic philosophical literature. Interestingly, the concept of "fana" in Sufism also has the same meaning.

Zero is the only digit, which cannot stand-alone. It is a lonely number, lonelier than one. It requires some sort of companionship to give meaning to its life. It can go on the left, on the right, or both ways. Or in the middle as part of a bigger number. E.g. "01", "10", "105", or "1010". A relationship with other numbers gives it meaning (i.e. it is a dependent number). By itself zero is nothing! Therefore, the concept of zero underlies the importance of team work and interdependence in organizations.

In his book, " Zero, the Biography of a Dangerous Idea" , the author Charles Sief claims "zero is so powerful because it unhinges the laws of physics...not only does zero hold the secret to our existence, it will also be responsible for the end of the universe." Again, zero shows up

now called the zero point energy- a zero in quantum mechanics means the entire universe and the vacuum, is filled with an infinite amount of energy.

Analogy Between Zero and Human-Being

In Sufi thought and practice, number zero symbolizes egolessness and transcendence. Zero is a mystery and a paradox for mathematicians and philosophers alike. To be an atom, the point of the needle, is nothing; therefore, it is everything. Zero is everything, when it is joined with the One. One without zero is still One; Zero without One is nothing.

A human being can be thought in the light of the analogy of “zero”. We seem to have an immediate inherent feeling of dissatisfaction and antipathy towards the concept of zero. Why does this stem from? Today zero has a meaning not just of a number, but as the bottom, or failure. He made no baskets, or, he made zero baskets - meaning he failed to score. Or he gave zero assistance. "We zeroed in on the cause," means we had isolated all the possibilities, and have discovered the one remaining. "The result was a big, fat, zero," uses the noun to express the idea of results of "nothing". For example, a child less than a year old is usually said to be so many weeks or months old, rather than "zero years old." The resistance against zero can be noted even at the architectural level in buildings where the ground level is rarely denoted as the zeroth-level as it should be. It is also noted that the feeling of comfort with zero in Western countries is still lower than Eastern countries. One psychological explanation for this resistance may be as follows: Human beings generally want to perceive themselves as powerful, rich, knowledgeable, independent, able, effective etc. They also want to be immortal.

Today, there is a still huge research and development industry devoted to discovering a possible solution to the “problem” of death. Death is a mystery much like zero. Thus, there is an inherent resistance to accept that one is zero.

Becoming a Zero

One of the most difficult tasks for me was to think of myself as being a zero. This requires that I should admit I am not powerful, not free, not rich, not knowledgeable etc. I need to deal and struggle with my ego to reduce my feelings of self-inflation, greed and arrogance. This war within me is the most challenging one in my life, much harder than the most difficult worldly achievements. Reflecting on myself, I observe that there is a continuous psychological war inside me between ‘the good’ and ‘the evil’. This war is by far the most difficult and stressing aspect in my life. If my conscience is hurt, I will suffer hugely from this regardless of my conditions in this world. If I do not control myself strictly, I may find myself doing something I do not ever want to do. This is completely related to my spirituality. This internal struggle within the human being may be something universal, regardless of specific religions.

Explaining the Analogy

- Zero is a number between the positive and the negative numbers. A human also has the potential to go to infinity both on the positive side and on the negative side.
- Zero is all at the center in the universe of the numbers. Human beings are also at the center of the universe.

- Zero cannot stand alone. It has no meaning and value by itself. It needs other numbers to add value. Similarly, a person needs other people to add value and needs to belong to the society.
- Zero is the most mysterious number with all its properties. Human being is also the most mysterious creature in the universe.

Zero in Sufism

Sufism can be defined as a lifelong Islamic discipline which builds up the character and inner life of people by purifying the heart spiritually and investing it with virtues. It is also known as the mystical and universal philosophy of Islam. Sufi paths of transformation have been used as tools for enhancing self-awareness and self-growth for centuries in the Islamic world (Uzunoglu, 1999). Several religious orders and ancient esoteric teachings in Anatolia, especially the *Naksibendi tariqa*, are known to have deployed “zero” for spiritual insight and development since the 15th century. The concept of zero in Sufism illustrates the enigma of human consciousness and the mysteries of human heart. Zero illuminates the nature of the multidimensional holographic universe.

In Sufism, zero is realizing the power of powerlessness.

Being a zero is called *fana'* (annihilation) in Sufism. Zero represents self-sacrifice, devotion and idealism in Sufi thought and practice. Zero is being a piece of soil for roses to flourish. Zero is the value of enabling others to live well instead of living well. Zero represents the power of overcoming the ego. Zero is transcendence. Paradoxically, an individual gains value

and meaning by becoming a zero. This brings humility and humbleness instead of pride and self-confidence. The person acts like a judge towards own self while acting as an advocate towards others.

Zero is a dot in Arabic. Zero is the central point in Sufism. The center point represents zero for the Sufi, the one who has lost all ego-centricity, the person who is able to hold wisdom, temperance and courage in moderation becoming a fair person. For the Sufi; the zero point is the point at which the self is now ready to leave the world of reason behind - being morally healed, being balanced - and enter the world of intuition. Zero represents the center and the balance. Zero represents the ultimate egoless, selfless, fair and just human existence.

Implications for leaders and organizations

a) The concept of zero can provide new ways of integrative thinking and reflection for leaders.

We are experiencing global uncertainty, chaos, change, speed, and complexity. We live in an era of corporate scandals, technological shifts, globalization, hyper-competition, ecological vulnerability, global warming, and post-modern terror. Today's organizations are faced with more complexities, competition, and change than at any other time in history. Our world is becoming more knowledge intensive, fast-paced, diverse, chaotic, interconnected, and multicultural. In such a world, we need new ways of thinking, reflection, and leadership in organizations. For example, integrative thinking is at the forefront of business success as never before. This can be seen in organizational change initiatives, organizational memoranda,

and even in MBA designs; such as the case of Toronto Rotman School of Management (<http://www.rotman.utoronto.ca/integrativethinking>).

Successful business leaders build their integrative thinking and reflection skills to achieve holistic success. They develop and utilize messy models to understand and act in an increasingly turbulent world. They think beyond the boundaries of a single discipline to see the big picture. They integrate knowledge from seemingly disparate areas to make sense of the world around them. Integrative thinking and creative brainstorming necessitate a high tolerance for change, innovation, openness, flexibility and chaos. The concept is zero is powerful because it is a perfect metaphor that integrates complexity, chaos, openness, humility, creativity and spirituality.

I define zero centered thinking as the philosophical capacity for holistic and creative reflection aimed at renewed spirituality and transcendence at work. Zero centered thinking builds on integrative thinking and systems thinking. Zero centered thinking can provide leaders a sense of clarity, openness, stillness, simplicity, and fresh thinking in the middle of complexity, change and fast pace. Many corporations try to integrate spirituality and meditation practices into work effectively. Zero centered thinking may help leaders and organizations in this regard; opening up new perspectives for creativity and reflection at work.

b) The concept of zero can provide leaders a new sense of meaning and spirituality at work.

To effectively cope with chaos and complexity, leaders in today's organizations need to focus on ethics, social responsibility, collaboration, innovation, creativity, adaptation, flexibility, and

system thinking. However, what will be the starting point? In the middle of all pace and struggles, leaders first need to slow down and reflect. They should take a deep breath and pause. They should reflect on themselves and the meaning of work. They should ask themselves where they are coming from and where they are going to and why. Kouzes and Posner (1993) introduced a series of existential questions that leaders ask themselves to reflect on their own spirituality:

- What do I stand for? Why? Is there a reason for my existence and the organization's?
- Why am I doing this work? What is the meaning of the work I am doing?
- Where does this lead me to? Where do I really want to go?
- What brings me suffering? What gives me joy and tranquility? Why?
- What am I passionate about? What do I want for my life? Why?
- What do I really care about? Why?

These existential questions go deep to the heart of managers and leaders and have implications for the type of work a person does; how he or she feels about the organization; and how one balances work, family, community, and spiritual needs. The search for meaning at work is echoed universally as people seek deeper meaning and fulfillment in their careers. Mitroff and Denton (1999) found that organizations that have a stronger sense of spirituality have employees who exercise stronger values and ethical beliefs in their workplace and can show creativity and intelligence at work. As Gull and Doh (2004) argue; when people find meaning in their activities they become more engaged, more responsible, more ethical, more collaborative, and correspondingly, more creative.

The concept of zero is a powerful metaphor for managers and leaders; because it brings the organic, the heartfelt, the philosophical, and the holistic aspect of organizational life into sharp relief. New spiritual thinking and feeling based on the concept of zero may provide managers and leaders a feeling of transcendence, mystery, balance, connectedness and humility at work. Zero denotes modesty and tranquility at work. Zero reminds us that we are not at the center of the universe or even at the center of the organizations. Even if we act as leaders who have immense power, we are nevertheless not models of excellence. Even if we may lead organizations, we are just humans who make errors. This acknowledgement of error provides leaders not only a great freedom and relief from stress; but also a sense of modesty and service at work.

c) The concept of zero can provide reflective spaces and capacity for renewal for leaders at work.

Too much action and decision making in the fast-paced global business is decision making and action without thinking. It is hard for leaders to take a principled stance when decisions are made under pressure and stress with narrow interests in mind. Our world and our organizations deserve more principled and ethical actions. To achieve this, leaders need to slow down and reflect on the long-term consequences of their actions. Leaders need safe spaces and creative reflective spaces for this. Human spirit demands reflective spaces, artistic spaces, and relational spaces at work.

Zero can provide reflective spaces for leaders at work. Leaders increasingly seek courage and inspiration from music, arts, meditation and reflection at work. The concept of zero encompasses the reflective spaces at work. Reflective spaces enable leaders to bring their passion, heart, soul and spirit into their work. Reflective spaces enable leaders to develop authenticity at work through self awareness.

For leaders, becoming a zero denotes transcendence and going beyond the traditional boundaries of power, politics and prejudice. Having a zero mind enables managers to leave their egocentrism, frustrations and prejudice. Leaders thus accept themselves and others as who they are. This grows the capacities of compassion, tolerance and love in people. Adopting a zero paradigm, leaders become humble and gentle, serving as “servant leaders” (Greenleaf, 1977). Many leadership scholars have reached a consensus that the fundamental motivation for leadership should be a desire to serve (Block, 1993; Covey, 1990; Fairholm, 1997; Greenleaf, 1977; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Snyder et al., 1994). These scholars also agree that humility, integrity, service and modesty are essential components of effective leadership. The concept of zero encompasses and symbolizes all these components. Stewardship (Block, 1993) focuses on ensuring that other people's needs are being served; not on exercising privilege, power and control. According to Block (1993), stewardship chooses partnership over hierarchy; empowerment over dependency; and service over self-interest (Block, 1993). Thus, the leader is actually first and foremost in service, not in control. Therefore, zero paradigm denotes a radical move from command and control to servant leadership, and emphasizes empowerment, service and cooperation. In an era of ethical

scandals, corporate greed, egoism and narcissism; zero centered thinking and zero paradigm may be what we need more in corporate life.

Zero Paradigm for Organizations

Paradigm Zero is basically a utopia of an eternal and ideal organization. This paradigm utilizes from complexity, quantum physics, social sciences, world religions, Sufism and philosophy. Paradigm Zero calls for a new discipline called “organizational philosophy”. Paradigm Zero is the paradigm beyond rationality. All paradoxes and contradictions are resolved in this state of excellence. Opposites are coexistent in harmony. There is unity in diversity and diversity in unity. Life, death and afterlife are integrated. Time and space limitations disappear. Organizations are viewed as spiritual entities in Paradigm Zero. Deep change begins from the inner selves of people. Mind, body and heart are integrated together. There are three objectives: Truth, beauty and goodness. Science and religion, heart and mind are reconciled. Central elements of this paradigm are meaning of existence, spirituality, belief, transcendence, eternity, perfection, interconnectedness, holism, unity, balance, consciousness, happiness and ethics. Key values of Zero Paradigm include universal moral virtues of the East and the West including love, peace, forgiveness, passion, altruism, humbleness, selflessness, patience, tolerance, self-renewal and compassion.

Implications of Zero Paradigm for Competitiveness

Zero Paradigm can provide inspiration and intuition for leaders who want to design new organizations or change the existing organizations for the 21st century. The world we face with all its complexities demands a different set of leadership skills than the more linear, analytic, problem-solving skills that were adequate in past eras. The world needs leaders capable of integrating complexity, seeing the linkages and interconnectedness that exists among them. To do these things, leaders must be able to slow down, reflect, and take perspectives for the long run. Zero centered thinking is about this philosophical capacity for holistic and creative reflection aimed at renewed spirituality and transcendence at work. Leaders need creative reflective spaces to achieve zero centered thinking. Zero centered thinking may help leaders to develop better creative reflection and brainstorming skills at work. Table 1 provides examples of such brainstorming and reflection on the meaning and implications of the concept of zero at work.

The most critical frontiers for the twenty-first century competitiveness revolve around values, ethics, morality, social responsibility, global sustainability, and spirituality. Emerging organizational research and practice similarly emphasizes a set of common dimensions and leader characteristics such as integrity, wisdom, morality, authenticity, intuition, and service to community. This new leadership paradigm, also called as servant, transformational, shared, fluid, inclusive, and post-heroic leadership, is increasingly considered a critical component of global competitiveness in the 21st century. Management practices will be clearly consistent with spiritual values such as integrity, love, modesty, nurturing, service and stewardship, and creativity in the 21st century. These changes in organizational literature are in line with the implications of the zero paradigm.

Zero represents a paradigm shift in organizations based on spirituality (Table 2). Zero paradigm refers to the new dynamics of competitiveness in organizations based on transcendence, cooperation, interconnectedness and humane values at work. Zero paradigm offers leaders and organizations an alternative model for competitiveness in the 21st century. Zero paradigm builds on the concept of spirituality as being connected with one's complete self, others and the entire universe (Mitroff and Denton, 1999). Zero paradigm builds on the characteristics of spirituality at work such as being broadly inclusive, universal, timeless, embracing, meaningful, transcendent, interconnected and peaceful (Mitroff and Denton, 1999).

Zero paradigm is an awakening. *Zero is Tabula Rasa*. Zero suggests that leaders of the 21st century should better understand the higher dimensional physics and metaphysics of consciousness and the heart to gain knowledge, understanding and wisdom of the self to provide their organizations a new competitiveness based on spirituality. Zero provides organizations and leaders an excellent metaphor and a new paradigm of spirituality for the 21st century.

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Table 1: Brainstorming about Zero: Metaphors and Alternative Definitions of Zero

One of the biggest inventions of humanity	Original outlook
Balance between the opposites	New, novel, fresh
The beginning of the universe	Humility
The birth of a child	The seed in the soil
Symbol of dialogue	Symbol of unity
Pool of diversity	Being open to change
Sun rise	Start of the road
Establishing an institution	Round table
Initiative of an entrepreneur	Big Bang
A blank sheet	Objectivity
A new horizon	Creativity
The color of white	Purity
The world in globalization and integration	Integrity
Being free of prejudices	Wisdom
Way to the heart	Peace
Clean water droplet	Being natural
Paradigm shift	Paradox
Secret of continuity	Consciousness
Turning point	Common sense
Reference point	Being different
Microcosm	Common vision
Zero defectives	Added value
Total of all energy in the world	The present
From tradition to innovation	Beyond rationality
The operator on the phone	Simplicity
Increasing profits	Bridge to infinity
No costs or risks	End of gravity
The atom	Human Being
Emergence	Tabula Rasa

Table 2: Zero Represents a Paradigm Change

	TRADITIONAL PARADIGM	PARADIGM ZERO
Centered on	Materialism	Spirituality
Dominant theme	Competition	Cooperation
Production of Knowledge	Analysis	Synthesis
Attitudes towards oneself	Self-confidence	Self-transcendence
Priority	Profits and loss	People and love
Relationships	Contractual, partial	Long-term, holistic
Self-representation	Impression Management	Authentic Behavior
View	Compartmentalization	Interconnectedness
Locus of behavior	Self-interest	Service to humanity
Atmosphere	Doubt and fear	Trust and support
Control	Power and influence on others	Control on oneself
Role of Ego	Self-esteem, strong ego identity	Transcending the ego
Self-actualization leads to	Pride and Arrogance	Humility and Humbleness
Leadership style closer to	Charismatic leadership	Servant leadership
Organizational life	Challenge and struggle	Altruism and mutual help