

# Fact-File 37: Mindful Leadership in Action: finding focus in a deluge of distractions...



Extracts from our **Guide on Mindful Leadership in Action: brain-training for attention, focus and clarity**

## Managing Mindfully

The February 3, 2014 cover of TIME magazine heralded the arrival of *The Mindful Revolution*. To Buddhists, it's old news. To bankers: maybe novel.

In the wake of other widely-influential concepts like Peter Senge's *Personal Mastery* (FactFile-7) and *Emotional Intelligence* spearheaded by Daniel Goleman (FactFile-20), *Mindfulness* seems set to also slip into mainstream management thinking.

- ❑ Mindfulness is practised in a growing number of organisations worldwide including Apple, Google, Barclays.
- ❑ Harvard Medical School runs a well-regarded *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) Program, as does Monash in Melbourne.
- ❑ A raft of neuroscience discoveries show how mindfulness-training rewires key brain-areas connected with attention, focus and calming.
- ❑ Research on benefits for business leaders, point to increased ability to sustain attention, heighten presence and handle stress.

Apart from contributing to leader performance and business bottom-line, it seems mindfulness is also good for our health and well-being. That's why so many are bringing it into their leadership lives. Not just to improve personal productivity, but to learn how to be less stress-prone, more even-minded and more emotionally balanced.

## What Makes up Mindfulness?

Despite its long tradition in Buddhism, there's not much really mystical about mindfulness. It means *being able to put aside distractions, be present, focused, and in-the-moment, so you can engage with whatever you're doing right now, or whatever is unfolding in front of you.*

We've all experienced times when we can do just that. We get into flow and we're so focused that distractions don't bother us. With the busyness, pace and pressures of 21<sup>st</sup> century workplaces, you're more likely to come across the opposite.

Our minds are full-to-bursting with all manner of thoughts, feelings, wishes, worries – distractions that detract from being mindful. *A full-mind isn't the same as being mindful.* A big part of being mindful is seeing how thoughts prevent us being



present. But it's not a matter of blanking-out thoughts. It's about learning to control them.

It's also about seeing how thoughts or *mental models* create our 'reality'.

Being able to distinguish *actual reality* from thoughts we project on to it that distort it, is a good rational start-point for mindfulness.

Exercising mindfulness, we can be more fully in control of our feelings, thoughts and actions, and make better choices. The first step in managing a crisis, analysing situations or making decisions is a mental one and mindfulness can help.

## Why Mindfulness Matters

When you think of the host of complex challenges leaders face today, it's easier to see why a bit more mindfulness may be useful to help navigate those turbulent workplace terrains. Here's a few:

- ❑ *Titanic change and creeping complexity:* now more than ever before, leaders can get lost in a maze of uncertainty, ambiguity, conflicting priorities and data-driven-overload. There are more complex, confusing factors and 'wicked' problems to juggle, and no easy answers.
- ❑ *A culture of 'busyness'.* The number of leaders suffering from stress or burn-out has doubled during the last decade as unrelenting work pressures and a sheer sense of *rush 'n hurry* drains our focus, attention and resilience and cuts across our efforts to attain or remain in the mindful state much of the time.
- ❑ *Rising rate of workplace toxicity.* A steep upturn in toxic behaviour, stemming from a widespread inability to self-manage disruptive emotions – along with a marked downturn in empathy or compassion that can counter this
- ❑ *Digital Distraction:* In hyper-heated, techno-connective business climates, it seems we're drowning in a deluge of digital distraction: an



array of devices that create anxiety, overload, social disconnection and incessantly barrage us with information that leads to less, not more, certainty.

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Daniel Goleman, in *Social Intelligence*, frames his book against a critique of society's creeping disconnection in an age of constant digital connectivity. Amidst the daily bustle and busyness, we're often not present or mindful enough to notice human moments. They all too easily slip by our attention.

Achieving more presence and focus by being more mindful begins by recognising just how much time we spend in what's been called a mental state of *continuous partial distraction*.

In this new work landscape, many leaders are looking for ways to still put in a peak performance without succumbing to such pressures, and sacrificing sanity, humanity and well-being.

They want to be visionary. They want clarity, and to be present and connective. They want to be emotionally balanced, less-stressed. In fact it's more than 'want' – they 'need' to be, to handle this brave new world. That's where mindfulness as a tool for leaders comes in.

There's another reason why mindfulness matters.



As we repeatedly point out in our leadership clinics: *"Before you lead outwards, you need to look inwards."* To lead others, you first need to understand yourself.

Without knowing themselves, leaders can't connect well with their teams or build positive and resilient workplaces. Mindfulness opens up an inside-path to get better results with people on the outside.

## 5 Mental Markers

So what are we minding when we're being mindful? We think there's **5 Mental Markers** that each provide a potential start-point for embarking on mindfulness:

**1. Being Awake and Aware** of our feelings and thoughts and how these affect how we interact with what happens around us. If we're not aware of them, thoughts easily control us and we remain oblivious. Mindful leaders:

- Take a mental step back to stop long enough to really see what they're thinking, feeling, what they're doing and what's happening.

- Tune into and control thoughts, feelings and actions, rather than be bush-wacked by them. They know the biggest obstacle to managing others is inability to manage ourselves
- Are also alert to the moment they're in now – to picking-up on what often eludes attention. Without this, we're on autopilot: saying, doing and reacting habitually without thinking or being aware of how we're coming across or impacting others in the process.

*"Mindfulness starts with self-awareness: knowing yourself enables you to make choices about how you respond to people and situations because we recognize and deal with our thoughts, physical sensations, and emotions. We are then better able to make sense of people and situations around us. Our perceptions are clear, not clouded by our own filters, biases and unexplored or unacknowledged feelings. Through purposeful, conscious direction of our attention, we are able to see things that might normally pass right by us, giving us access to deeper insight, wisdom, and choices. When we are mindful, we are more in control of ourselves simply because we see reality more clearly."* Richard Boyatzis & Annie McKee, *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope and Compassion*, 2005 pp.120-21

**2. Presence of Mind** is being present to what's going on right now in the moment rather than let our mind stray to thoughts of past or future. The past has gone. The future isn't here yet. It's only in the present that things happen, so you need to be there to respond to it.

- Mindful leaders need to be present to be approachable, connected and fully-engaged.
- To assess a current situation, take action or make a decision, the present is the only place to be to influence things that matter.

When leaders are present, others see it and feel it. They know they have full attention and mindful leaders know how to give it to whoever or whatever's, in front of them. The opposite is more common. You're only partially present or are totally absent for the person you're speaking with.

**3. Focused Attention:** is the ability to make ourselves '*pay attention on purpose*' to whatever we choose by setting-aside mind-wandering thoughts and feelings that under-cut concentration and hijack us. If we're distracted by other things, we can't be present and can't concentrate our focus.

- Brain-research shows we move in-and-out-of focused attention throughout the day and that

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we all train our brains to be either more, or less, focused.

- Untrained brains find it very difficult to focus for more than a few seconds. In fact, it looks like most brains come naturally wired for distraction and mind-wandering.

- Attention is a limited mind-resource. We only have so much of it at any given time. Paying attention to one thing comes at the expense of switching it from something else.

Being able to focus is a game-changer for teams, leaders, life and learning. As one neuroscientist put it, "*Attention is the holy-grail*". In his new book on *Focus*, Daniel Goleman says a main task of leaders is directing attention of others to the right things. To do so, leaders need to learn how to put aside distraction and focus their own attention.

**4. Emotional Balance** is also called *equanimity* or *even-mindedness*.

- It's the ability to accept what's going on, rather than resist or deny it; then to control unsettling feelings and thoughts. By being less emotionally fragile, and more clear-minded about a situation, you can handle it more effectively.
- Accepting doesn't mean being indifferent or agreeing. You might think something is unfair or harsh. That doesn't change the fact it did happen. But getting stuck on your aversion or attachment to it means you're not balanced to deal with whatever the aftermath might be.

Influenced by prejudicial motives or attachments to certain outcomes, leaders can make mindless decisions or take unthinking action.

*"The practice of cultivating a mind that is free from attachment, aversion and indifference is described as developing equanimity or even-mindedness. Some mistakenly assume equanimity means not caring about anything, but this is totally wrong."* Lorne Ladner, *The Lost Art of Compassion* pp.100-101

**5. Clear, open, calm mind.** Mindfulness is also open-mindedness. Many times, we ruminate on the past, worry about the future or let biases get the better of us. This leads to anxiety, confusion or clouded thinking. Mindful leaders:



- Remind themselves they don't have all the answers; that saying *I don't know* rather than pretend you do, may be the best thing to say.

- Deal with situations calmly because they are even-minded. Calmness helps clarity, allays confusion and is a much admired attribute.

- Don't let their own preconceptions cloud their perspective. A calm, open mind prevents them rushing in and jumping to conclusions.

Clear-mindedness is an ideal mental state to be in to make the best possible decision or assess a situation. As a leader, it also means being clear on your intentions, vision and expectations of yourself and others.

## Mindfulness minus Meditation

Many of us see mindfulness as inactive, passive and impractical; as a mainly meditative practice reserved for Buddhist monks and their acolytes. It's true. They are quite a bit better at meditation than most of us.



- While research shows meditation is certainly a very effective path to it, mindfulness does not have to involve lengthy and rigorous meditation routines, where we trance-off and cleanse our mind of all thoughts – a popular misconception about mindfulness meditation.

- Nor does it mean retreating into a meditative huddle or 'omming' around work serenely, wearing a saffron-coloured tie.

- Mindfulness is a natural quality of attention and focus that all of us can bring into our everyday work-life.

- Mindfulness doesn't have to entail sitting still on a cushion with incense burning in the background. But it does require the ability to achieve a mental stillness of sorts that many leaders fear, since it implies not doing things.

There are many ways to build mindfulness practice into your working-week without having to set aside time to practice meditation. For instance:



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- ◆ Reflecting on, and mapping the way thoughts and feelings influence your actions
- ◆ Tuning into your mental models and beliefs and how these make you think, feel and act
- ◆ Paying attention to your thought processes
- ◆ Becoming more aware of mind-wandering
- ◆ Identifying what you do or say on auto-pilot
- ◆ Being more present in your conversations
- ◆ Practising mindful listening and speaking
- ◆ Increasing your focus by making yourself be present as you do simple daily activities

Everyone's heard of neuro-plasticity these days: how our brain re-shapes according to what we do (or don't do) with it. New neurons are attracted to whatever part of the brain we use to strengthen it. It's a bit like going to the gym to develop muscles.

Any kind of meditation, including mindfulness, is all about the discipline of retraining your brain for attention, says Daniel Goleman in his latest book, *Focus*. Meditation training, according to Richard Davidson, boosts brain-circuits that focus and disengage our attention.

*"We all have habitual ways of responding... (and) mindfulness training alters these habits by making it more likely that one neuronal pathway rather than another will be used. Mindfulness meditation carves new channels in the streambeds of the mind."*  
Richard Davidson *Emotional Life of Your Brain* pp.204-5

Whatever methods – plus or minus meditation – you still need to train your brain by doing mental exercises like some of the above – that make you and your brain re-mould your circuitry for more focus, presence and attention rather than just react on auto-pilot all the time.

## Legacies of Mindfulness

If you sit still long enough to reflect on it, the cost of a lack of focus is huge if you think of what we miss, or how we act when we're distracted. For example, how many accident reports contain classic lines like *"I didn't have my mind on the job"* or *"I let myself get distracted for a moment"*?

The aim of mindful leadership is to slow down and focus on what's in front of us, so we can deal with it adeptly. **Mindfulness can help leaders:**

- ☑ Lift their level of clarity, focus and presence
- ☑ Stay calm, connected, emotionally balanced

- ☑ Manage distractions and mind wandering
- ☑ Dampen down anger and disruptive emotions
- ☑ Be more present for the people they lead
- ☑ Ease anxiety, relieve stress, curtail confusion
- ☑ Make better decisions and take wiser action

*"Contrary to popular belief, cultivating the capacity for mindfulness is not just a nice-to-have; it is essential for sustaining good leadership. Mindfulness is the practical application of self-awareness, self-management and social awareness; in short, developing mindfulness means developing emotional intelligence"* Boyatzis & McKee *Resonant Leadership* pp.114 & 137

People generally seem to resonate with leaders who are emotionally intelligent, present, positive, compassionate and connective (see FactFiles 27 & 29) – all attributes that align with mindfulness.

Many authors on mindfulness claim too much for it when they make nebulous, *mindfulness-mends-all* type assertions like "more mindful managers may have averted the global financial crisis"! *Yet again, perhaps changing our mind is the first step on the journey to changing our world?*

Mindfulness might certainly help leaders at least find a haven of clarity, balance and focus in a maelstrom of uncertainty, and attend to what really matters most in all workplaces: their people.



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