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Sample pages

1

The mindful leader

The opening questions

- What is the perception of mindfulness in your organisation?
- What approaches to mindfulness have you experienced?
- If you have experienced mindfulness techniques – were any of them helpful to you?

As a leader who wishes to include mindful practice professionally, it is helpful to have a sense of what it is and where it comes from; if nothing else, but to convince the sceptics of your credibility on the topic!

Where does mindfulness originate?

It was in 1979 when the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts presented the 'Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction' programme (MBSR), which brought the Buddhist practice of meditation into the formal scientific and clinical setting.

MBSR, in its use of the term 'mindfulness', acknowledged its practice within Buddhism. The practice of mindfulness is the seventh factor of the eightfold path, one of Buddhism's

'Four Noble Truths'. Through *mindful* meditation for transcendence, Buddhists attained:

- '... a state of peace and bliss'
- '... contemplation of one's own experience, subsumed under the four objective domains of the body, feelings, states of mind, and experiential phenomena'
- '... greater compassion'.

(Bodhi, 2013)

As such, the meditation practised within MBSR was also focused on those three elements:

- a peaceful emotional state
- awareness and balance of the body and mind
- compassion (for the self and other).

The course, still popular today, comprises a mix of meditation retreats where participants focus on yoga-breathing and broadening awareness of their bodies.

When it first appeared on the scene, this unification of 'East meets West' as a form of treatment generated interest, but, as the term 'mindfulness' grew in popularity, so did the need to formally evaluate the science behind it. Buddhism would be accepting of practice enabling self-reported transcendence; science needed more to be convinced.

The growing literature on mindfulness included development of the MBSR work of Jon Kabat-Zinn (widely credited for the popularity of mindfulness) and the use of formal meditation and focused breathing began to yield results:

- Reports of a better work–life balance (e.g. Shanafelt *et al.*, 2012; Michel *et al.*, 2014).
- Improvements in resilience (e.g. Keye and Pidgeon, 2013; Pidgeon and Keye, 2014).

- Performance benefits for leaders, such as improvements in compassion and collaboration (e.g. Ling and Chin, 2012; Trisgolio, 2017).

As the interest grew, more books were written on the topic to encourage the practice to spread, and organisations started taking an interest as a means of improving the performance of their staff.

Unfortunately, what is also clear is that many books on mindfulness, in trying to convince leaders to implement it, would often focus on explaining the neuroscience behind the concept, for example: the improvement of neural pathways and circuitry in the brain (e.g. Davidson and Lutz, 2008). This was all too easy to criticise due to lack of verifiable evidence. ‘In particular’, said emotional intelligence writer Goleman in 2017, there is a lack of fit to the ‘gold standards for medical research’. Such damning words in sceptical industry papers and scientific journals meant the leader who embraced it might choose to invest in it (and sometimes their passion would inspire their teams to give it a go) but many would not.

Arguably, mindfulness aside, it has long been known that simple deep breathing can make a huge difference to performance. At the very least, this element can be demonstrated.

Try the following exercise.

EXERCISE 1.1

What are your levels of stress or calm?

Take note of your current level of stress or calm:

Very stressed 5 4 3 2 1 Not stressed
at all

Sit comfortably with your hands in a relaxed position in your lap

Take a deep breath in through the nose for a count of three

Hold it for three

Release it slowly by breathing out through the mouth for a count of six

Repeat the process five times

Take note again of your level of stress or calm:

Very stressed 5 4 3 2 1 Not stressed
at all

Hopefully, you will perceive a greater level of calm following the exercise.

Physiologically, our levels of anxiety are regulated by the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) and the sympathetic nervous system (SNS). As we breathe in, blood is drawn to the lungs and the heart responds to this deficit (using the SNS) by pumping more around the body. As we exhale, the PNS slows the heart down because the deficit is reduced. The body is efficient at maintaining the balance in a healthy heart. However, under stress, breathing becomes shallow and erratic, which means that both systems are trying to work but find it harder to reach equilibrium. However, the act of slow, relaxed, deep breathing has the added effect of activating the 'slow adapting pulmonary stretch receptors' (SARs), which inhibit the working of the SNS so it does not increase the pumping of the heart muscle (MacKinnon, 2016). Therefore, slow, deep breathing is effective in inducing calm.

However, mindfulness can bring more than that. It is not just about calming the mind through breathing exercises or meditation, it can include techniques for clearing and re-energising the mind too.

How a clear mind improves organisational performance

One of the disadvantages of the frantic multi-tasking world in which we live – and which leaders are often trained to improve their skills within – is not being ‘fully present’ within everything that needs to be done. How many times have you been talking to a friend, a spouse, your child and found yourself distracted by your phone, tablet or laptop? The balance that leaders need to strike is between quality and quantity – in life and in work.

In his book *High Performance Habits*, Brendan Burchard (2017) spoke of an executive who seemed able to handle a complex and extremely tight schedule and still offer engaged and high performance. Burchard identified that, in between each item on the list, the executive would perform a mental palette cleanse. In between running from one meeting to another, he would go to the bathroom, splash his face with cold water and do a couple of star jumps. He would complete one task before moving to the other. Burchard tried it for himself and found he could engage more with each new task. In the same way as a wine connoisseur might sip water or eat a dry cracker between tastings so as not to affect the taste of the new wine with any flavour of the old – if a leader is able to afford him or herself a ‘mind cleanse’ between tasks, engagement will be refreshed for the next.

Try this exercise.

EXERCISE 1.2

Imagine you have to send a series of emails, then go to a meeting, then go to another meeting.

1. After you have completed your emails, splash some water on your face, take a couple of deep breaths or do some star jumps to clear your mind prior to your next engagement.

2. After the meeting, do the same.

You will find that you will be re-energised for the start of that next task.

At the very least, doing this means that you are still completing all your tasks – but are giving each a higher quality of attention.

Although this technique would not necessarily be classified under 'mindfulness', it is, arguably, a good means of improving your 'embodied awareness'. Thus I posit now that any technique aimed at improving awareness, compassion or balance that may be of benefit to performance may fall within the realm of 'mindful practice' ... and, without any clear codification of the term 'mindfulness' as yet, if it works – use it!

So what does mindful practice entail for the leader?

A report by The Mindfulness Initiative (2016) presents *a series of mindfulness interventions* and reviews undertaken by Cranfield, Birmingham and Aberystwyth Universities, resulting in organisational self-reports of participants:

- feeling more focused
- experiencing an improvement in behavioural insights
- moving forward rather than brooding

A team that is able to do this will be of benefit to any organisation.

Following this, Daniel Goleman recanted his earlier concern and conceded that, following a literature review of the studies, there are many discrepancies in the academic rigour;

however, there is still enough evidence to suggest that, ‘while you shouldn’t believe everything you hear about mindfulness, there are, indeed, payoffs . . . ’ (Goleman, 2017).

Taking the application of the common mindful techniques (breathing, meditation and exercises for awareness) a step further, research by Tang and Carr (2018) suggests that *any* intervention that improves self-awareness can be beneficial to executives. They ran a 10-week ‘Mindfulness Programme’ for leadership and management students at Brunel University following a session structure of:

- positive affirmations
- breathing exercises entitled ‘Yoga breathing’
- theory about the technique being used
- practice
- reflection and feedback
- guided meditation

and found that participants reported improvements in the categories codified through Bodhi (2015):

- embodied awareness
- emotional balance
- compassion

as well as in

- confidence
- ability to relax
- creativity
- clarity in decision making

Exercises and techniques within the programme included activities inspired by neurolinguistic programming (NLP) and

psychology as a means to elicit a greater awareness of the self – some of which are also included in this book.

As such, it is arguable that the scope of 'mindful practice' extends beyond meditation and breathing and – even better – can be adaptable to how the leader wishes to incorporate it into the organisation.

How can I apply mindfulness as a leader?

Rather than approaching mindfulness as a buzzword, it is most effective when incorporated into daily life. It is not essential to introduce 'meditation lunch hours' but encouraging your teams to do some deep breathing (or any 'mind' cleanse activity) before they enter a meeting can cleanse the mind and raise their performance and credibility (Mudd, 2015). This concept can be seen in practice within the McLaren Honda Technology Centre where all staff have to pass through a completely white corridor before entering the workplace (MAHLE Powertrain Ltd, 2017). The relative openness of the concept means it is possible for the leader to be creative in applying mindful practice, and this book will offer suggestions as to how this may be done.

Therefore, one of the most effective ways in which a leader can apply mindfulness is through its use in common parlance – 'Just be mindful' – be *more aware*.

Whether this is helped by mindful meditation, deep breathing, yoga or any of the exercises and techniques in this book – including merely being told to 'be more aware' – if an exercise is effective, or if you tweak it and it is effective, *then utilise it*.

With multi-tasking a necessary part of leadership, and invaluable to keeping up with the fast-paced world, leadership development focuses on being able to attend to numerous demands and display a range of skills

simultaneously (Williams, 2016). Mindfulness seeks to improve not the number of skills a leader has but the *depth and quality* of those skills in performance.

EXERCISE 1.3

Think of your abilities/traits on a scale. Outline them in no particular order.



FIGURE 1.1 An example using the commonly cited leadership skills/traits

Those who are experienced or natural leaders may have a longer scale than those who are just starting or learning. But, whether you are already practised or just starting out, you have the capacity to develop more.

The difference between taking a *mindful* approach to leadership and any other leadership training is not in making the scale longer, but by adding depth.

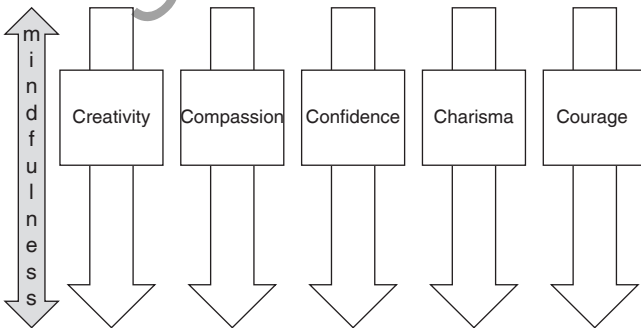


FIGURE 1.2 Adding depth to the commonly cited leadership skills/traits

By incorporating mindful practice to enhance your self-awareness, you will refine the leadership skills you already have, as well as develop further your emotional agility to adapt as needed – either using what you have or through fostering innovation.

Mindfulness also functions as a form of self-care

It is getting more and more common to introduce well-being and self-care into books aimed at the high-flying executive. The reason is simple: the higher you fly, the harder you work, but the faster you may become exhausted. One means of developing your longevity at the top is through self-care.

Self-care may be defined as ‘. . . care provided “for you, by you”. It’s about identifying your own needs and taking steps to meet them. It is taking the time to do some of the activities that nurture you. Self-care is about taking proper care of yourself and treating yourself as kindly as you treat others.’ (Fort Garry Women’s Resource Centre, California, 2018). It is also one of the most important elements of longevity in leadership. No matter what your skill, if your health forces you to retire, you can no longer demonstrate it. According to Su (2017), self-care is no longer ‘. . . a luxury; it’s part of the job’.

Every day as a leader comes with pressure. Significant decisions have to be made – which have far-reaching consequences; the threat of competition is always lurking; alliances may need to be formed, which may or may not serve you long term; further, as an emotional agile leader, often you will have a team who – with open lines of communication – will seek your advice as they need to; and, of course, you will also have a fulfilling life outside the workplace, which needs maintenance and attention. This is emotionally draining.

Su (2017) lists the four detrimental behaviours into which leaders slip when self-care is not part of their routine:

- self-neglect
- self-management
- self-sabotage
- self-preservation

Because of the frenetic pace at which a leader's life may move – not forgetting that those who are successful in the workplace often have success in their personal lives (an area that needs to be looked after too) – it is essential for the leader to remain authentic, grounded and recharged. It is in these very areas that mindfulness plays a part. Permeating all walks of life with no restriction on age nor belief system, this practice offers everyone – particularly the leader – some respite, often achieving a better balance and resilience at home and in the workplace (Mindfulnet.org, 2017).

Mindful practice has the potential to enhance *emotional agility* – the ability to be aware of your emotions as well as adapt them to the needs of others; and *resilience* – the ability to pick yourself up again following setbacks *and* continue to perform at your best for everyone else, whether you are making decisions, problem solving, creating or innovating, providing support or building relationships. It has a place professionally and can enhance your personal well-being too.

Let the academics concern themselves with framing and codifying mindfulness. The techniques in this book will support and enhance your performance and that of your team.

IN SUMMARY

1. Despite there being some question marks over the exact science and framing of 'mindfulness', research shows it has very successful applications.
2. In addition to (rather than a substitute for) leadership skills, it can help sift through the white noise to get an accurate view of the various options in a given situation.
3. Mindful practice brings depth and breadth to your current leadership skills, thus improving performance.
4. It helps teams remain open to new ideas – from wherever they may generate – and also to draw easily from their own resourcefulness.
5. Mindfulness encourages a mindset of openness and compassion, conducive to successful collaboration, and it promotes a culture of help and assistance rather than envy and competition. It teaches you to reframe failure so that you may learn and grow; it encourages gratitude to appreciate where you are in the present – and how much you can become in the future.
6. Emotional agility within the pressures of leadership needs support and self-care to avoid exhaustion.
7. To garner the benefits, mindful practice is about raising awareness of the self and others – which, in turn, creates a clear platform for creativity, decision making and learning, and this can be applied in any way that best suits your organisation.
8. These benefits do not only benefit the working professional, but also extend further into your own personal life.
9. And remember, whatever your final approach to incorporating mindful practice, mindfulness must always be *additional* to good basic organisational procedures already in place, otherwise this can give rise to 'pseudo growth' – something that can be detrimental and unhealthy (Maslow,1970).

CHAPTER 1 TOOLKIT



- Mindfulness remains a contemporary issue in leadership.
- Companies who have introduced mindfulness into their working practice have reaped rewards in performance, but it is still viewed with scepticism.
- This chapter introduced the leader to the history of mindfulness and its application within the business world.

Key points to remember

1. *Always* remember mindfulness can help clear much needed space within your busy schedule and practise a 'mind cleanse' or take time to breathe deeply before rushing to the next thing.
2. *Sometimes* take a moment to recognise how your body is feeling.
3. *Try* to introduce a short time for mindful practice into your day (even if it is 10 minutes before bed).