

A Call for Mindful Leadership

by Ellen Langer, Professor of Psychology, Harvard University

Mindlessness — not a good quality for any organization — has led to some questionable assumptions about the need for leaders; namely that 1) those who lead have privileged and reliable abilities and knowledge — what are often described as "leadership competencies" ; and 2) people need to be led to achieve their goals.

If organizations were mindful — referring to the simple act of noticing new things — leadership would be quite a different matter. They would not only be mindful themselves; their most important responsibility would be to enable their followers to be mindful as well. One might argue that in an increasingly complex world — where work cuts across all types of institutional boundaries — the leader's only task may be to promote and harness "distributed" mindfulness.

Noticing puts us in the present, makes us sensitive to context, and aware of change and uncertainty. When we are mindless we hold our perspective still, allowing us to confuse the stability of our mindsets with the stability of the underlying phenomena. Hold it still if you want but it's changing nonetheless.

However visionary we consider our leaders, they cannot predict the future any more than anyone else. They may be able to predict what might happen much of the time if the situation stays constant — which of course is questionable — but can never predict individual occurrences, which is where we should be most concerned. If, most of the time, when someone does "x" the result is "y" it doesn't guarantee that the next time you do "x," "y" will follow. (Do you believe Mercedes makes a great car? Would you bet all of your money that any particular Mercedes will start with one try?)

Those in positions of power often keep quiet about what they don't know. Instead of making a personal attribution for not knowing — "I don't know but it's knowable and I probably should know," which sounds defensive — leaders should make universal attributions for uncertainty — "I don't know and you don't know because it is unknowable." When we acknowledge these universal limits, we can be less distracted by the need to appear to know, which would allow us to get on to the problem at hand. Being awake in the moment allows us learn better what we need to know now.

Leaders can't know and that's fine.

What about those being led? Mindlessness can lead you to assumptions about their behavior. Once you understand the actor's perspective, you can be less judgmental. If I see you as rigid, I want to ignore you. If I see you from your perspective, as someone I can count on, I'll value you. We can turn around every judgment in this way (e.g. impulsive/spontaneous, grim/serious, conforming/eager to have everyone get along) and when we do

we'll find we have a less rigid view of people (some bad, some good). Once we free ourselves from our misplaced superiority, we may find talent and ability to provide solutions in those we prematurely cast in an unflattering light.

Regardless, the larger issue is that, if everyone is awake, you don't have to lead as if everyone else needs to be led. You may find that people will see what the situation demands, and the surprising result may be superior performance.

In a study I conducted with Timothy Russell and Noah Eisenkraft, orchestra musicians were instructed to be either mindless or mindful. In this case, being mindless meant replicating a previous performance with which they were very satisfied. The mindful instructions directed them to make the piece new in very subtle ways that only they would know. (They were playing classical music and not jazz so the novel distinctions were indeed subtle.) Their performance was taped and then played for audiences unaware of our instructions. We found that not only did the musicians much prefer playing mindfully, the mindfully played pieces were judged as superior. Everyone was in a sense mindfully doing their own thing and the result was a better coordinated outcome.

In more than 30 years of research, we've found that increasing mindfulness increases charisma and productivity, decreases burnout and accidents, and increases creativity, memory, attention, positive affect, health, and even longevity. When mindful we can take advantages of opportunities and avert the dangers that don't yet exist. This is true for the leader and the led.

In sum, there is no best way to do anything independent of context, so the leader cannot have privileged information. When leaders keep everyone in their place with the illusion of knowability and possession of this privileged knowledge the benefit to them is that we "obey" and leaders feel superior. The cost is that they create lemmings. Their mindlessness promotes our own mindlessness which costs us our well being and health. Net result, the leader, the led, and the company all lose.

It's nice to imagine a company where everyone is mindful. But it will take some time to achieve the ideal even if possible. Meanwhile, we need leaders whose major, perhaps only task is to promote mindfulness in those around them. By learning how to exploit the power of uncertainty maybe all of us will wake up.

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