

Mindful Leadership

By Scott Rogers, Mobius Transformational Faculty

We are living at a time of great change and uncertainty where effective leadership is needed more than ever. While change and uncertainty are inherent in the lives we live, it has, for a long time, been easier for those living in highly developed countries to forget these underlying truths and replace them with an illusory sense of stability and predictability. But with globalization's reverberations sending tremors into local communities, the larger realities of life's complexities and challenges are imposing themselves in a more formidable manner. While people tend to react to this scenario by experiencing discomfort, even angst, the ripeness of the reality offers the opportunity to see more clearly what is happening. It helps us sustain attention for greater lengths of time, and make decisions that are more directly related to making a meaningful difference in the lives of a great many—in business, education, medicine, and law.

Mindfulness is an area of growing interest for many as society grapples with the implications of a rapidly changing world. Leaders are looking to mindfulness as a way of cultivating a set of skills to help them operate at the top of their game in the increasingly stressful and distracting environments in which they work. For many, mindfulness is a new concept that offers a stimulating and exciting change from more staid approaches to professional development. For those with a background in meditation, mindfulness meditation (one form of mindfulness practice) offers a simple, yet elegant method for finding balance amid the hustle and bustle of a hectic work-

day. And with neuroscience research finding that practicing mindfulness is associated with changes to the structure and function of the brain—which can translate into long term benefits—even the skeptics are taking note and participating in mindfulness workshops and retreats. The following offers a glimpse into what mindfulness is and some of the different ways it is being explored in the context of leadership.

Mindfulness and Attention

Paying attention resides at the core of a mindfulness practice. And so too, paying attention resides at the core of effective leadership. The difference that emerges at times is what it is to which we should be paying attention. To the leader, the answer is found “out there”—to the reports and its underlying data, to the people and their productivity, to the competition and its threat. To the mindful leader, the answer is found “out there” too, but great interest is also found “in here” attending to thoughts, feelings, and sensations that are continuously arising and passing away. Most of the time, these phenomena pass unnoticed. And yet, their subtle and not so subtle presence influences our decision making. Without awareness of this influence, decision making is a reactive process, with little actual choice involved. But with awareness, the leader has greater mastery over the options available, the timetable for making a decision, and the decision reached. The great paradox, however, is that until one comes to glimpse the presence of these inner experiences, one cannot know the measure of their influence or how

much greater their mastery could be. Mindfulness practices open the doorway to this insight.

Mindfulness, Self-Awareness and Empathy

At Harvard Business School, Professor Bill George, the former CEO of Medtronic, has long been interested in the ways that leaders can be more effective by becoming more “authentic.” His books include the bestseller “Authentic Leadership” and, more recently, “Finding True North.” To this highly successful business leader turned researcher and educator, great knowledge and experience of all things business are of limited benefit if there is not a corresponding degree of self-awareness. Self-awareness offers a leader the capacity to notice how external factors are influencing changes to thought patterns, feelings, and body sensations, which in turn allow the leader to assess how these changes are influencing the decision making process. Momentary impulses are noticed and, rather than leading to a rash decision—or ignored—are factored into a decision that appreciates the many moving parts at play. Factor into this neuroscience research that finds mindfulness practices to be associated not only with increased self-awareness, but with greater attention and working memory capacity, and it is no surprise leaders, like George, are taking note.

The role of emotional intelligence—of which self-awareness is central—in the acquisition and development of leadership skills was introduced early on in Daniel Goleman's classic “Emotional Intelligence” and more formally expressed in his recently

released “Leadership: The Power of Emotional Intelligence.” Both George and Goleman are keen on “empathy,” a hot topic in neuroscience circles and an often misunderstood aspect of emotional intelligence, as an attribute that is fundamental to effective and sustaining leadership. With businesses realizing not only the benefits to flow from cultivating a more emotionally intelligent workforce, but the ways in which each employee serves as a leader in their own right, emotional intelligence programs are being offered to employees at corporations like Google, General Mills, and Target. Books like Chade Meng Tan’s “Search Inside Yourself,” and the program of the same name that it promotes, are providing information on mindfulness, a pillar of emotional intelligence, and practical approaches to cultivating mindfulness in daily life.

Mindfulness Practice: Noticing the Mind

We often find ourselves sitting—in our office, at a business meeting or lunch—and these moments invite mindfulness practice, whether for a few breaths or 30 minutes. In contrast to the ways we sometimes approach these situations (lost in thought, sizing up an adversary, preparing for the worst), and experience these situations (feeling tense, judgmental, and worried) mindfulness practice asks that we shift our attention inward and notice the thoughts, feelings, and sensations arising in the moment. You can experience this shift right now by assuming a posture in your chair that is upright and stable and following these instructions:

1. Bringing awareness to your breathing, noticing the movement of your body with each breath you take.

2. Following the in-breath, paying attention to the air that flows into your nose or mouth, or to your belly as it lifts with the breath.
3. Following the out-breath, sensing the body as you exhale.
4. Resting your awareness on the breath with the intention to maintain your attention on the breath.
5. When you notice your mind moving off onto a distraction or getting lost in thought, gently bringing your attention back to the breath.

This simple instruction forms the basis for a mindfulness sitting practice. If you are alone you may wish to close or lower your eyes while you practice as this can be helpful for toning down distraction and cultivating an inward focus. One of the first things you’ll notice is how challenging it is to keep your attention in one place when your mind is moving about. It is all too easy to get lost in the thoughts that arise (as we often do) and operate reactively out of habit. By bringing your attention back to the breath, again and again, and again, you become more adept at noticing when your mind has wandered, doing something about it, and not getting pulled further and further afield. This practice is often regarded as a powerful experience and an effective exercising of the muscle of attention. Its regular practice pays dividends when interacting with another person or in a group setting.

Mindfulness, Attitude and Possibility

Another important approach to mindful leadership is found in the work of psychology professor, Ellen Langer, and her 30 years of

research and writing on the subject of mindfulness. Langer, who penned *Mindfulness and Mindful Learning* and speaks on the crucial role of mindfulness in decision making and leadership, offers an approach that focuses more on the ways we attend to momentary experience, than on meditation, as the term is commonly understood. While the importance of mindfulness meditation cannot be overstated, many find a sitting meditation practice to be challenging to implement. This often limits the role mindfulness plays in their lives. Langer’s approach, which does not espouse meditation as a central route to the cultivation of mindful awareness, is a powerful vehicle to mindful living and offers a complementary approach that works well alongside mindfulness meditation. To leaders who, like most of us, often operate on automatic pilot, Langer makes the case that an attitude of interest and curiosity opens the mind and body to opportunities that continually present themselves but are often overlooked. Not surprisingly, the fruits of a mindfulness meditation practice include the cultivation of a mind that is open to the mystery of the unknown and to the limitless possibilities that reside in each moment. In some ways, Langer’s approach operates in reverse as she recognizes the ability we have to choose to pay attention and offers guideposts on the ways of doing so that enrich momentary experience and decision making.

Mindfulness Practice: Noticing the New

Langer invites leaders to snap out of automatic pilot by choosing to do so. Noting that it is next to impossible to know that one is in a state of automatic pilot—hence its common-

place presence—Langer suggests that leaders make the deliberate decision to pay attention to what's taking place with a curious and interested mind. Even more, she urges leaders to awaken mindfulness in those they lead. The key is noticing what is new—and it's all new. Notwithstanding that we tend to attribute a predictability to that which we have already encountered, realizing that everything is always changing and therefore new, readies us for the moments to come, unhindered by the past.

Walking into a business meeting, whether easygoing or stressful, is often attended to in a habitual way. Langer encourages taking a fresh look at the people and surroundings; noticing that which we tend not to notice and in doing so, open the mind to a host of insights and opportunities that may otherwise have never arisen or taken longer to do so. Langer asserts that the intentional

act of “noticing” positions one in the present moment where there is a natural sensitivity to context, and an awareness of change and uncertainty. And because leaders are looked to as guides for future action, a leader who sees clearly the inherent uncertainty and instability of situations and circumstances, is more likely to appreciate that their own “not knowing” is less a character flaw that needs to be concealed at all costs and more a natural expression of reality. Relieved of the burden of needing to know that which is unknowable, leaders are better prepared to learn what they need to learn to lead with courage and vision.

Bridging Experience and Attitude

Though the application of mindfulness in the leadership context is relatively new (though some would suggest that traditional mindfulness practices have long been a

basis for the development of strong leadership skills and insights), there are a growing number of websites, books, and events that explore this exciting area. Different approaches will draw off the different perspectives and backgrounds of their proponents, and it is likely that the coming years will offer a diverse collection of methods. Some will be borne out of traditional mindfulness practices while others will be based on more modern approaches. For now, you can bridge the two approaches discussed above by establishing an attitude of openness and

interest in persons, places and things (i.e., the newness of nouns), while paying attention to the thoughts, feelings, and body sensations arising in the body and mind (i.e., the newness of me). In your next meeting, notice what's new about the person and periodically check in with the thoughts, feelings, and sensations arising during your interaction. But rather than comment on your inner experience or doing something about it, just notice it. The breath can be a powerful anchor allowing you to remain present for the conversation without reacting to these momentary influences. This same practice is available to you when, upon quiet reflection you strategize next steps to take with an important opportunity. There too thoughts, feelings, and sensations will arise and pass away. Noticing them, and allowing them to be as they are, will offer you interesting insights and a renewed sense of well-being.

Through mindfulness practice—and it is a practice—we notice the richness of our inner experiences without them flooding us. We see and sense them with greater clarity, and, doing so, have greater mastery over them. We have greater mastery over ourselves, of the decisions we make, and choose not to make, and over the actions we take, and refrain from taking. We also come to see those around us and the events continuously taking place, the pleasant and unpleasant, as multi-faceted and exciting. Intrigued by the mystery, we are freed from having to know the answers to everything. Uncertainty becomes not only bearable, but fascinating. And through that fascination, we find in ourselves a leader interested in facing the unknown and finding out what happens next. ■



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