



Perceptions of how spiritual leadership enhances connectedness in blended teams



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Orientation: Before the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, employees in most industries were expected to work from the office during their stipulated working hours. The pandemic notably changed this norm, creating unique challenges for managers who were not used to leading remote teams. Since then, hybrid work has become more common, and organisations have been trying out different hybrid models.

Research purpose: This research aimed to explore managers' perceptions of how spiritual leadership enhances connectedness in blended teams within the financial industry.

Motivation for the study: The increasing prevalence of blended teams necessitates a deeper understanding of how managers perceive and understand the challenges and opportunities in fostering connectedness through utilising spiritual leadership approaches within these teams.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative research approach employing a purposive sample was followed and semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from 12 managers in the financial services industry which were then thematically analysed.

Main findings: The findings revealed differences in team dynamics between blended and co-located teams and the resolution of conflict. Spiritual leadership traits and practices that supported connectedness in blended teams were revealed, including compassion, integrity and empathy.

Practical/managerial implications: This research offers key leadership competencies and practices needed to successfully leverage spiritual leadership in enhancing connectedness when managing blended teams.

Contribution/value-add: The research offers valuable insights for organisations seeking to adapt to blended work models.

Keywords: spiritual leadership; connectedness; blended teams; co-located teams; financial services sector.

Introduction

Over the last 5 years, the number of people working remotely has increased because of technological and societal developments which were significantly accelerated by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Ugwu et al., 2023). In many industries employees can combine on and off-site work, which allows them flexibility regarding where and when they work (Wörtler et al., 2022). Blended work environments are changing the execution of work globally, and it seems that blended work may persist going forward (Nyanhongo et al., 2023; Saurombe et al., 2022). Meanwhile, leadership, as we know it, has had to evolve in response to the ongoing changes occurring in the workplace globally, such as the increase of remote and blended working arrangements (Kok & Van Den Heuvel, 2019; Linden et al., 2025; Mishra & Jena, 2020). Collins et al. (2016) reported that blended teams and their leaders face unique demands that are different from those of co-located and fully virtual teams. For instance, blended working environments have imposed various challenges such as leaders' perceived reduced level of control over subordinates' work and increased difficulty in maintaining connections between leaders and employees as well as among team members (Linden et al., 2025). Consequently, it has become increasingly important to explore ways of adapting and enhancing contemporary leadership styles to promote effectiveness in such working environments (Linden et al., 2025; Nesindance et al., 2024).

Orientation

Schutte et al. (2019) particularly assert that different leadership styles affect various wanted and unwanted outcomes in the workplace. For example, a collaborative, empowering, inclusive

and passionate leadership style was found to improve organisational effectiveness in Canadian and Japanese organisations, whereas authoritarian and autocratic leadership approaches were found to be decreasingly acceptable in the global modern workplace (Linden et al., 2025). Samul (2019; 2024a) additionally suggests that a spiritual approach to leadership particularly creates an environment where leaders inspire a sense of meaning and purpose in both employees and themselves, as well as an enhanced sense of connectedness and mutual support among employees and leaders alike.

Lippert and Dulewicz (2018) posit that virtual teams are beneficial to our environment – as well as companies – as they minimise greenhouse gas emissions because employees prefer working from home due to the reduced preparation and travel time to the office. Such flexibility can enhance employees' quality of life which would in turn be beneficial to their employers (Saurombe & Barkhuizen, 2020). Furthermore, employees can access more stakeholders via virtual platforms, thus expanding their reach (Walsh, 2019). Alternatively, Tripod and Roodt (2023) argue against too much flexibility, citing that blended working arrangements do not necessarily guarantee happier or more productive employees. For example, Hay (2020) found that 31% of employees believed that working remotely adversely affected their mental health, particularly because of the limited human interaction such work provides. Additionally, while remote working employees have been shown to appreciate the limited room for micromanagement that their distance from the sight of their leadership and management provides, such distance often also leaves employees feeling out of touch and unsure of what exactly their leaders expect from them regarding certain work tasks and responsibilities (Samul, 2024b). Zhang et al. (2023) further found that while *laissez-faire* leadership styles encouraged innovative and creative behaviours in some employees, it also led to negative behaviours and outcomes such as a lack of accountability and direction in others.

To balance the benefits and challenges associated with fully remote and blended working arrangements, Tripod and Roodt (2022) encourage leaders to adopt remote work strategies that increase the practicality and efficacy of such work. Thus, this research sought to understand how spiritual leadership enhances connectedness in blended teams, specifically within the financial services sector, where limited research currently exists in this regard.

Research problem

Research outlines various challenges associated with working in the financial services sector, such as high market competition leading to long working hours and increased stress levels, as well as rapid digital transformation and evolving customer, employee and employer expectations (Nesindande et al., 2024; Nesindande et al., 2025; Yousaf et al., 2024). The recent increase in remote and blended working arrangements within the South African financial services sector has added a further layer of complexity to

the sector's existing challenges (Ngobeni et al., 2022). While the workplace transition towards blended models in the financial services sector may largely be permanent, research on the strategies for effectively leading such teams remains limited. Meanwhile, Yousaf et al. (2024) imply that a spiritual approach to leadership can result in enhanced connectedness and overall well-being among employees in the financial services sector. This research therefore contributed to addressing the gap in extant literature wherein the benefits of spiritual leadership are underexplored, particularly within the South African financial services industry.

Research purpose and objectives

This research aimed to explore perceptions of how spiritual leadership enhances connectedness in blended teams within the South African financial services sector. The research objectives were to explore the current perceptions regarding connectedness in blended teams and to explore best spiritual leadership practices for improving connectedness within blended teams.

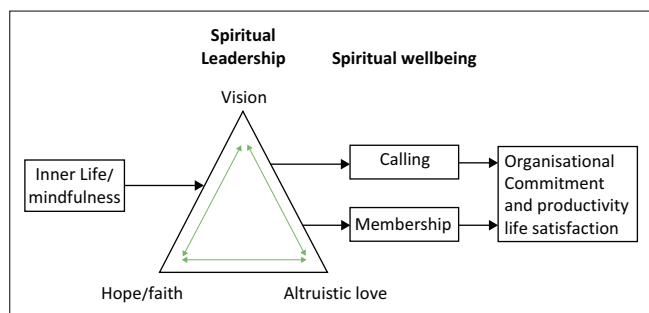
Literature review

This section discusses the theoretical framework used to underpin the research (i.e., Fry's spiritual leadership theory), as well as the key concepts associated with the research objectives (i.e., spiritual leadership and connectedness) as identified within extant literature.

Spiritual leadership theory

At the turn of the 21st century, leadership discourse emphasised authentic, ethical and inclusive approaches (Northouse, 2022). This is important in understanding that leadership behaviour plays a significant role in shaping employees' sense of belonging, performance and interpersonal relationships (Chen et al., 2012). Building on this foundation, Fry (2003) introduced the concept of spiritual leadership, which merges a leader's values, attitudes and behaviours to inspire employees by providing meaning to their work. Fry et al. (2017) later proposed a model expanding Fry's initial spiritual leadership theory to allow its broader application, as shown in Figure 1.

Spiritual leadership fundamentally focuses on a leader's vision, altruistic culture, hope and faith, which collectively foster a sense of purpose and belonging in employees, which in turn enhances organisational citizenship behaviours and contributes to a competitive advantage (Fry, 2003). Building on this, Fry et al. (2017) highlight the cause-and-effect relationships between leaders' actions and employees' perceptions, demonstrating how these dynamics shape company culture and cultivate a collaborative environment. Fry's theory was considered befitting to underpin this research, as spiritual leadership begins with a leader's inner life, placing a strong emphasis on self-awareness, authenticity and integrity. The theory's key elements of transcendent



Source: Fry, L.W., Latham, J.R., Sharon K., Clinebell, S.K., & Krahnke, K. (2017). Spiritual leadership as a model for performance excellence: A study of Baldrige Award recipients. *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, 14(1), 22–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766086.2016.1202130>

FIGURE 1: A proposed model of spiritual leadership.

vision, faith and altruistic love specifically help unite team members through a shared sense of purpose and connection to a larger vision (Oh & Wang, 2020; Sapta et al., 2021).

More specifically, the team dynamics of care, compassion and mutual respect implied by the spiritual leadership theory foster experiences of trust and being valued in terms of members' contributions to their team and organisation's overall purpose (Sapta et al., 2021), which are essential to enhancing connectedness in financial services sector blended teams. Additionally, the hope and faith that allow teams to overcome obstacles as outlined in spiritual leadership theory are crucial strategies for enhancing connectedness in blended teams within the financial services sector (Yousaf et al., 2024). Furthermore, spiritually inclined leaders empower team members by enabling autonomy and increased opportunities for growth (Oh & Wang, 2020), of which such outcomes can also enhance connectedness within financial services sector blended teams. The authors of the current research believe this all-encompassing approach to spiritual leadership would be effective in managing blended teams in the financial services sector, as it fosters cohesion, and cultivates a shared purpose through empathy, support and open communication, thus enhancing connectedness (Pattnaik & Jena, 2020; Wang et al., 2019). Hence, the spiritual leadership theory was considered most appropriate for underpinning this research.

Understanding how spiritual leadership relates to connectedness in the workplace

When organisational leaders employ a spiritual lens to managing their teams and employees, this often results in employees feeling valued, purposeful and interconnected within their teams as well as the broader organisation (Tigedi et al., 2024). Additionally, spiritual leadership theory underpins many principles that define the essence of connectedness (Fry et al., 2017). For example, Fonseca et al. (2018) allude to connectedness being a psychosocial state of cooperation and mutual reciprocity between individuals concerning the realisation of shared objectives and values. This definition of connectedness pertinently characterises the essence of spiritual leadership, which creates a sense of belonging and common pursuit of shared goals as earlier outlined regarding Fry's spiritual leadership theory

(Fry et al., 2017). Accordingly, spiritual leadership enhances connectedness in the workplace by creating a sense of community, enhancing organisational culture, inspiring and motivating followers, facilitating holistic well-being and promoting inclusivity and diversity (Samul, 2024b). Thus, the authors of the current research paper argue that spiritual leadership can enhance connectedness in blended teams within the South African financial services sector.

Akbar et al. (2023) emphasise how employing spiritual leadership in the workplace empowers employees to emulate their leaders' behaviours of altruism, inclusivity and accountability. Fonseca et al. (2018) further assert that employees who are driven by an intrinsic sense of duty and purpose tend to achieve greater cohesion within the team setting, as each person is concerned with contributing substantively towards the overall team purpose. It has also been found that employees who are spiritually interconnected with their team members tend to fear letting their teammates down (Sumbul, 2023). Akbar et al. (2023) further suggested that spiritual leadership enhances the profound interconnectedness within teams which leads to employees being more intentional about not letting down their teammates or disappointing their leaders. The authors of the current research similarly assert that spiritual leadership enhances connectedness within blended teams while further enhancing their overall team dynamics.

Understanding how spiritual leadership enhances connectedness in blended teams

Samul's (2024c) research focused on key aspects relating to spiritual leadership in virtual and blended teams and found spiritual leadership to enhance interconnectedness between and among employees in such workplaces. Samul (2024c) found various ways to enhance blended team connectedness (through the application of spiritual leadership principles) including establishing a flexible, yet accountable work environment; collaborating through various appropriate channels; clarifying team purpose and using the correct collaboration tools to engage. Samul (2024c) also found that following up with the team to understand their needs, the obstructions they encounter and their state of mind enhanced connectedness within blended teams. Additionally, strengthening work associations by means of team bonding; scheduling inclusive synchronous collaboration time; meeting employees' needs for inclusivity and efficiency, as well as rewarding team and individual achievements were found to enhance connectedness when employing spiritual leadership within the blended workplace. The authors of the current research paper therefore believe that spiritual leadership can enhance connectedness in blended teams within the South African financial services sector.

Spiritual leadership plays a pivotal role in enhancing the connectedness of blended teams by fostering a cohesive and unified work environment (Sumbul, 2023). Additionally, spiritual leadership nurtures a sense of belonging and shared purpose, which are essential components for achieving

connectedness in blended teams. A deep sense of connection facilitated by spiritual leadership through communication and mutual trust within blended teams - despite some members' geographic dispersion - supports an inclusive and supportive culture (Samul, 2024c). When spiritual leadership is leveraged to enhance connectedness in blended teams, this enables leaders to inspire and guide their teams more effectively, promoting holistic well-being and aligning individual contributions with the overarching mission and values of the organisation (Arena et al., 2023; Mitchell & Brewer, 2022; Newman & Ford, 2021). Similarly, the authors of the current paper argue that such benefits would enhance the overall effectiveness of blended teams in the South African financial services sector.

Research design

The study sought to understand participants' views and experiences of spiritual leadership and connectedness in blended working environments. This was achieved by exploring the lived realities of these employees while acknowledging the subjective nature of their experiences and interpreting them with rigour and caution. Consequently, the interpretivist research paradigm was adopted in this research (see Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). A qualitative research approach was specifically adopted in this research. Kumar (2019) and Creswell and Poth (2016) posit that a study is classified as qualitative if its purpose is to describe a condition or occurrence, which was the case in this research.

Research participants and sampling methods

The population for this study comprised 12 individuals employed at two financial institutions located in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Purposive non-probability sampling was utilised to identify suitable participants. Following Mertens and Wilson's (2012) advice, participants who could contribute relevant information to the research were identified within the researchers' professional networks. To be included in this research, the participants had to self-identify as spiritual leaders, based on the attributes of spiritual leadership explained to them. Furthermore, participants had to be middle or senior managers in the South African financial services sector with a minimum of 5 years of industry experience to qualify for inclusion in the research. Permission to participate in this research was sought (by the authors) and granted by the organisations at which the participants were employed. Table 1 depicts the demographic profiles of the participants in this research.

Data collection

Primary research data were collected by conducting open-ended, in-depth, semi-structured interviews to allow for free-flowing conversations with the research participants. The interviews were preceded by a brief segment where the key principles of spiritual leadership were clarified to participants to ensure the relevance of their responses in relation to the research topic. Following are the examples of questions that were posed to participants: What do you

TABLE 1: Demographic profile of the participants.

| Participant pseudonym | Age (years) | Gender | Division | Years of work experience |
|-----------------------|-------------|--------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Participant 1 | 39 | F | Private banking | 19 |
| Participant 2 | 39 | M | Learning and development | 21 |
| Participant 3 | 35 | M | Private bank | 12 |
| Participant 4 | 38 | F | Operations | 17 |
| Participant 5 | 53 | F | Legal and compliance | 27 |
| Participant 6 | 45 | F | Private bank | 23 |
| Participant 7 | 38 | M | Offshore banking | 16 |
| Participant 8 | 45 | F | Private bank | 23 |
| Participant 9 | 43 | M | Financial consultancy | 26 |
| Participant 10 | 43 | F | Operations | 20 |
| Participant 11 | 55 | F | Learning and development | 34 |
| Participant 12 | 47 | M | IT (information management) | 20 |

IT, information technology; M, male; F, female.

perceive to be the current state of connectedness within your blended teams, and how do you believe this is affected by spiritual leadership? What do you perceive to be the importance of enhancing connectedness through spiritual leadership in your blended teams? What spiritual leadership behaviours do you believe influence connectedness in your blended teams? The interviews were held one-on-one and in English. Some interviews were held in person and others were held virtually on Microsoft Teams or Zoom. All interviews were recorded once considerations of voluntary participation and confidentiality had been provided.

Trustworthiness considerations

Various aspects were observed to ensure the trustworthiness of this research: particularly, credibility, reflexivity, transferability, dependability and confirmability were observed. The credibility of the findings was confirmed by devoting sufficient time to all aspects of the research activities, including the time spent interviewing the participants, and also by enlisting the help of NVivo 14 (which assisted in the analysis of qualitative data), keeping audit trails, conducting member checks, debriefing with the data analyst and supervisors, and through the methods of triangulation and crystallisation (Fouché & Geyer, 2021). In alignment with Beuving and De Vries (2015), the authors applied reflexivity by reflecting on their analyses through self-awareness, thereby being able to better analyse emerging themes; reflecting on their methodology by looking at journal entries to understand what they heard, observed and felt; reflecting on ethical dilemmas such as conflict and confidentiality; and reflecting on their observations by journaling their existing stances about each participant and the immediate surroundings experienced.

To ensure transferability, the authors provided thick descriptions of the research setting, methods and procedures applicable to this research, to allow readers and other scholars to determine the extent to which the current research can be applied across multiple contexts. Qualitative researchers operate on the assumption that we live in an ever-changing social world; therefore, the dependability of the research over time is tested by the superiority of supporting documents and their audit trails (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure

dependability, the participants of this research were requested to check whether there was good reconciliation between the perspectives they shared and the inferences the authors made. To maintain confirmability, the authors consistently evaluated how much of their own biases and perspectives influenced the research process. While this research presented some dissenting views in relation to similar studies, it was also well aligned with many other studies, thus ensuring confirmability.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to develop themes from the dataset, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase model. Thematic analysis is regarded as a systematic and inductive approach designed to identify and explore themes within text-based data transparently and reliably (Guest et al., 2013; Okoli, 2023). The interview data were transcribed by playing back the audio recordings and capturing participants' verbatim responses in a Microsoft Word document. After becoming familiar with the transcribed content through immersive and repeated reading, patterns and trends in the participant responses were identified and coded using Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). These codes were then grouped into sub-themes and further combined into categories based on meaningful patterns (Fouché & Geyer, 2021). Inductive coding techniques were employed to find original perspectives (Patton, 2015). Deductive coding techniques were then employed to compare the data against existing knowledge, concepts and theories in the literature in alignment with the research objectives. Thereafter, the various sub-themes were double-checked to ensure their relevance to the overarching themes and also ensure no further appropriate categorisation was possible. A narrative report including verbatim quotes to substantiate the various themes and sub-themes developed was produced in the end.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was sought from the Research Ethics Committee of the College of Business and Economics (Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management), University of Johannesburg (No. PPM-2024-852[M]).

Results

The two themes resulting from the data analysis in this research were (1) perspectives regarding connectedness within blended versus co-located teams; and (2) spiritual leadership traits and practices that encourage connectedness in blended teams. The first theme addressed the first research objective, while the second theme addressed the second research objective.

Theme 1: Perspectives regarding connectedness within blended versus co-located teams

This theme explored the participants' experiences in creating connectedness in both blended and co-located teams. The sub-themes that emerged were centred on the team dynamics

of traditional co-located teams, the team dynamics of blended teams, conflict resolution and leadership strategies for cultivating blended team connectedness.

Sub-theme 1.1: Team dynamics of traditional co-located teams

The findings revealed that traditional co-located teams provided a more conducive environment for bonding among team members as opposed to blended teams which typically have members who are geographically dispersed from each other. Participants mentioned that traditional co-located teams make it easier to have regular check-ins and mutual support, as demonstrated in the following quote:

'Prior to COVID, I took it for granted that we were able to see each other every day. I think it's human nature to be near others and it changes how people feel, how much they want to be here, how loyal they are or aren't. And so, I think connectedness is extremely essential to how an organisation works.' (Participant 2, male, learning and development, 21 years of work experience)

Another participant stated that being in the same office allows for interactions that lead to faster decision-making:

'When we are in the same office, I can meet one of my colleagues in the corridor, in between meetings, and say, hey, this and this and this issue, what's your view on it? He gives me his view, and then we quickly make a decision, or we leave that discussion on the same page. There are a lot of small things that you can address much quicker than in a virtual team where a conversation like that will have to be a Zoom meeting and a lot more formalised.' (Participant 4, female, operations, 17 years of work experience)

Sub-theme 1.2: Team dynamics of blended teams

Hybrid work was seen to assist individuals in balancing family life and work life. Participants specifically emphasised the positive impact hybrid work has on women in that it offers flexibility which benefits those managing professional and personal responsibilities:

'I support hybrid working. You know to just get that balance between family life and work life, especially for women.' (Participant 5, female, legal & compliance, 27 years of work experience)

One participant highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic helped companies to realise that employees are generally able to work productively and reliably even when they are not physically present at their employers' premises:

'I think what the pandemic taught us is that if you have the right people and a clear definition of roles and responsibilities and expectations, that people can work remotely. So, the level of supervision that you need to give people is a lot lower. As a leader, you don't need to necessarily see your people to know that they're working.' (Participant 4, female, operations, 17 years of work experience)

Conversely, the findings uncovered a possible downside of hybrid work, this being underperformance by employees who may struggle to self-manage when away from the office:

'The challenge for the business is that you never know if somebody is really doing what you asked them to do within the time that you have given them. When you have non-performers, the hybrid model favours them [but disadvantages the organisation] because they are not in sight.' (Participant 1, female, private banking, 19 years of work experience)

In addition, the findings revealed that the use of technology in hybrid work environments, no matter how advanced or convenient, did not make up for the inimitable physical interaction that traditional co-located teams provide:

'[In a physical setting] You would be able to read their [team members'] body language in-person, and if there was a problem you saw through the body language and you could react. How are you going to do that in a remote environment because you send a person a message, they say "I'm fine" and you can't read past that so you have to actively engage with people. I remember having conversations with people late at night, like, 7:00 or 8:00 o'clock at night, which is past the working hours to gauge their actual emotions and head spaces.' (Participant 9, male, financial consultancy, 26 years of work experience)

Sub-theme 1.3: Conflict resolution

Allowing the involved parties to attempt to resolve any arising conflict on their own was seen as an effective approach towards fostering and restoring harmony in blended work settings:

'Sometimes in giving them space, they resolve the matter amongst themselves. When we meet, I remind them that the objective is to identify where the problem is coming from and to resolve it and avoid having the situation again.' (Participant 2, male, learning and development, 21 years of work experience)

Another participant expressed that conflict arose when there was a lack of clarity regarding employer expectations of employees. This was resolved through formal meetings which helped to clearly define job roles and aided in the resolution of these conflicts:

'I think there was a bit of a disconnect in terms of expectations and communication and what decisions who could run with which was causing frustration. There was a disconnect in terms of roles and responsibilities. We resolved it through a series of meetings, having a clear cadence as well as clearly defined deliverables. Every week the team would report on their performance, but it didn't take one meeting to resolve. It took time and reinforcement.' (Participant 4, female, operations, 17 years of work experience)

Sub-theme 1.4: Leadership strategies for cultivating connectedness within teams

The participants discussed the practical tools and strategies utilised to enhance connectedness within their blended teams. It was found that the leader must be seen to embody company values, which would then filter down to the team. This was seen as key for gaining buy-in and commitment from the teams:

'If you have a sense of purpose as an organisation that everyone is clear on and the leader's sense of purpose is aligned to those, and the team's values are aligned to those, then you have got a very successful team.' (Participant 7, male, offshore banking, 16 years of work experience)

Theme 2: Spiritual leadership traits and practices that encourage connectedness in blended teams

The findings revealed that empathy, compassion, integrity, discernment, emotional intelligence and self-awareness create an environment where team members feel valued, understood and respected, which in turn enhances connectedness within the team by promoting trust, collaboration and a shared sense of purpose. According to the findings, these traits were complemented by the following practices: promoting trust and autonomy, encouraging flexibility and agility, fostering a sense of belonging, as well as effective change management and communication.

Sub-theme 2.1: Traits that encourage connectedness in blended teams

Empathy emerged as important in that leaders should consider the feelings of their employees, more especially in striking a balance between work and family time:

'Empathy [is an important spiritual leadership trait] and I want to say, listening skills and vision. The pandemic challenged a lot of our stereotypical thinking. It actually taught us a lot of lessons, particularly as leaders; post-pandemic what I learned is that different people will have different situations but can get to the same goal or same outcome, just very differently. You [have] just got to understand your people.' (Participant 10, female, operations, 20 years of work experience)

A further trait that emerged was *compassion*, which was seen to go hand in hand with empathy as demonstrated in the following quote:

'It [the recent pandemic] taught me that life is short. For leadership today, I think compassion is probably most important because COVID was a scare for everyone.' (Participant 5, female, legal & compliance, 27 years of work experience)

Integrity was also an important consideration with participants maintaining that leaders should demonstrate ethical behaviour and strong moral principles. This was seen to foster trust in followers. A leader with integrity, who is committed to doing the right thing and takes responsibility, becomes trustworthy. This, in turn, was seen to minimise disruptive activities by employees:

'As a leader, walk the walk, talk the talk. I force myself to always do the right thing, even if I know it's going to get me in trouble because eventually it starts rubbing off onto the team.' (Participant 2, male, learning and development, 21 years of work experience)

Other participants emphasised the need for leaders to have *discernment* in identifying employees who might take advantage of remote work by using company time dishonestly:

'As a leader, you need to be wise enough and need to be experienced enough to see if someone's taking you for a ride.' (Participant 5, female, legal & compliance, 27 years of work experience)

'I'm saying it [be]cause I've learned right. I lead with my heart, and people sometimes take advantage of that.' (Participant 6, female, private banking, 23 years of work experience)

It was further highlighted that managers with *emotional intelligence and self-awareness*, when navigating complex interpersonal dynamics, are capable of empathising with others, engaging in active listening, and fostering an inclusive environment that appreciates and respects diverse viewpoints. Participants stated that self-awareness involves understanding oneself, while emotional intelligence develops through exposure to diverse individuals:

'I think the first thing, is to go on a journey with yourself to understand what your own biases are, because if you know how that looks, how you integrate different people will be different.' (Participant 3, male, private banking, 12 years of work experience)

A further participant expressed:

'Emotional intelligence means I gauge and read the room. Why is this one always speaking? That one is not speaking. I think the most important traits of a spiritual leader are emotional intelligence and self-awareness. Because of how difficult it is to interact with both the role and the person, those two things combined, are of utmost importance.' (Participant 7, male, offshore banking, 16 years of work experience)

Finally, one participant stated:

'Having an individual development plan for yourself that you always know what your weaknesses are and what you're working on, where your areas of development are and what you need to work on, because I'm, for example, an ex-teacher and anyone who has ever worked with me will tell you that the teacher comes out.' (Participant 11, female, learning & development, 34 years of work experience)

Sub-theme 2.2: Practices that encourage connectedness in blended teams

The research revealed that displaying a sense of trust in your employees' capabilities and communicating expectations upfront enables employees to feel more empowered, perform more efficiently and autonomously, achieve higher levels of productivity, and experience job satisfaction:

'I think if you as a manager can start by truly, truly trusting your recruitment process and honestly believing that everyone deserves to be in your team, and they are the right people to be in your team. That's where it starts. Once you've accepted this, then it becomes easier for you to show appreciation for every team member.' (Participant 10, female, operations, 20 years of work experience)

Being a flexible leader who can adapt to changes and circumstances was also considered admirable. Participants maintained that post-COVID-19, they have adapted and adjusted their strategies to respond to the situation, including allowing employees greater flexibility and agility in their work routines:

'My previous leader said, guys, we can't ask people, even if they're working from home, to be in a meeting at eight ... So, I have to give her credit, that's why we start at nine in

the morning.' (Participant 2, male, learning and development, 21 years of work experience)

And:

'... if you're not agile as a leader, it makes it very difficult to make changes that will still allow you to reach the targets. You need to create an environment where employees can grow and are free to showcase their knowledge and skills, if you're not agile as a leader, it might curb those things.' (Participant 6, female, private banking, 23 years of work experience)

Another participant further introduced the idea that leaders' allowance of increased flexibility among employees fostered a sense of employees feeling trusted by their employers and leaders, thus possibly enhancing their sense of duty and responsibility:

'The thing is, when you allow those you manage more flexibility regarding their working schedules, this often makes them feel more accountable to make sure they perform. Yes, it [allowing flexibility] may not have the same effect on all employees but I know many who feel obliged to put in extra effort because of the flexibility afforded to them.' (Participant 8, female, private banking, 23 years of experience)

It was also found that a leader who fosters a sense of belonging among their followers builds trust and boosts their motivation to actively participate:

'I so much believe in diversity because different people bring different sets of strengths to the table. I think diversity is important, not only how people look or gender but different schools of thought and generations, you know this Gen X, this Gen Y, millennials, [those who are] more and less experienced. That [kind of diversity] is so important in any organisation because then you bring a different culture, a different school of thought, a different drive. People who are different can also connect with different people differently.' (Participant 10, female, operations, 20 years of work experience)

Participants further highlighted the importance of effective change management and communication. These are important practices that a leader should implement because they foster a positive work environment, reduce miscommunication and make it easier for staff members to understand what is going on within the company, especially during seasons of change and transition to new ways of doing things. The following quotes substantiate these views:

'The ground rules are quite important in terms of making sure that guys know what you are expecting. On a weekly basis, I had an engagement with my direct reports. We had to catch up to say what's happening in their area, what support do they need. I had guys [team members] in Zimbabwe, Durban, Zambia and Mozambique. So, I needed those one-on-one catch ups.' (Participant 7, male, offshore banking, 16 years of work experience)

And:

'I think I manage change very well. I think I've got a good understanding of what the vision would be, what the steps are for the people and where some of the shortcomings will be. So, I think that I've had that ability to show people this is the vision and [in case of] any change [that may occur along the way],

this is where I think we're going to have some obstacles or we're going to have some roadblocks.' (Participant 9, male, financial consultancy, 26 years of work experience)

Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore the role of spiritual leadership and connectedness in managing blended teams. This paper's discussion section follows the outline of the research objectives.

Research objective one: To explore the current perceptions regarding connectedness in blended teams

Regarding traditional co-located teams, participants noted that working in the same physical space allows for spontaneous interactions and face-to-face communication, leading to more frequent and informal check-ins, support, insights sharing and real-time issue addressing. These views support the findings of the Chicago Institute for Management Training (2024). While hybrid and remote teams can attempt to replicate co-located team dynamics using communication tools, fully replicating the immediacy and fluidity of support in a co-located team remains challenging (Grobelyny, 2023). Co-located teams also generally follow fixed working hours, ensuring that team members are available simultaneously, making it easier to schedule meetings, coordinate tasks and address issues promptly (Saurombe et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Grobelyny (2023) alternatively opines that while fixed hours offer these advantages, they may lack the flexibility that hybrid or remote work models provide, where employees can tailor their work schedules to better suit their personal lives or peak productivity times. The participants in the current research supported this perspective.

In terms of blended teams, the participants discovered that the hybrid work model promotes a healthy work environment by enabling employees to balance personal responsibilities with productivity. They emphasised that a hybrid model avoids the drawbacks of being exclusively in the office or working remotely, providing a balanced approach that enhances employee well-being and effectiveness. These insights align with existing literature, which suggests that the hybrid model can improve workplace connectedness and well-being by balancing professional and personal demands (Bendassolli, 2014; Beyond Team, 2024). Woods (2014) highlights the importance of setting well-defined goals and expectations, empowering employees to effectively manage their tasks, regardless of their location. The findings revealed a potential downside of hybrid work, which is the risk of underperformance by employees who struggle with autonomy and self-management. Aquino et al. (2022) and Keppler and Leonardi (2023) suggest that technological tools should be complemented with occasional in-person meetings or team-building activities that leverage the strengths of physical presence. The participants unanimously agreed that leaders need to exert more effort when working with a blended

team. According to Drayton (2024) and Arena et al. (2023), leaders need to make a conscious effort to regularly engage with remote employees by involving them in meetings, discussions and informal conversations.

The findings emphasised the significance of having constructive discussions in resolving conflicts that arise from misunderstandings. Participants recommended enabling parties to work towards resolving conflicts, using mediation, when necessary, clearly defining roles and responsibilities, and approaching conflict resolution with a focus on learning. DeMarr and Janasz (2018) support these findings and assert that effective leadership entails actively managing conflicts, clearly communicating goals and creating an environment where team members feel appreciated, and their voices are heard.

Regarding the role of the leader cultivating connectedness within teams, Tripod and Roodt (2023) highlight the importance of leaders aligning company values, belief systems and attitudes in virtual and blended work environments. Participants in this study also emphasised the significance of employees understanding and embodying company values, serving as a 'true north' to guide behaviour. The findings emphasise that teams are more cohesive, connected and successful when individual and organisational purposes and values align.

Anseel and Brutus (2019) advise managers to check in with employees as often as they can without overwhelming them, and they recommend a mix of formal and informal check-ins. They propose that one-on-one performance check-ins should occur at least monthly, and these can be linked to formal quarterly check-ins and annual performance reviews. By promoting connectedness, leaders build credibility and trust, leading to greater team cohesion and collaboration. Leaders play a crucial role in strengthening individual contributions to promote unified team functioning. This can be achieved through peer mentorship and shared leadership practices, where leadership tasks are entrusted to different members across the team, fostering a shared sense of responsibility (Andersen & Watkins, 2018). The findings of the current research similarly revealed that flexibility and a culture of trust are crucial for maintaining a blended work environment.

According to Fantinelli et al. (2023) and Ngobeni et al. (2022), the concept of a psychological contract is vital in a hybrid workplace as it helps define and align the mutual expectations between employees and employers regarding flexibility. Employees typically prefer flexible working arrangements that allow them to maintain their job security and career development, while employers expect continued commitment and performance (Saurombe et al., 2017). Similarly, participants in the current research highlighted the importance of leveraging the workplace flexibility that blended teams inherently provide, to foster an increased sense of duty to perform among their employees.

Research objective two: To explore best spiritual leadership practices for improving connectedness within blended teams

Participants concluded that certain personal traits, which are characteristic of spiritual leadership, including empathy, understanding, and being helpful towards team members formed the foundation of connectedness in the workplace. They emphasised the value of taking the time to understand the group rather than solely focusing on driving the bottom line. Nipp and Palenque (2017) emphasised that effective spiritual leaders build high degrees of psychological safety. In this study participants advised leaders to balance compassion with accountability, ensuring that while they show empathy, they also need to maintain clear expectations for productivity and quality of work – a good work ethic can never be compromised. Discernment enables leaders to address potential issues proactively ensuring that ethical standards are upheld. The findings revealed that managers who possess emotional intelligence and self-awareness are adept at navigating complex interpersonal dynamics. This is because these leaders can empathise with others, engage in active listening, and cultivate an inclusive environment that values and respects diversity. Hacker and Washington (2017) discussed the concept of spiritual intelligence (SQ), introduced by Zohar (1997), which extends beyond emotional intelligence (EQ). Spiritual intelligence encompasses the ability to recover from setbacks, develop self-knowledge independent of the organisation, and create a personal mission, vision, and values. Developing SQ involves cultivating deep self-awareness and aligning one's vocation with a higher purpose. It is a journey of discovery where followers learn how their leader's vision aligns with their own.

The findings revealed that demonstrating trust in your employees' capabilities and communicating expectations upfront encourage connectedness through empowering them to work together more efficiently and autonomously. Participants observed that displaying trust led to team members taking initiative and higher levels of collaboration within the team. Trust can be built through joint decision-making, fostering transparency by regularly sharing progress, challenges and successes, thereby creating an environment where team members feel secure and valued (Andersen & Watkins, 2018; Mitchell & Brewer, 2022).

Blended team leaders demonstrate agility by adjusting workflows and embracing new technologies. For example, if a project's priority suddenly changes or a key member is absent due to illness, an agile leader may promptly reassign tasks among team members to ensure that deadlines are met (Jaiswal et al., 2024). Similarly, the participants in this research emphasised the importance of being able to respond to various situations as they arise within the blended working environment and adapting these responses or strategies appropriately. Dev (2023) presents an opposing view that being excessively adaptable as a leader can lead to a lack of clear direction and purpose, resulting in constantly shifting priorities which can lead to followers undermining

the leader's expertise, resulting in resistance to commitment. Nonetheless, the authors of the current research paper argue that rigidity in the blended working context may do more harm than good as the environment is inherently flexible; thus, this research inclines more to Jaiswal et al.'s (2024) views supporting agility and flexibility.

The participants particularly considered leaders who can foster a sense of belonging among blended team members as crucial to enhancing connectedness within such working environments. This supports the view that when employees feel valued and connected within their teams, they are more engaged, motivated and likely to exceed expectations in their roles (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2016; Grobelny, 2023). The participants in the current research further emphasised the importance of leaders effectively communicating any current or anticipated change within the organisation, as keeping blended team members in the loop of important developments was considered key to enhancing connectedness. This perspective supports Newman and Ford's (2021) view that by emphasising the overall value of the change and demonstrating how it contributes to the long-term success of the organisation – and consequently job security – leaders can foster buy-in. Keeping all stakeholders informed and engaged throughout the change process further fosters a sense of ownership and commitment as feedback is solicited on an ongoing basis, and concerns are accordingly addressed (Burnes, 2020; Nyanhongo et al., 2023; Shamsheer et al., 2021).

Practical implications

This research provides insight into the perceptions regarding spiritual leadership and connectedness within two financial services institutions located in the Gauteng province of South Africa. It also highlights key leadership competencies and practices needed to successfully leverage spiritual leadership to enhance connectedness when managing blended teams within the institutions. For example, leading with empathy, supportiveness and understanding can enhance connectedness among blended team members within the explored financial institutions. The research also offers valuable insights for effectively adapting to blended work models within the two financial services institutions. For instance, it is important for their leaders to appreciate the differences in dynamics that blended teams present compared to traditional co-located teams for them to leverage the strengths of the blended working environment rather than trying to replicate the typical dynamics of co-located team. It is further hoped that this research will provide similar organisations with a foundation for developing their unique models for enhancing organisational connectedness through spiritual leadership within the context of the blended work environment to create a culture of high sustained performance.

Limitations and research recommendations

This qualitative study explored the experiences of 12 managers from two institutions within the financial services sector regarding connectedness and spiritual leadership

within blended teams. As a qualitative study, the ability to easily generalise the research findings to the broader financial services sector population or to other sectors is limited. However, it does provide a foundation for future studies. This includes quantitatively exploring the connectedness–spiritual leadership nexus to more conclusively determine the aspects of spiritual leadership that influence connectedness in blended teams. A further limitation is that the study explored perceptions of managers and not those of employees. It may be that employees hold different perceptions of the connectedness challenges and opportunities presented in blended teams and the role played by spiritual leadership. These perceptions could be explored in further studies. Future quantitative research could also be conducted in other sectors and provinces within South Africa to provide a more comprehensive view of the phenomena. Comparative studies could be conducted to explore the influence of demographic variables including age and tenure. This would help in understanding the phenomena across different stages of career development.

Conclusion

This research explored how spiritual leadership enhances connectedness in blended teams within the financial services sector in South Africa. More specifically, the research identifies spiritual leadership traits and practices, such as empathy, compassion and integrity, as crucial for promoting connectedness within hybrid teams. The research further points out challenges in hybrid work, particularly in knowledge sharing, where remote and hybrid workers often have fewer and weaker workplace relationships. It additionally highlights the role of digital communication technologies in developing ‘relational confidence’, which enhances knowledge sharing. These findings offer practical recommendations for organisations to improve their hybrid work strategies, ensuring better communication, stronger team cohesion and enhanced leadership practices. By addressing these insights, organisations can better navigate the complexities of blended work, improve team performance and enhance overall leadership effectiveness during the constant disruptions prompted by internal and external changes and beyond.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors’ contributions

This article was adapted from the master’s research of T.L.M. who executed and wrote up the study, while M.D.S. was the study leader and provided supervision, conceptualisation guidelines, methodology refinement and editorial inputs.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.D.S. upon reasonable request.

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