

# A practitioner reflects on the role of awareness training in leadership development

By Marc Roudebush, Mobius Consultant and Executive Coach

*“There is nothing so practical as a good theory”* –Kurt Lewin, 1951

This is a time of great ferment for practitioners of leadership development, organizational learning and the like. At such times, we see potential connections between multiple approaches—for example Voice Dialogue, Difficult Conversations, Mindfulness, Immunity to Change, and Conscious Business—but don’t necessarily see how they fit together, or know which end to present to clients.

I imagine a number of readers of this newsletter are engaged in integration efforts, making sense of different theories, experimenting with different practices, and finding ways to talk about their discoveries that make sense to clients and colleagues. I offer this essay as a contribution to the effort to integrate Eastern wisdom traditions and Western approaches to leadership development.

The question I’d like to take up with you is “what is the role of awareness training in the development of leaders, and why does it matter?”

Like many of you, my fascination with this question was a big part of the bond I instantly felt with Amy Elizabeth Fox, the publisher of this newsletter, when I first met her in 2006. Thank you, Amy, for holding the space for such inquiries. You host a magnificent virtual Salon!

Back then, as now, spiritual practice was of central importance in my life (I had been a Tai Chi practitioner since 1989 and meditating since 1993), and such practice seemed to make me more effective as a coach and trainer. I would go further now: the result of spiritual practice (let’s call it greater awareness

and compassion) seems to be the source of the best value I bring to clients.

Yet I don’t teach meditation or mindfulness to clients... yet.

Now you may say there’s a simple fix for this. “Train in MBSR or MBCT and apply it in your coaching. Become a Search Inside Yourself facilitator!” Or

you may say “you should meet person X who is doing “Big Mind” in a corporate context.” My reply is “Terrific! In fact I *am* training to be an SIY facilitator. But that doesn’t change the fact that we’re still in the early stages of this integration.”

There is a lot of excitement about Mindfulness. Pioneers like Richard Davidson have brought it “out of the closet” and into the limelight of scientific inquiry. But in pulling the blanket hard over to the side of Mindfulness, we are at risk of forgetting the benefits of our western, action-oriented models of learning. We are leaving Organizational Learning exposed and grumpy on the other side of the bed.

To make our Eastern and Western bedfellows happier with each other, it may be helpful to reflect on their shared interests and ability to support each other. One could take Eastern and Western approaches to this task. In this essay I focus on a Western one.

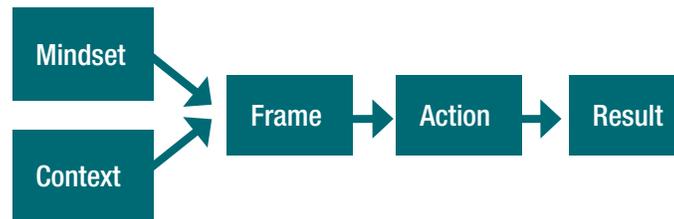
Let us consider the natural link between awareness training and the “learning pathways” that are at the heart of so much organizational learning and leadership development. I

learned the “learning pathways” model from our Mobius colleagues Bob Putnam, Phil MacArthur and Diana Smith—all three students of Chris Argyris. It posits that results are always a function of our actions, which in turn are shaped by how we “frame” a situation, which, in turn, is shaped by our underlying mental models and the external context. (See figure to left.)

It is in this framework that many of us learned to reflect on our “Left Hand Columns” (what we thought and felt but did not say). Thus we gathered data to illuminate the frame of reference and operating assumptions governing our actions. Informed in this way, we were able to make changes not only to our behaviors, but also—more powerfully—to the mindsets driving those behaviors. Not only might I give my erstwhile opponent greater air time in the negotiation; I might shift my intention from “winning over” him to “winning with” him. Chris Argyris famously called this higher leverage approach “double-loop learning.”

Already in this approach to learning we can discern a role for awareness. The better our skill at reflecting on our “operating assumptions”—especially in the moment—the greater our chances of successfully learning, adapting and leading. The “reflective practitioner” is by definition self-aware.

Many readers of this newsletter will be familiar with one or several children (or cousins) of the learning pathways framework, for example Bill Torbert’s *Action Inquiry*, the “iceberg” model (in which behaviors are shaped by underlying thoughts,



feelings and beliefs), the “observer-action-result” triad in the Newfield ontological coaching model, or the “Be-Do-Have” sequence in Conscious Business.

When talking about the importance of awareness in one of these frameworks, I have often presented it as a means to greater effectiveness. Like the lumber jack’s proverbial saw sharpener, the ability to reflect on one’s mindsets and actions is presented as an investment required to optimize effectiveness—to get the leader to be, or get back to being, at her best.”

This line of reasoning has a weakness, however. It defines the value of double-loop learning as a means to an end and does not provide a way of questioning one’s definition of success. The question of ethics goes begging. We might try to answer “why ethics” in terms of intrinsic motivation (as in Daniel Pink’s *Drive*), in terms of the binding power shared purpose, or in terms of building a more sustainable “whole system” approach to solving problems. But such answers easily fall prey to a false dilemma—the dilemma of the long-term and short-term.

Coach: “... and so you can see the superior effectiveness of long-term, multi-stakeholder thinking...”

Client: “I like that idea, but just now I have to make my numbers. I’ll call you in a few quarters.”

Fortunately, this dilemma is resolved when we clearly distinguish between two distinct dimensions of action: effectiveness on the one hand, and integrity on the other. I’m not aware of the full lineage of this concept, but I was first exposed to it in Fred Kofman’s, *Conscious Business*.

In this elaboration of the learning pathways, effectiveness is defined as the accomplishment of one’s goals, and is recognized as being conditional (i.e. only partially in our control). Our

attempts to generate buy-in, like a marriage proposal, only succeed if our counterparts agree! We may be 100% committed to success, but we can’t command the outcome.

Integrity, on the other hand, is defined in relation to our values, and is therefore unconditional. How I ask is entirely within my control. In the case of the marriage proposal, I can choose to lie and manipulate—exaggerating my assets, getting my girlfriend drunk, asking a mutual friend to disparage the “other guy”—or I can choose to be authentic, vulnerable and respectful of my beloved’s choices.

The choice to be authentic or not (or respectful or humble or compassionate, or any of their opposites) rests *unconditionally* with me. It does not depend on any one else’s choices. This is why Kofman offers another name for integrity: “success beyond success.” Integrity represents the “how” that you would not want to lose sight of in order to accomplish any given “what.”

What would be the point of securing a “yes” to your marriage proposal at the expense of having deceived and manipulated your fiancé? Conversely, how much better is a relationship—whether personal or business—when we have had the courage to be authentic and respect the other person’s choices?

OK, so far we have a theory that says our actions can be evaluated both in terms of their effectiveness and their integrity. If we want to improve in either of these dimensions, we can look “upstream” along the learning pathways, for a better understanding our goals, values, interpretations and choices. Thus double (even triple) loop learning can enhance not only our effectiveness but also our integrity.

So what’s awareness got to do with it? At the simplest level, awareness is in play for anyone who may be wondering “what are my values anyway, and what does it mean to express them



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through my actions?” To be honest, this was my initial reaction when I was first exposed to the concept of “success beyond success.” I was intrigued by the “admirable characters” exercise in which we listed people we admired and why (e.g. Nelson Mandela for his forgiveness)... and by the suggestion

that I would be more engaged and engaging if I could count myself on that list. “Live courageously, with integrity,” sounded like a good battle cry, but at first it was a lot easier to regard this earnest entreaty with irony than to see what it might point to in my life.

I could readily see what it meant in the extreme example of the marriage proposal, but then I started to see it in more and more ordinary situations. What it meant to propose a process improvement, to check an assumption, to invite participation, to share a story that had moved me: In all these cases there was a conditional outcome that defined success (such as getting a “yes”), but there was also an opportunity to “exercise” a way of being that I could be proud of regardless of the outcome: to engage productively rather than just criticize the process, to be curious, to respect other’s choices, to be generous in sharing what moves me.

I could see the value of being aware of these choices and their consequences. In my coaching practice, it seemed that many of my client’s big “ahas” occurred when they saw new choices that appeared meaningful to them—like discovering an opportunity to be more true to oneself.

This is how I came to think of awareness as a third dimension of action. Awareness gives our actions depth. Moreover, our ability to make choices with effectiveness and integrity is in part a function of awareness.

As a meditation practitioner, I was intrigued by fact that effectiveness is always demonstrated over time—the time it takes to complete a project, to play a baseball game, to get an answer to a proposal—while integrity does not take time. Being honest.... or curious or respectful or generous, etc. is not something that evolves over time. It just is or it isn’t.

Integrity, as the expression of such values, is a quality of being, not of doing. It does not vary with time, but it does vary with our awareness. If we are not even aware that our buttons are being pushed, or that we are being influenced by a conflicting interest or commitment, how can we be expected to resist the temptation or make the wiser choice? If we don’t even see the opportunity, how can we make a meaningful sacrifice or take a “heroic” stand?

Thus by making the role of awareness and integrity more explicit in the learning pathways framework, we can demonstrate that awareness is a critical factor not only for success but also for “success beyond success.”

My hope is that this framework may be helpful to those of us who are seeking to integrate mindfulness or awareness training into our leadership development work with clients. In what ways have you attempted this synthesis? How can we integrate mindfulness with listening exercises? How does it apply to working with the Left Hand Column, or Immunity to Change? Can we link pausing and reflecting directly to the quality of our advocacy and inquiry? How can we offer meditation training in a broad and explicit context of creating an inspiring workplace and building culture leadership capability?

I would be very curious and grateful to hear your experiences in this domain. Please join the discussion on Linked in I have just launched.



**Marc Roudebush** is an executive coach and culture change consultant whose empathic listening, “tough love,” and deep understanding of the human dimension of business have helped senior leaders achieve breakthrough results in high-tech, big pharma, financial services, consumer goods, as well as government and non-profits. Along with his 15 years, hands-on experience in coaching and consulting, Marc brings direct experience as a business executive (CEO and Managing Director roles) and the analytical rigor of a social science Ph.D. He is also a dedicated meditator, and President of Pointing Out the Great Way Foundation.

Finally, I would like to add that I am excited about the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute. Please check out the book excerpt in this issue by Chade-Meng Tan. Search Inside Yourself represents an ambitious and thoughtful synthesis, providing an evidence-based approach that links mindfulness, emotional intelligence, difficult conversations, and leadership. Go SIY! Let’s keep on learning!

## Epilogue

There would be a whole other article to write from the “eastern side of the river.” The task here would be to build a bridge in the opposite direction; from awareness training toward the more action- and dialogue-oriented western approach to leadership development. The stereotype of Eastern spiritual traditions as being about retreat and renunciation can seem to suggest that actions are of no consequence in comparison to contemplation. Yet action—in body, speech and mind—plays a central role in Buddhist theory and practice. At the subtlest levels action and awareness, compassion and wisdom, are inseparable, and one of best questions we can ask as spiritual practitioners is “what can we do to allow our actions to express and amplify our awareness, rather than obscure it.”

Awareness plays an important role in helping us learn to be skillful in our conduct, but conduct as well, plays a role in developing and sustaining our deepest realizations. ■