



Mindful Leadership: enhancing the quality of our actions...

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Based on excerpts from our self-coaching guide on Mindful Leadership in Action © Bill Cropper 2014-15

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As a leadership and culture consultant, I've been privileged to work with many different management teams on cultural revitalisation, work redesign, performance improvement and strategic change. I've been witness to some inspired thinking, decision-making and change initiatives. Yet it's sometimes surpassed (not in a good way mind you) by what I've come to call 'mindless' decision-making. *Sounds a bit insulting I guess...let me explain.*

I'm not suggesting leaders who make '*mindless decisions*' (and who hasn't?) are dim-witted or don't have a mind. Indeed, some may be too clever and fast-weaving for their own good! What I *am* suggesting is that sometimes our minds get tuned in to thinking channels that aren't all that helpful for making systemically-sound and effective decisions. For example:

- We're feeling pressured by those higher-up into the need to please or appease. We're trying to plot a middle (and often mediocre) course, or even being too stellar, far-reaching or ambitious.
- We're caught in the pressure-cooker of subtle emotional hijacks, or we're thinking way too much about our own convenience, comfort, self-interest or success.
- We're unwittingly roped into mind-traps like tunnel-thinking, where we fail to step back, pause and see the bigger picture, or re-active-thinking, where every situation is seen as a crisis to rush-in and fix.

You can't separate leadership from decision-making. Put simply, the outcome of a leader's choices and decisions are a critical make-or-break factor, along with their level of emotional, social and political intelligence. Mindful actions are so much better than mindless ones done reactively on auto-pilot. Many leaders fail because they make mindless decisions or take mindless action, over and over again. Let's forget the stress-reduction, health and well-being bits for a moment. From a purely practical-business perspective, mindfulness is only useful if it leads to clearer thinking, more incisive solutions, and better thought-out decisions and actions that lead to better performance results.

That's why I called the program I run *Mindful Leadership in Action*, fully aware that many think of mindfulness is 'inaction' – as mainly meditative, passive and possibly impractical. But there's a myriad of everyday leader activities where a bit more mindfulness might enhance your effectiveness and train your brain to be more focused, present and attentive. Indeed, such key mindfulness traits not only enhance the discipline of your thinking, but also the quality of your actions.

So what does it mean then, if we say a leader has acted mindfully? Perhaps the most obvious thing is that *mindful action is deliberate*. It's carefully thought-through. It's *conscious, calculated, intentional, careful and measured*. The mindless opposite might be knee-jerk, rash, inconsiderate, unbalanced, hasty and impulsive. It's also when leaders act with integrity, in line with benevolent beliefs, community-best values and an unselfish mind-set. Mindful action is also recognising that in order to avoid mindless impulses, such as hasty quick-fixes that tend to back-fire, there's got to be a pause between thought and

action – where we can stop to contemplate our decision, and even decide whether any action is warranted at all.



As you've no doubt noticed, many actions in our hectic, action-packed work cultures aren't mindful or effective. They're wasteful, ill-conceived, careless, even caustic. We act when no action is needed, or we act without reflection, on auto-pilot, and end up taking the wrong action, under the influence of selfish motives, external pressure, political expediency or what Buddhists call "wrong thinking". We push through decisions that don't "fix" the problem, and often create more; or we lurch toward speedy action wearing a 'crisis crash-helmet', without taking the time to consult or contemplate. Mindful action on the other hand, is the result of a mindful decision enacted.

- Mindful decision-making starts by first, being aware of your mental models or beliefs about the best way to make certain decisions.
- Second, it's being mindful of the processes you use to make decisions.
- Third, it's having soul-searched deeply about the systemic, flow-on impacts our decisions may have.

It's also about how mindful we are of what's actually driving our decision-making. For instance, mindful decisions are – or should be by rights – driven by selfless, non-partisan or constructive motives. Mindless decisions are entangled in selfish, baser motives like politics, power, prestige or expediency.

Mindless decision-making models abound. Dictatorial decision-making seems to be making a resurgence on the organisational and world-stage. It can seem to make decisions stick, but imposed decisions generally don't work well and encourage a back-swell. They generate resistance and implementing them is often difficult because there's no real commitment. Mindless decisions tend to result in consequences that ultimately aren't good for anybody, whereas mindful decisions are motivated by our deep concern for the well-being of others or our broader community at large – whether it's local or global.

Mindless decisions are often made fast, with little or no reflection. They're based on faulty assumptions, insufficient information and often absent of any clearly agreed decision-making criteria. They can equally be so slow, cumbersome or procrastinated, that they dwindle into insignificance. It's a state of mindless immobilisation, where we abandon making a decision at all and wait for circumstances or serendipity to make it for us. Mindful decisions involve meaningful dialogue, collective reflection and joint decision-making. Without it, people argue, alienate or disengage.

Leaders today are confronted by a mountain of complex issues where there are multiple-factors, no simple solutions or easy answers, and definitely no quick-fixes. They need to be able to cope mindfully with complex situations where no-one "knows the answer". "Wicked" problems like these are notoriously difficult. Many problems leaders face are the result of historical attempts to *quick-fix* them in the past. The results of continually re-applying "same-old" solutions are discouraging enough to make you think you'll never effectively address them.



Mindfulness makes it possible to see big-picture connections we may have missed before. It gives us an ability to let go of what we know; to suspend current models and beliefs, and open up to new possibilities. This kind of big-picture mindfulness informs the discipline of Systems Thinking.

The purpose of being a mindful leader is to ultimately improve the quality of our actions and our interactions, by slowing-down to focus on whatever's in front of us right now so we can deal with it more adeptly, more systemically, more

subtly and more sensitively. You put-aside distractions and give your full attention to whatever's unfolding right in front of you. It's being present to problems and situations and seeing them objectively for what they are – not what we'd like them to be. In this sense, to borrow from the perspiring words of our venerable Mr. Abbott, we're *'shirt-fronting'* reality. Who knows? A bit more mindfulness may even take the lid off that corporate pressure-cooker so we can slow-down on some of those crucial decisions and savour our options more.

If you're looking for ways to enhance the quality of your leadership actions and sharpen your focus and thinking capacity, [*Mindful Leadership in Action*](#) may provide a pertinent platform for you... Perhaps I'll see you at one of my clinics?

More on [*Mindful Leadership in Action*](#) on-line at www.thechangeforum.com.

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