Leading Mindfully at Work

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How might insights about the nature of the mind change the way we work and lead in our organizations? Consider the following two scenarios.

**Scenario One** It’s Thursday of a very difficult week. A program you have been working on is encountering deep problems, 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, your elderly parent has been hospitalized and relations with your partner are strained. You have a board meeting tonight and feel ill prepared. You are exhausted but were relying 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…

**Scenario 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 realized it. The crisis has given you a fresh appreciation of the preciousness of other people in your life. 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 and how we support others at work.

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1 This article was written for the ‘Mind and its Potential’ Conference but draws on Sinclair (2007a and 2007b) and Searle (2008, 2009). Correspondence to Prof. Amanda Sinclair, Melbourne Business School, 200 Leicester Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia.
Mind Practices at Work

At Melbourne Business School, we have been introducing concepts and practices of mindfulness, including meditation, yoga and other reflective approaches into our teaching on the MBA program, in executive programs, coaching and other aspects of our work. Since 2004 we’ve been doing this in a systematic way, including running several 4 day Mindful Leadership programs and introducing mindfulness into our mainstream leadership programs alongside other techniques we use such as dialogue, feedback and reflective practice. Our view is that mindfulness can assist leaders be more effective and fulfilled in their leadership work whether or not that leadership is exercised from a formal position of authority. Having said that, we are still learning a lot about how mindfulness might be incorporated into work, leadership and organizations. This is work in progress.

We begin with a brief discussion about the application of mind practices at work. We review some of the research we draw on in bringing together mindfulness, meditation and leadership before describing what we do in our work with leaders and what happens.

Often asked for definitions of mindful leadership or leading mindfully, our experience is that it’s more useful to give people the experience of slowing down, becoming more observant and paying attention to what’s going on in the present moment. A simple, powerful definition of mindfulness is to bring one’s full awareness into the moment. Jon Kabat Zinn defines it as paying attention without judgment – of self or others – an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. Why?

Most of us are trapped by our minds. A lot of the “thinking” we do at work and which 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.

Our experience is that managers and leaders are often captive of ‘excessive thinking’. Sometimes careers and identities have been built on thinking. But at some point, habits of thinking can get in the way of those same individuals capacity to exercise leadership. Many people are so locked in their own thoughts that they:

- fail to notice or have ways of addressing what is really going on
- find it difficult to focus energy on what really matters amidst the clutter
- get very attached to their own ‘solutions’ and find it hard to adapt or listen.

On the positive side many are also looking for new ways to do their work: at a basic level to reduce the stress and cope with workload but at a more profound level, to re-energise themselves, to be more aware, present and effective. Practices of mindfulness can then support leaders to

- screen information and demands, giving high-quality attention to the key issues
- direct influence and efforts to purposes and values that we believe in
- be more in the moment, less driven and exhausted by the lower order demands, the meetings and emails that dominate working lives
- be more connected and present to others rather than on automatic pilot, instrumental or mechanical in interactions
- be self-aware about how working lives can become hijacked by old patterns, defensiveness, ego needs and narrow scripts
- work and lead with a sense of aliveness, a joy and appreciation of others

One thing we believe is that evolving understandings of the mind should not be used to harness people more complianntly to work or oppressive work habits. Neither should mindfulness be used to help people find enough resilience to go back into fundamentally unsustainable work roles. We labour this point, because knowing the tendencies of the leadership literature well, what often happens with great rediscovered ideas is that they get drawn into the big mill of ‘top tips for leaders’. Buddhism warns of the dangers of “spiritual materialism”: exploiting spiritual insights for self-aggrandising or material ends (Trungpa 1973). 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 greater happiness and well being for all in society.

What research do we draw on in our Mindful Leadership work?

We both came to meditation to cope with very difficult periods in our lives. Amanda undertook yoga teacher training and Yoga and Buddhist philosophies provided a way into new understandings of the mind (for example Patanjali’s Yoga sutras). Richard drew particularly on the meditation teaching of the Gawler Foundation in Melbourne and the Harvard Insight Negotiation Initiative. Buddhist writing by, for example, His Holiness the Dalai Lama; Sogyal Rinpoche; Thich Nhat Hanh and Ayya Khema have been a key source of our evolving practices and understanding. Similarly, the writing of Ian Gawler and colleagues such as Craig Hassed have provided powerful new insights about the capacity of meditation to heal and foster well being. We have both just completed meditation teacher training with the Gawler Foundation.

Our work in mindful leadership has also been strongly inspired by the writing and practices of Jon Kabat Zinn. The therapeutic applications of mindfulness and the now wide range of research documenting its value to treat a range of psychological and physical ailments have provided a firm foundation (see Melbourne Mindfulness Group for a review). The burgeoning research in neuroscience (Schwartz 200 Greenfield 2008; Doidge 2007) has demonstrated unequivocally the plasticity of the brain and that we can consciously shape brain physiology by working with the mind. 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 likelihood of relapse. Further, and importantly from the point of view of our interest in leadership education, the brain and mind are highly responsive: changing habits of thinking and attention translate into changes in brain physiology which in turn supports innovation and adaption in functioning.

This scientific evidence is helpful and persuasive, particularly as we work with logical, evidence oriented and often scientifically trained managers. At the same time, we don’t spend too much time on recounting this evidence. Our preference is to work by giving people some experiences of slowing down and becoming more mindful. As Williams and his colleagues note, logic and knowledge of the latest research are often not of practical use ‘because they tend to speak only to the head through thought and reasoning’ whereas its practice and experimentation that work (Williams et.al.2007: 7).
Turning to leadership, our work has been strongly influenced by the research and methods of Heifetz (1994; 2002) and his colleagues at the Kennedy School of Government (in fact, we met at a program in Boston in 2004, not long after our two organizations merged). Heifetz makes the case that leadership often involves ‘getting on the balcony’ of the action; ‘giving the work back to the group’ (rather than feeling leaders must provide answers) and managing one’s own hungers. We find that our own experiences of teaching leadership and many of Heifetz’ ideas about leadership connect directly to practices of mindfulness, such as the power of reflection and awareness; of finding stillness and a place of being less ego driven; of mobilizing others through one’s own presence.

There are a cluster of researchers working in organizational change and dialogue whose work we have found very helpful. These include Senge and his colleagues (2005), Scharmer (2007) and others such as Isaacs (1999), who are interested in the power of deep listening, of noticing and paying attention to often overlooked aspects of organizational life, in order to foster openness and transformation.

Amanda has also found the work of some philosophers, feminists and critical social theorists helpful to understand the way constructs of the mind have operated to negate the evidence of the body, for example. Belgian feminist Irigaray writes about how conventions of Western philosophy have left out the value of relationships, love and connection in human experience. Perhaps surprisingly, critical theorists and Buddhism share the observation that we often get caught up in the business of producing the self and that stepping back from these habits can be freeing – both for ourselves and others.

While this is a brief overview of large bodies of research, our experience is that there are valuable connections to be made across these eclectic traditions. We generally find that the groups we work with are open to learning from these sources about how they might work – and live – differently.

What do we do when we work with mindfulness and leadership?

In introducing groups of leaders and managers to ideas and practices of mindfulness we seek to do the following five things. Perhaps more important than the content are our efforts to model mindfulness ourselves and create a stiller space for experimentation.

1. Slow things down, encouraging people to listen, notice and develop a much deeper appreciation of what’s going on – with others around them and themselves. Richard terms this ‘stillness in action’. It goes along with becoming more reflective and observant, picking up on more subtle cues of bodies and emotions. He says ‘deep, still and generous listening will move groups’ and our work with Indigenous leaders has shown us how much their deep listening changes things.

2. Encourage people to get present and real, to allow themselves to get in touch with their emotions and their vulnerability, to take off some layers of armour (described in some leadership literature as being more authentic). In the workplace, people (especially women) are often counseled to toughen themselves up but there is no research that supports that this as an effective way to do leadership. Rather, it is a cultural norm. Our experience is that
3. Encourage people to experience their interconnection. Leaders sometimes have the illusion that they can orchestrate the work from above or in front of the team. In fact very little valuable work gets done by individuals on their own. There are several discernible steps watching groups work through this process: people initially just tell each other what they think they need to hear. Gradually they start to work out its good to listen and then it’s essential to find a level of trust. This goes against the great heroic myths of our society where the leader is the stoic loner.

4. Develop the capacity to name what is not being named, to notice what is not being said, to face up to and find ways to discuss conflicts and difference, how some people regularly are getting shut down, how anxieties are being hidden behind routine defenses. This is often the hardest part of the work for us. Participants sometimes come to mindfulness and leadership thinking it will be gentle, soft or Zen like. Its not. If it’s working, it’s often challenging, confronting and exhausting. Slowing down in itself can be radically unsettling. As one participant described ‘Leadership is uncomfortable: you can feel vulnerable and you face an unknown path ... As a group, however, we saw that it’s ok to be vulnerable - it can build trust among people, and that as the leader you don’t always have to control situations. Instead you can learn to trust that the team will pull together with solutions.’

5. Encourage some experimentation with and letting go of habits and views that people hold onto tightly, sometimes as a central part of identity. We explore concepts of self, identity and identity work encouraging participants to notice how they invest energy in unnecessarily defending and securing a sense of self. Mindfulness helps us see how ego needs and attachments to ways of doing things can get in the way of leadership.

Alongside this slowing down and developing better attention we introduce some very different ideas about what leadership might be. Many people working in organisations think of leadership as the job done by CEOs and involving big deeds. It’s the heroic model where leadership is demonstrated by leading at the front and knowing exactly where the organisation should go. Our view is that leadership is done in the group, in the everyday connections and conversations we have, in relationship and in the spaces between people. Leaders are not above the rest. Rather, leadership is a way of being with the rest that supports, inspires and mobilises others towards purposes they value.

What happens?

A lot! We receive quite profound feedback about how peoples’ lives and work changes after being introduced to mindfulness. The comments and examples described below give a taste and although they do not include everyone, there is plenty to inspire us to continue. Some of the things that happen are people:

1. let go of some things – ways of being or ideas about how they must be
2. recognize the value from listening to and learning from others
3. reconnect to values and how to work in a way that makes a difference
4. initiate deeper dialogue with their teams (and their partners and families), share what they are trying to do differently and ask for feedback and help
5. make career changes and pursue things they have been dreaming about
6. establish regular exercise (such as walking or yoga) and meditation practices
7. feel happier

Four months after the Mindful Leadership program a senior public sector manager reported 'life – and most especially my inner sense of calm and happiness - has moved ahead in leaps and bounds.' She had received outstanding results in feedback from both her team and managers and experienced much less stress. 'I know where we want to get to, and I focus on the present as the means to get there. Regular yoga is still happening. And joy and personal riches are increasing.' Another senior corporate manager described 'I feel far more powerful and able to allow whatever is expressed through me to emerge. What gets in the way of that expression is gone. These aren't just words – they are real life experiences. I have crossed a threshold and identified territory that I have long admired from a distance but never had the courage to land on.

Sue Dever was Director of ACT Capital Linen Service when she undertook the Mindful Leadership program in August 2008. When we followed up recently we found her in a new role as Executive Director of Territory Services – overseeing six key government service businesses in addition to the one she was leading a year ago. Asked about the impact of the ideas and practices of mindfulness Sue says:

“I still use them. It’s really good to pull the materials out. I use them to talk to staff. Taking the time to sit back and look at things from the point of view of others including; staff, clients and members of the community. Being patient to stop and listen while also being persistent and not giving up on the things you believe are important. I came back (from the course) and undertook a development process with my managers. We bought them ipods and audio books on managing differently. At the end of each book the team then questioned the learning and what they could take from the learning that would change the way we do business. We made a lot of different team decisions as a result, and I’ve been trying many different ways to communicate. Also, working with them to have the courage to speak up, we need to be able to challenge each other and not be defensive. When I coach other people, they are often afraid of making a fool of themselves. By encouraging them to have the sometimes difficult conversations we have stopped a whole lot of fear and we build a broader understanding of the importance of addressing people issues as quickly as possible”.

While Sue demonstrated enormous ability as a leader before coming to mindfulness, it is clear that the concepts and practices have given her a new level of confidence and ways of authorizing herself and her staff to work differently. She observes ‘I’ve had many comments. I moved into a new building as part of the new role and people have said I am a breath of fresh air.’ She goes on: ‘last week I took over a previous negotiation that had stalled. I went with an open mind, set up a meeting with all the contractors, people from the Minister’s office and so on, and it now looks like we’ll have agreement.’

Sue has continued to meditate, exercise and takes care to look after her health. In addition there have been changes in her personal life: taking the time to grieve for her partner and reassess ways forward. In 2008 she was awarded the Public Service Medal for her contributions to the ACT Government and she says ‘the best thing now is to see other people grow and giving them the confidence to make a difference. You have more
of an understanding of the impact and influence you can have to the everyday lives of people as well as improving workplace environment and efficiencies.'

On several of our other mainstream leadership and corporate programs we might devote as little as two hours explicitly addressing mindfulness and meditation and yet the impact can often be quite profound. Before introducing mindfulness formally we will use methods such as dialogue, reflection and feedback to give participants the experience of mindfulness, stillness and deep connection in a group.

Six months after participating in one of our senior leadership programs this is how the CEO of Swisse Vitamins, Radek Sali, described the impact: “I am a new person, more in touch with what my team needs from me and what we have to do as a business to set the benchmark for the industry. I am healthy and less stressed because I now have a better grasp of what really matters.”

And Jennifer Wifferiff, Head of Leadership Development at Queensland Health described the impact for her this way: “My work is like that song 'white noise, white noise'. There is so much noise and busyness that there is not time or head space for the real leadership work. I attended the Senior Leadership Program three months ago and it gave me the opportunity to turn off the noise … The program provoked me into committing to change some behaviours that were limiting my capacity to lead. It's hard work to change behaviours of a lifetime but it is now harder to continue…”

We have also conducted corporate versions of our leadership programs which include an implicit and explicit focus on mindfulness. In impact interviews two years later with senior managers from AXA Australia and Asia-Pacific, they report the value of continuing to use the practices of reflection, listening and paying attention. One General Manager at AXA said: “One of the specific things that lives on, and I have worked on, is Real Listening. It was the most profound. You can't listen while you are talking or judging instead of deeply listening. They were really new ideas and experiences for me and important both professionally and personally. I have consciously worked on it and I have had some success. It started as a discipline and now it is more of my style – a real eye opener!”

We introduce short meditations on mainstream leadership programs. Although for many managers this is the first time they have ever meditated, we find that many make personal commitments to continue after the program. Recently we made available to past participants of our leadership programs an eight week evening course in Mindfulness-Based Stillness Meditation, and eighteen senior managers promptly enrolled, one or two with partners.

One construction industry manager in a Mindful Leadership program sums up: ‘the practical/experiential nature of the program sets it apart from other leadership programs – making leadership more than a concept. The mindfulness aspect adds a depth to leadership that I have not previously explored in such a way.’
Bibliography


