Taming the Monkey Mind

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RECALL A scenario like this: it’s Thursday of a very difficult week. A client you were wooing has gone cold, relations among members of the management team have reached a new low and there seems to be an expectation that you’ll fix it. On the home front, an elderly parent has been hospitalised and relations with your partner are strained. You have a board meeting tonight and feel ill prepared. You are exhausted but were banking on the next hour to get something off your desk. There’s a knock at the half-open door and your heart sinks. You start wondering how to get rid of whoever it is and leave enough time to finish the job you’ve been trying to complete since the start of the week…

Take two. It’s Thursday and a lot has happened. You have seen your parent into hospital and witnessed the beginning of a new phase in their dying, but also a new openness between you. They need you now and you’ve realised it. The crisis has given you a fresh appreciation of the preciousness of other close relationships. Coming out of the hospital, you take a deep breath of crisp winter air. A couple of setbacks and disappointments circulate in the workplace, but what strikes you is how resilient people are. There are many small acts of support. It occurs to you the Board might like to hear this less formal evidence of the organisation’s health and adaptability at the meeting tonight. There’s a knock at the half-open door and glancing up you see it’s the very person you have been concerned about…

These two scenarios play out very different ways of experiencing the same events. The first is reactive and based on the assumption that the job of leadership is to get through the work. The second is mindful. It recognises that while the work will always be there, it is how and with what intent we focus our attention that determines the quality of leadership. Most of us are trapped by our minds. A lot of the “thinking” work we believe necessary and useful is far from it. Rather, we spend a large proportion of our waking hours with an endlessly repeating subliminal script playing – “junk mail”, as the Buddhist teacher Dzogchen Rinpoche calls it. Such thoughts often have little to do with what is going on around us, or what might be useful for us to focus on at this moment.

TO BECOME TRULY EFFECTIVE LEADERS WE MUST FIRST DEVELOP THE CAPACITY TO MASTER OUR UNRULY MINDS
MINDFULNESS CAN ENCOURAGE US TO STEP BACK FROM A HUNGRY EGO, AND ENHANCE PROSPECTS FOR HAPPINESS

Likely to be unconsciously activated, regrets about previous events, or anxieties about future ones, these thoughts demonstrate ingenuity in repackageing themselves as new and important. Just like the other junk mail messages that clutter up our in box, they end up sucking us in. We get caught up in the irritation and emotional effort of sorting and deleting them – until they reincarnate it in another form the next day.

Having an overly “busy” mind without the skill or capacity to tame it is a pervasive modern ailment. Evidence shows that this clutter of uncivilised yet powerful thoughts is dangerous to our health and wellbeing, but it may also be bad for our leadership.

Practitioners and scholars of Eastern philosophies such as Yoga and Buddhism have long been interested in mapping the activities of the mind. For these traditions, our capacity to find happiness and reduce suffering for ourselves and others depends on learning to bring some control to our unruly “monkey” minds.

Scientific advances over the last few decades have also ushered in specialisations in cognitive science and neural biology sometimes known as consciousness studies. Much of this research, aided by the capacity to scientifically map brain connectivity, aims to explain the workings of consciousness in neuro-scientific terms. It shows, as did the yogis and gurus before, that the mind is comprised of multiple parts and that our consciousness is to some extent a unique product of the interactions between these parts.

This research also provides firm evidence of neural plasticity. The billions of neural connections determining what and how we think are highly changeable, and they continue to change – to grow, form new connections and disconnect – through adulthood and into old age. A wide range of evidence indicates that the mind is available for and responsive to conscious adjustment – for example, people working with focused attention alone can substantially reduce their experience of pain and the likelihood of relapse for a range of physical and mental conditions. Further, the mind is highly responsive. What we think about and how expansively we keep thinking as we age is dependent on social context and interaction with our bodies – conclusively demonstrating the significance of the mind-body link.

Critical philosophers and social theorists are also concerned that the way the mind is constructed, understood and promulgated (often by experts) creates the conditions for new forms of oppression – for example, providing for rigid determinations of “healthy” minds and “normal” mind functioning. Mindfulness is not a technique to be applied to bolster narcissism, advance a career or build a brand. Rather, mind and consciousness research can encourage us to step back from a hungry ego, to reflect on our intentions and approaches in leadership, and enhance prospects for reduced conflict, and greater happiness and well being for both leaders and their followers.

My colleague at Melbourne Business School, Richard Searle, and I suggest there are several ways that insights about the mind’s activities and enhanced mindfulness may be of central importance to leaders and leadership. They can foster capacities to:

- identify and communicate the overarching purpose and meaning of organisational activities
- screens the clutter of information that leaders often face, allowing them to give high-quality attention and focus to key issues
- deeply and powerfully relate to others and practice emotionally intelligent, transformational leadership
- be self-aware about how our lives as leaders can become hijacked by ego and narrow scripts about the ways we should “do” leadership.
Becoming mindful means learning how to observe and detach from extraneous thought, allowing for a stiller, clearer consciousness that leads to less distraction and more presence. Being mindful does not mean having a “full” mind. Rather, it is sometimes defined as “paying attention without judgment”, and includes encouraging a focus on the present moment (as opposed to allowing the mind to be preoccupied with the past or planning the future). It can include becoming skilled at various forms of attention – attentional ease, attentional focus or attentional stability – depending on the requirements of the context.

Mindfulness opens up ways to react to thoughts differently. By inserting a momentary psychic distance from thought, we become more able to choose how we react, whether it is simply to note that thought, to actively let it go, or to take the time to understand where it has come from and how it is functioning. In this way, mindfulness is consistent with forms of therapy and has itself been incorporated into Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT).

Far more issues and information comes through a leader’s door than can be humanly processed, let alone dealt with. Leaders have to develop the capacity to discern signals and give their attention to what matters most. The corporate governance and business ethics literature is replete with examples of senior executives and boards who, in the avalanche of information coming to them from stakeholders, failed to attend to the critical issues.

In these settings, leaders need to respond to external stakeholders and customer needs in ways that are clear-sighted, fully present and not prematurely judgmental. They need to steer clear of common habits of stereotyping and discounting the warnings of critics. Further, leaders need to be able to hold their own psychological baggage at bay, particularly when they are working in high-pressure, stressful situations. Negotiation specialists such as Mark Gerzon and Australia’s Tom Fisher advocate the use of mindfulness for leaders involved in mediation and conflict transformation.

There are many situations in which mindfulness can assist leaders. One is where CEOs are grappling with big transitions, such as succession planning. A common example is where a visionary or highly entrepreneurial leader, often strongly invested in a business, needs to find ways of stepping back and supporting others to take the business forward – sometimes in radically different ways. Strategies of mindfulness can assist because they help leaders separate out from a lifetime’s career the central purposes or legacies they want to ensure have some continuity. They also assist in the processes of letting go of what may appear to be indispensable ways of doing things.

Successfully navigating transitions like this requires us to see how caught up with a particular role our identities have become. Our sense of self has become inextricably attached to a particular persona, with all of the expertise, knowledge, contacts, credibility, and “runs on the board” legitimacy that has been built up in our work.

It is a frightening but necessary step to let go to at least of part of this identity, and trust that without it one is still able to add value. In fact, leaders often find that it is the very absence of all those props that sometimes enable them to deliver more or better leadership in a new role. A leader who is stepping back may be in a unique position to ask questions about issues that incumbents assume are non-negotiable. Mindfulness concepts give us the means to separate from that ego and connect to a higher, overarching or shared set of purposes. A doorway opens when we acknowledge that we are more than how we are thinking about ourselves at present. We have more possibilities than those a wary or backward-looking mind allows us.

All leadership work is relational. The main way a leader can make a positive impact is through the relationships he or she cultivates with followers. Even in those cases where followers never meet their leader, the latter can have influence because followers feel that the leader “speaks” to them, that they have a message that is significant and true for them, or a story or actions that mobilise them. Despite this, there are pressures that can distance leaders from followers. Leaders can find themselves behind tight security, or so overwhelmed by work it’s hard to find space and time to listen, to hear what may be happening for others. There are many cases where leaders and boards have failed to respond to important warning signs of ethical contravention or impending crises. Having the capacity to focus the means to separate from that ego and connect to a higher, overarching or shared set of purposes. A doorway opens when we acknowledge that we are more than how we are thinking about ourselves at present. We have more possibilities than those a wary or backward-looking mind allows us.

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