



**Allied Ronin**  
Leadership Training & Consulting

An Interview With  
Judi Neal, Ph.D.  
President & CEO, Association for Spirit at Work  
(June 2007 Allied Ronin E-Newsletter)

Recently I traveled to West Hartford, Connecticut to deliver leadership and team effectiveness event hosted by DeSai Learning Systems [www.DeSai.com](http://www.DeSai.com) <<http://www.DeSai.com>>. There I was joined by Dr. Judi Neal, President and CEO of The Association for Spirit at Work [www.spiritatwork.org](http://www.spiritatwork.org) <<http://www.spiritatwork.org>>, who co-facilitated the event with me. Judi is a very rare and special person. She received her Ph.D. from Yale and managed Organizational Development at Honeywell for a number of years before leaving to form her own consulting firm and teach management at the University of New Haven. We began our affiliation a few years ago after being introduced to each other by Dr. Kathy Kane of the University of San Francisco [www.usfca.edu](http://www.usfca.edu).

What makes Judi Neal rare and special? In my opinion, it's the result of the adversity she has faced, what she has learned from it, and how she managed not only to rise above it, but to carry her learning into the world in ways that touch others so that their lives transform. Judi's book "Edgewalkers" has just been published and she agreed to an interview for the June 2007 Allied Ronin e-newsletter.

Enjoy ... but most importantly, put into practice what moves you!

Lance M. Giroux  
Founder/Executive Director

**AR: Judi, what is the Association for Spirit at Work, why did you create it and what do you see it does for the world?**

Judi: The Association for Spirit at Work is a membership organization that provides community, networking and resources for those who are integrating work and spirituality and those who are called to support societal transformation through a shift in organizational consciousness. Back in 1992, when I first became interested in the integration of spiritual values and practices in my own work, I felt quite alone and often wondered if I wasn't a little bit crazy trying to do this. Eventually I discovered other people on the same path and I felt it was important that we find ways to connect and support each other in a world that often does not support or reward the value system we are trying to live by.

I think we have done a tremendous amount to legitimize the role of spiritual values and spiritual practices in the workplace. In 1992, there was only one book on the topic, now there are thousands. All of the mainstream media have written articles on spirituality in the workplace and some have even had cover articles such as Business Week and Fortune Magazine. The Academy of Management now has a special interest group called "Management, Spirituality, and Religion" that I helped co-found and chair, and it is now the fastest growing group in the Academy. Thousands of consultants and coaches are incorporating spirituality into their work and having a positive impact on organizations.

One of our major contributions is the creation of the International Spirit at Work Award (formerly the Willis Harman Spirit at Work Award). We honor organizations that have an explicit commitment to nurturing the human spirit in the workplace. In five years, we have honored 35 organizations from 12 countries. Case studies of these organizations appear on our website, and the leaders of these organizations run workshops at our annual conference, teaching other people how to do what they have done.

**AR: What do you feel is the biggest challenge facing organizational leaders today?**

Judi: The biggest challenge is attracting and retaining key talent, and bringing out the creativity and passion of all employees. All organizations basically have the same access to technology, business processes, and information. The deciding factor in competitiveness is the creativity and involvement of their people. The secret is to find ways to tap into their deepest values and their creativity. One of our International Spirit at Work Honorees was a company called Elcoteq in Germany. The CEO of this company was Ruediger Fox who came into a company that was losing money like crazy and he turned it around in just six months through the application of spiritual values like trustworthiness, humility, respect, and unity. Within two years the company was breaking all performance records. However, the parent company did not understand the importance of spiritual values and they began to implement policies that were in conflict with these values. Mr. Fox fought these for as long as he could and when he knew he was not making any progress, he left the company and went to work for a more spiritually focused organization. Elcoteq lost the person who had created incredible performance and a positive measurable impact on the bottom line. This kind of thing happens every day, and organizational leaders need to begin to understand a new way to lead that is based on a values-driven code of leadership.

**AR: How would you answer that same question with respect to those we call "teachers" whether they be involved in elementary education, high school or the university level... or at a much more basic level ... the parents of today's youth?**

Judi: Teachers today are challenged with trying to teach in a system that is soul-deadening and not very conducive to learning. First of all, education only focuses on intellectual learning, and to a minor extent - physical education. Research has shown that success is based even more on emotional, social, and spiritual intelligence, yet these are not taught in any of our halls of learning. Students are more sophisticated than ever, and in many ways, are more scared than ever of the world that is being left for them to lead when they become adults. They want to be treated as whole persons and they want some assurance that their education will prepare them to survive and thrive in an increasing chaotic and unpredictable world. It is very difficult for teachers to be able to give them what they need in the midst of a bureaucratic system that requires that a certain level of curriculum be covered, whether its of interest to students or not, and whether or not it is relevant. Teachers are encouraged to not get too close with students, physically or emotionally, for fear of litigation. They are not allowed or encouraged to be creative, and many teachers leave the profession because it is not nurturing to their own souls.

Parents also have incredible challenges today. Usually both parents have to work in order to make a living, and so there is always the challenge of finding ways to be with their children and time to truly be a parent. Parents are stressed out and are not always in the best emotional and spiritual space to be able to give their children what they need. And the world is not as safe for children as it seemed it was for us when we were growing up. I remember when Halloween started to become a dangerous holiday because of the potential of pins or razors in candy. Violence in schools, child abductions, sexual abuse from teachers and priests and trusted others – all of these make it harder to be a parent in today's world.

Teachers and parents both can benefit from any techniques or practices that help them to stay whole, centered, values-driven, loving and compassionate. Most of our institutions do not provide ways for them to do this, but there are a few pioneering organizations, and we can learn from them.

**AR: What about the students they teach, particularly the young women and men about ready to leave home and establish their own mark in the world?**

Judi: These young men and women have an interesting mix of cynicism about the world, and a passionate idealism. Perhaps that's healthy. They have seen a lot more of both the good and the bad of humanity that my generation did when growing up. They have more information about the state of the world than we ever had, and they know that it is going to be up to them to make a difference in critical issues like world poverty, peace, the environment, and a fair and just society for all. The more we can help them to know their strengths and encourage their idealism, the better. We can understand their cynicism but have to help them realize that it can be paralyzing if it is all that they focus on. They can make a difference.

**AR: You have quite a story with respect to what occurred for you at Honeywell. Can you talk about that and shed light on what happened, what you learned as a result of that and how that has shaped your life and work?**

Judi: In 1987, I was working as the Manager of Organizational Development and Training at the Honeywell Defense Systems Division plant in Joliet, IL. We made ammunition that was sold to the military. During a team building process with the ballistics team, I discovered that the reason for the poor morale was that people were being told to alter ballistics test data and to report faulty ammunition as meeting specifications. I became a whistle blower and did not have my anonymity protected. I made the mistake of reporting the fraud to our internal ethics hotline, and the person I called told high-level Honeywell managers that I was the whistle blower.

For the next several months I suffered retaliation, including having my life threatened, my job duties taken away, and a promotion blocked. I ended up quitting my job and went into a deep depression because all meaning and purpose had disappeared from my work. I now call that my “Dark Night of the Soul.”

To help me through this difficult time, I started reading everything spiritual I could get my hands on. I began to meditate and pray and do yoga. Somewhere, in the midst of all this, I had the sense that this was all happening for a reason and that some day I would understand.

I had seen the dark underbelly of the corporate world, and I wanted to do whatever I could to ensure that others would not have to go through what I went through. I began, over time, to explore how spirituality might be helpful to organizations, and that’s when I decided to create the Association for Spirit at Work.

I learned that integrity is the most important value we can live by, and that everything else flows from that. When you live from integrity, you no longer have to live in fear. You are being authentic, and that gives you power. No one can ever take that away from you, no matter what. To not have integrity is to lose your soul.

**AR: When we worked together this past April for DeSai Learning, you told me about your new book, "Edgewalkers" (Praeger Publishing). What is an "Edgewalker", who are some of history's "Edgewalkers", and what differences are being felt today as a result of their lives?**

Judi: An Edgewalker is someone who walks between worlds, or different realities. In ancient cultures, each village had a shaman or medicine man who would visit the invisible world to obtain vital information, guidance, and healing for members of the tribe.

In today’s world, we need people who have this capacity more than ever. Edgewalkers are the first ones in an organization to take on a challenging new assignment. They are the ones with breakthrough ideas. They have an uncanny intuition about the future. They are the ones that people often describe as crazy when they first propose ideas, and then later, when they are successful, people describe them as brilliant.

Some of history's Edgewalkers include people like Albert Schweitzer, Nelson Mandela, Igor Sikorsky (the inventor of the helicopter), and Albert Einstein. They each had a strong spiritual or mystical life and that gave them the courage and insight to do things that others said could not be done.

We need Edgewalkers in the world today because they are able to rise above a single paradigm or reality and to see the interconnectedness and systemic nature of humanity. We also need them because of their ability to see underlying patterns in the chaos and they can help to lead us to a better future that works for all.

**AR: Would you say that "edgewalking" is generally supported by institutionalized education and business today? Why is this so?**

Judi: I wish I could say that this was so, but it's not. Edgewalkers are often treated as if they were an invading virus into a system. Institutionalized education and business have strong antibody systems that fight people who have different and unique ideas, who appear different, and who are uncomfortable with playing the institutionalized game.

That is the main reason I wrote this book. I wanted to give these people a name and to legitimize their importance in organizations. I want organizations and educational institutions to find new ways to value what Edgewalkers have to bring to the party. And I want Edgewalkers to have the courage to be themselves.

I cannot tell you how many people have read my book and have told me what it meant to them to have a name for what they are and to know that they are needed in the world, just the way they are. If you are an Edgewalker, knowing that there is a concept and that there are others like you, can be very empowering.

**AR: If the average person has it within him or herself to be an edgewalker what must they do to get onto such a path ... and then stay on it?**

To get on the Edgewalker path, the first step is to work on self-awareness. Each human being is unique. We each have special gifts, and I believe we each have our own calling. No one else can tell us what our gifts and our calling are, although they may be able to help point to it. It is extremely important to spend time in self-reflection. This can be done through journaling, through meditation, through prayer, and through time in nature, for example.

Secondly they must pay attention to what they are passionate about, regardless of whether it seems practical or not. Passion is a key source of energy and by following our passion, we open up the doors for greater intuition, creativity, spiritual guidance, and synchronicity.

In my book I talk about the need to also develop one's integrity, vision, and playfulness. These five characteristics; self-awareness, passion, integrity, vision, and playfulness, are the hallmarks

of an Edgewalker, and each of these characteristics can be developed through conscious attention. I have developed a workshop called “Walking on the Leading Edge,” that takes people through each of these characteristics and helps them to deepen the way they live them.

There are also five key skills that people can develop, and these are the skills that are needed if people want to stay on the Edgewalker path:

- \* Sensing the future
- \* Risk-taking
- \* Manifesting
- \* Focusing
- \* Appreciating

These are skills that are taught in a more advanced Edgewalker workshop. People can learn more about Edgewalkers and about these workshops at [www.edgewalkers.org](http://www.edgewalkers.org).

**AR: What about organizations ... are there edgewalking organizations, and if so what stands out about them?**

Judi: Edgewalking organizations are rare, but they exist. What stands out about them is that they don't follow the rules of business, they make their own rules. One wonderful example is the San Francisco hospitality company Joie de Vivre, founded by Chip Conley. Chip wrote a book called “The Rebel Rules” and his company is a perfect example of an organization that no one would have ever predicted would have been successful. But while other hospitality companies have been losing money for years in the San Francisco area, Joie de Vivre is growing and thriving. Instead of trying to create economies of scale and to standardize their hotels, like say a Marriott or a Hilton, each Joie de Vivre hotel has a distinct personality and is extremely unique. If you go to their website, you can take a questionnaire that tells you which hotels are the most likely to be ones that fit your personality and tastes. They are a very spiritual organization and they trust their instincts and they have the courage to turn right when everyone else is turning left.

Edgewalking organizations embrace their Edgewalkers and create a values-driven, fun, and creative culture. They also have room for what I call Hearhtenders and Flamekeepers, people who create stability in the organization and who help the organization to live by its core values.

**AR: You write in your book (p 69) that the key to being an Edgewalker is "to be true to yourself and to your own calling. If you immerse yourself in what matters to you, keep yourself open to possibilities, and make a commitment to act on what is calling you at the deepest level, you will be shown the future." What advice do you have for those who seek to be true to themselves and seek their own calling? What pitfalls do you see they need to attend to as they move forward with this calling?**

Judi: Our society teaches us to focus on money, status and success. Edgewalkers are not at all driven by these factors, although they are often very successful financially. My advice to those

who seek to be true to themselves and to seek their own calling is to stay away from naysayers. Ignore the people who tell you that your dream is impossible. To them it is. To you it's not. If it is truly your calling, you will find a way to manifest it, and the Universe will help.

If you think that you don't know what your calling is, I suspect that you are lying to yourself. James Hillman wrote that we all have our own "Soul's Code" implanted in our spiritual DNA and signs of it show up in our childhood. You may be burying dreams that you thought were impossible or impractical. Or you are just too scared to shake up your current life. And following your dreams will shake up your life. There will be some losses. My friend Martha Finney, author of "Find Your Calling: Love Your Life" calls them necessary losses.

If you follow your calling, you will lose relationships that no longer serve you. You may go through a time of financial difficulty as you build something new in your life. You may lose some sense of your old identity as you build a newer and truer you. It takes courage and tenacity to go through these changes and losses, but the new reality is absolutely worth it. You begin to build a world that plays by the rules that you are creating, and believe me, that's a lot more fun!

**AR: What is your hope for the future?**

Judi: My hope for the future is that we as a human race begin to live our full potential. We are evolving as a species and are developing a greater sense of our interconnectedness and a greater reverence for life and beauty and joy. There are pioneers who are already living in this new reality and they are passionately committed to creating a planetary community that values each human being as precious and worthy.

My hope is that enough of these people can evolve quickly enough to create a critical mass that will shift us away from a culture driven by materialism, greed, hatred, violence, and a disregard for nature. It is important to watch for the signs that this is happening and to tell the positive stories so that we can give others hope and courage to make the changes that need to be made.

**AR: If you were limited to one central idea, one thought ... as if it were the first, last or only thing you could ever say to anyone ... what would it be?**

Judi: Love is all there is.

Judi Neal, Ph.D.

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"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it is the only thing that ever has." Margaret Mead