

Developing Agile Leaders through mindfulness awareness meditation

By Michael Carroll

We all know what human agility looks like. Attend any performance of “Cirque du Soleil” or the NYC Ballet and we can witness remarkable performers executing flawlessly: muscular, refined, and utterly disciplined. Such agile artistry is a marvel to behold!

And, as an executive coach, I am equally inspired when business leaders bring their special breed of agility onto today’s global stage: mentally quick, emotionally confident, socially intelligent and commercially astute. Such agile leadership is equally a marvel to behold.

Needless to say, such agile leadership is vital for today’s enterprises. The old models of “command and control” leadership do not readily scale with the mobile “Facebook” generation of self-organizing networks and distributed technologies. Traditional “top-down” leadership is giving way to a new generation of leaders who influence through networks, galvanize diversified teams and accelerate creative change - negotiating, problem-solving, collaborating and jointly executing. Today, work is about resilient coalitions and leaders who are agile enough to lead them.

But how are our emerging business leaders learning to master such agility? Dancers attend ballet academies and acrobats have gymnasiums where they relentlessly practice and perfect their art. And, not surprising, it’s in the halls of our corporate and educational institutions where we find our leaders engaging an emerging

field of agility training: *young leaders learning to sit still for extended periods of time on meditation cushions.*

Mindfulness-awareness meditation in business

Let’s consider a few examples:

- The Drucker School of Management and Wharton Business School both offer courses for applying mindfulness meditation to the challenges of leading enterprises.
- Virginia Tech is sponsoring a conference entitled “Contemplative practices for a technological society” designed for engineers who want to integrate contemplative disciplines into their work.
- Google offers courses in meditation providing facilities for employees to practice meditation and yoga.

Aetna, Merck, General Mills – the list goes on – all are exploring how meditation can help their leaders and employees agilely thrive in today’s fast paced business environment. And the benefits are widely publicized: sustained attention span, improved multi-tasking abilities, strengthened immune system, increased emotional intelligence, improved listening skills....And there is

science behind such claims. Research is fast concluding that sitting still for defined periods of time is a very healthy thing to do.

But what really happens when we meditate? How can such a simple act of sitting still actually cultivate agile, talented leaders?

What is mindfulness-awareness meditation?

For those not familiar with the practice of mindfulness awareness meditation, let’s take a moment to describe what the act entails.

When we practice mindfulness awareness meditation, we take a posture sitting upright, relaxed and alert. Our eyes are open, with a soft gaze; our hands are placed palms down, gently resting on our thighs. Our chin is tucked in, neck straight and our gaze is slightly downward. Our face and jaw are relaxed and our mouth is slightly open. We breathe normally and sit still. If we are sitting on the floor, we sit on a cushion with our legs loosely crossed. If we are sitting in a chair, our feet are firmly on the ground.

When we sit still like this, we have two distinct experiences. First, we notice the simple vividness of our immediate circumstances: sounds, sights, smells and sensations. And secondly, we also notice that we are thinking: talking to ourselves, commenting on this and that, thinking about any number of things. Particularly, if we are new to meditation, we may find ourselves unusually restless with our thoughts. But, such restlessness is not a problem; it is what we work with in meditation.





Attending to these two experiences - being alert in the immediate moment and thinking - is central to mindfulness awareness and requires a simple yet exquisitely demanding gesture: while sitting still in the meditation posture when we notice ourselves thinking, we deliberately recognize that we are thinking by silently saying “*thinking*” and then bring our attention gently to our breath. We, in effect, *label* the thought “thinking” and bring our attention back to now.

As we become familiar with resting our attention on our breathing - like gently running our hand over a piece of silk, slowly, precisely again and again - we eventually find balance where we are both mindful of our breath *and* mindful in the immediate moment.

Attending to our breathing in such a way, especially for extended periods

of time, is a tremendously boring thing to do and this is where cultivating our agility and natural leadership talents come in.

“Letting go”

When we examine this simple and often monotonous act of sitting still, at first glance there appears to be little going on other than the sheer boredom of sitting still. But by doing the practice consistently, we begin to notice that we are expressing some subtle yet powerful “spiritual muscles” that had gone overlooked - leadership muscles that had gone flabby, so to speak.

For example, during meditation we label thoughts as “thinking”. Whenever we notice that we are thinking, we simply recognize that we are doing so by saying to ourselves “thinking”. But a careful examination of such a simple

gesture reveals that our very next gesture after “labeling” is to “let go” - to release our grip on our internal dialogue and gently bring our attention to our breath. We “let go” of our inner dramas and story lines and guide our attention to the simple yet vivid experience of just breathing.

This gesture of “letting go” of our internal gossip while simple, is also a highly concentrated gesture of leadership agility. Like ballet dancers rehearsing a *demi-plie* or an acrobat practicing a handstand *pirouette* over and over again, here in mindfulness awareness meditation we, too, are exercising core muscles of basic human wisdom and agility.

Too often at work we tend to “hold on”, “hold in” and “hold back”. Whether it’s “holding onto” our jobs, our prestige, our paychecks, “holding back” our views, concerns and suggestions or “holding in” our frustrations, inspirations and ideas - at work our bias toward “holding” can have a singularly blinding effect on how we skillfully engage challenges. “Letting go”, on the other hand, of our fixed mindsets, discursiveness, opinions, emotional habits and much more, can provide vital perspective in effectively leading a team, an enterprise or a life.

And what happens when we exercise this muscle of “letting go” in conducting daily business? We become agile, as Professor Leonard Riskin, JD observes in his seminal study of practicing attorneys:

“To perform well as a counselor or negotiator - to make and help the client make wise decisions - the lawyer must be able simultaneously to consider inconsistent perspectives (such as those considered associated with adversarial and problem-solving approaches). Mindfulness can play a role in helping the lawyer do this. First, it can free a lawyer from habitual reliance on either

mind set, by helping her observe – without attachment – the thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations that typically make up and support these mindsets.... Consequently, the lawyer can adopt an attitude of curiosity, consider other options and make a discerning decision.... Second, mindfulness can help the lawyer uncover and gain distance from a preoccupation with self....help the negotiator better understand and deal with emotions that affect all participants...and when a negotiation situation threatens a lawyer's sense of identity and competence; mindfulness can help the lawyer simply notice the manifestations of the feelings of being threatened.....and decide to let them go and maybe learn from them."

This lawyerly agility that Professor Riskin is observing here – an agility that comes from being free from fixed mindsets – is the very same agility that thousands of business leaders are discovering through mindfulness awareness meditation. Such agility, not surprisingly, is all about a leader's poise and confidence in the face of novel problems, dissonant voices and unforeseen opportunities – an "emotional

flexibility" that is ready to learn, reassess and adapt.

Of course, there is more to being an agile leader than simply "letting go", and mindfulness awareness meditation exercises many other subtle yet highly concentrated "spiritual muscles" such as "opening", "loosening", "connecting", "recognizing" and much more.**

A new generation of leaders for the 21st century enterprise

Leaders alone can't do all the work, however. "Cirque du Soleil" and the NYC Ballet understand how to create the stage for elegance – the atmosphere, the tradition and the brand. And business enterprises – global, local, large and small – must also embrace new, agile ways of doing business. Besides optimizing for efficiency and profits, enterprises must also cultivate self-organizing networks – as in "Google's Bazaar" where engineers self-select projects to work on; promote cultures that revere retail excellence – as in ING Direct on line banking where IT analysts are the celebrated heroes; and enlist consumers in the joy of doing business – as in "Apple Stores" where

customers linger and linger and linger.

But core to the success of these emerging adaptive enterprises are agile leaders who can build and inspire high impact coalitions among employees, with vendors, and alongside consumers. Such leaders are artists of a sort who can confidently sip a glass of water or launch a global brand – flawless, spacious and firm. Arrange fresh flowers on a table or design a cutting edge technology – gracious, distinctive and uplifting. Such leaders are confident and poised in this diverse and ever changing climate and there is no better way to train for the challenge than with the practice of mindfulness awareness meditation. ■

**The Contemplative Lawyer: On the Potential Contributions of Mindfulness Meditation to Law Students, Lawyers and their Clients, by Professor Leonard Riskin JD, Harvard Negotiation Law Review, Volume 7:1*

*** See The Mindful Leader: Ten Principles for bringing out the best in ourselves and others by Michael Carroll (Shambhala Publishing, 2007)*



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